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FANTASIA

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Warwick Deeping

FANTASIA



CASSELL

and Company Limited

London, Toronto, Melbourne

and Sydney

First published 1939

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LTD., THE
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON
F. 239

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I

JOHAN SKELTON came to a little clearing in the spruce woods below the Brienzer Grat, and shedding his rucksack he sat down on a projecting hummock of stone. He was on a tramping holiday, in cream shirt open at the throat, brown shorts, and heavy shoes, and if he had come to Switzerland in search of sunlight, the mountains had given it to him with blazing emphasis. His nose was red and peeling; cheekbones, forehead and neck were covered with scorched and papery skin. Even his rather bony knees looked inflamed. John Skelton was that strange creature, a poet, and since Phœbus had blazed his arrows at him, he could savour the coolness of the spruces and the solid chilliness of the stone. But Skelton was more than a little tired and the sun had given him a headache. His nose glowed like a red coal, and his scorched skin smarted. It was all very well for John Keats to sit in a chair and write about fauns pelting each other with fircones, but there were times when nature seemed to over-emphasize her intoxications, and to plant her poignancies inside you like points of pain. He had seen the Swiss uplands stippled thick with flowers, acres and acres of flowers, whole hillsides of them, scabious and wild geranium and nameless lovely things. Was it possible to have too much colour in one's world? Especially when one had a headache, and one's skin was resenting the enthusiasms of youth, and that very enthusiasm seemed somehow to flounder in moments of self-accusing futility. Poetry! Who the devil cared for poetry in these pragmatcal days? You might flatter

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yourself that your soul was clean, and your craft as uncommercial as mountain ice, but if your poems sold some seventy copies out of an edition of two hundred, and your royalties amounted to about one pound ten, what, in the name of Mammon, was your significance?

Significance!

Why was one always choosing a word and pinning it up like a text in a bedroom? Value, progress, culture, the individual I, dignity, freedom? Dignity as a basement-bargain at eleven-three farthings? Freedom, to be what? How much was self-conceit, the passionate and puling ego in you, how much inspired mysticism? God, what a mess the prophets of power seemed to be making of life! Oh, unhappy generation! Why should life be a scramble just to make a living? What was youth's ultimate choice, to sell its soul? Soul! Were not the psychologists teaching that man was a complex of conditioned reflexes co-ordinated by a thing called reason?

Far below him he saw the lake very blue between the dark trunks of the spruces. The sunlight slanted in and threw splashes of light upon rocks and undergrowth. The woods were very silent, but in the valley road below motor cars hooted. Oh, damn this mechanical age! His ideal had been to resist and to transcend it, and the wilful aloofness of the youth in him was like his skin, a little scorched and irritable. How did one lose the little fretting self inside one? Sink it in some ism, turn fascist or flare into communism? More tyranny, less freedom. If the dictator said "Stand on your head", you stood on it and waggled your legs in a salute to authority.

Rather a depressing business this search for self-expression by way of self-analysis! If only man could live to the last heart beat without thinking about it. Like being in love. But then, love itself had become just sex-appeal and lipstick. Well, anyhow, a bath was indicated and lodging for the night, and food in one's belly. He got up, shouldered his baggage, stood a moment looking back and up into the sunlight and shadow of

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the spruces. God, how good it would be to stand like a tree in green contemplation. And of what? The ideal of quietism? But that was rot. Man is and will ever be the slave of his urges.

She was sitting in the garden behind and above the Hotel Schiller, under the shade of a pollarded chestnut tree, a book in her lap, and a tea-table beside her, and in her grass-green frock she looked as cool as the foliage. Above the roofs of Brienz she could see the blue stillness of the lake, and the shimmer of heat over the meadows. The shade temperature had touched ninety. If she too was alone and upon a holiday she was not courting damage to her complexion, or perspiring ecstasies upon the mountains. No doubt it was right and fitting that John Skelton should lodge at the Hotel Schiller, for the inn boasted of having housed a trio of famous poets, but Ann Lester was less the predestined guest. She could not read poetry, even the poetry of a young and blighted realism, and most certainly she had never read any of Mr. John Skelton's poems. Nor had she ever heard of his name.

She was lighting a cigarette when Skelton came up the stone steps into the hotel garden. He had been assigned an attic room which had only just been vacated and was in the hands of the chambermaid. Ann Lester observed him. She noted the little blond beard, the inflamed forehead and nose, the peeling knees. He still carried his rucksack, and he stood there rather shyly, looking about him with what she described as "Lost dog's eyes". Every table had its occupants, and his tiredness was obvious.

A robust Swiss waitress appeared with two strong red hands holding a heavy tea-tray wedged against her swelling apron. He appealed to her in German.

"No room anywhere?"

"No, sir, but perhaps in twenty minutes."

Miss Lester, obeying a friendly impulse, took pity on him. He might speak German, but his Englishry was patent.

"I have finished. The gentleman can have my table."

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He turned quickly and smiled, and his smile was instant and natural. He had very good teeth.

"It's very kind of you, but I don't want to——"

"I've finished."

"Thanks, awfully. After fifteen miles up there one's rather ready to sit down."

She rose and withdrew her chair a little way from the table, and he, going to beg an unwanted chair, came back and sat down, dropping his rucksack on the grass beside him. Ann Lester continued to observe him. She might have described him to herself as a nice lad gone badly highbrow. Had she been completely frank with him she would have said: "What you need, my lad, is a shave and some lanoline." Meanwhile, he was conscious of being observed, and perhaps he was conscious of more than her scrutiny. She looked so deliciously cool and untarnished under the shade of the tree. She had one of those very white skins that go with jet black hair and equally definite black eyebrows. He had always admired such hair, and a skin whose summer response is no more than a faint browning. He fidgeted. He extracted a cigarette-case from the breast pocket of his shirt, opened it and found it empty.

She caught his quick, self-conscious smile. It seemed to include her in this minor tragedy. It said: "I'm a silly, sensitive, vague sort of ass. I suppose that if I——" She spoke. She said: "Out of ammunition?"

He looked startled.

"Yes. Do they sell——?"

"Only gaspers. Have one of mine."

She held out an open cigarette-case, and he rose, and taking two steps towards her, picked out a cigarette. She saw that his hands were brown, and though strong, finely finished. She disliked fleshy hands with carnal fingers. Hands could be nauseating.

"Thanks, awfully. I'm a bit of a hobo, and in more ways than one."

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"Not quite tempered."

"Tempered? O, you mean my skin."

She did not say that he was pretty badly sun-scorched, but the quality of her glance somehow implied it. He was apologetic. He said that the sun was very fierce upon the mountains, and that in England the winter left you like boiled mutton. Meanwhile, he lighted his cigarette, and his shy brown eyes observed her.

"It doesn't seem to have affected you."

"I don't let it."

"How clever of you."

She glanced at her book as though half suggesting that its interest remained for her. Or was she erecting an intangible barrier, just because his shyness was more provocative than a cad's complaisancy?

"Hadn't you better order your tea?"

His eyelids flickered.

"Of course. Silly of me."

"They are rather pushed here. One has to shout or someone else gets in first. Like the usual commercial scuffle, in which the cad always has a pull."

He looked at her with sudden intentness. How did she know? Was the exquisite and polished patina somewhat elusive? She did not look like a woman who had experienced commercial realism.

"I suppose so. But isn't that rather a cynical saying?"

"Think so?"

"Well, that rather depends."

She gathered that he was hinting that its quality depended upon the source of issue, but he took her advice and went in search of the stout Swiss maid. She looked at her book, but her eyes did not focus the print. What a clash of contrasts. His air of long-legged, brown-eyed innocence piqued her. But was anybody innocent, these days, and what was innocence? Insisting upon seeing things as they were not, or as they might

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be? She saw him returning. Well, if there was to be a next move, it should rest with him, nor was she quite sure that she desired a further move. Her response might be an abrupt "Check," and she guessed that he was the kind of creature who would leave the game unfinished. He was so much more sensitive than she was.

He sat down and was silent. She was aware of him staring at his peeling knees. He had an air of not being pleased with those inflamed and naked bosses. Almost, she could see him pulling down a petticoat to cover them. Quite a virginal gesture! Some men, a very few, were like that. His tea arrived, and he looked relieved. She pretended to read her book while he ate bread and butter as though nothing else existed in the world for him.

The silence continued, and either she felt that it was becoming uncouth, or she had changed her mind about veils. Veils were out of date, save as occasional and provocative attachments, and your body went consciously naked, or almost so. She closed her book and sat looking over the lake.

"Do you mind if I talk to you a little?"

She turned her head, and smiling at him, said that the human voice was made for use.

He countered: "Or misuse."

That piqued her. His little blond beard suggested Chelsea, and a certain mordant attitude to life, bangles and boo-hoo hair and pansy faces. She had had some experience of a semi-suburban replica of that world, and had no illusions about it, and if she was fastidious by nature, life as an aseptic process was beginning to appeal to her.

"I suppose you paint?"

His head seemed to give a little, sensitive jerk.

"No, not exactly. Is a beard a symbol?"

"It might be part of a pose."

"You're frank."

"Aren't we, these days? Rather better, don't you think?"

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"No, not wholly so. I still deal in reticences. You don't see all of life at a glance. Isn't nudism rather priggish?"

"Possibly. And you?"

"I play about with words."

"Novels?"

Almost, he looked hurt.

"No, poetry. Ridiculous, of course, but true."

So, that was it! Her eyes seemed to narrow a little as she considered that blond, pointed appendage.

She said: "It is a strange genus to me."

Her candour appeared to scare him.

"O, I don't want to talk shop. I'm just made that way. And I don't make much money."

"Fastidiousness and commerce aren't good mixers."

"How do you know that?"

"Isn't it a cliché? If you wrote sensational stuff about the latest murder——"

"But I don't. And you?"

She prevaricated.

"I'm just a wench with a job that suits her, in bits. Life's not too easy for our crowd, is it? So, I'm lucky. Any inspiration in Switzerland?"

She saw his eyelids flicker, and she wondered whether she had frightened him. She had. His chair seemed to irk him. He fidgeted on it, his long legs making restless movements.

"No, not much. A country that has specialized in mercenaries and hotel keepers. May be something in that. Besides, it's so damned efficient."

"Do you object to efficiency?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"O, I don't know. Perhaps because it kills the kid in one, and won't let us tell ourselves fairy stories. No mystery. Like chromium-plating the face of the moon. Well, I think I'll go and have a bath."

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She said: "I shouldn't put water on that skin of yours."

He stared. She seemed to have a way of producing suggestions that were very like orders. Did she manage a secretarial office, or run a clinic, and was efficiency her god?

"Oughtn't I to?"

"Of course not. You've a sensitive surface. I'd try and raise a tube of lanoline."

He got on his feet, upsetting his chair in doing so. A sensitive surface! What the devil did she mean by that? Unfeminine interference. But then, wasn't modern woman pragmatical and bossy? She watched him pick up the chair, and collect his rucksack. How much live vanity had he? Would he ascend to his room and peer at his peeling face in a mirror, and feel hot and self-conscious about it? A nice lad. O, rather more than that. She liked his eyes and hands and teeth, and the fiercely shy way he struck out at life. She sat and looked at the lake, while he, climbing the steep stairs to his attic, flung the rucksack on the bed, and went to examine his face in the wardrobe mirror. Good lord, he looked rather like an old-fashioned clown with dabs of red paint on his nose and cheekbones! Why not take her advice? He descended to explore Brienz, and in a shop of various merchandise he managed to buy a tube of lanoline.

II

HE appeared at dinner in grey flannel trousers that were badly in need of pressing, and a brown sports jacket that was much crumpled. Also, he had compounded with the conventions by putting on a tie. On a tramping holiday luggage was limited, but the Hotel Schiller was not a luxury hotel and was accustomed to bare knees, and youth somewhat in a state of nature. It received whole consignments of raw young flesh roasted by the mountain sun. Miss Lester did not put on an evening frock, remaining My Lady Greensleeves. She had a table by a window, and her almost too perfect profile showed like a cameo against the dark foliage of a tree.

The hotel possessed a veranda covered with vines and roses, and after dinner she took her coffee there. She saw him come out and stand at the top of the veranda steps. He did not glance in her direction, but she sensed his awareness of her presence, and the tense timidity of his mood.

Suddenly, he turned and came to her table.

"May I sit here?"

She smiled up at him.

"Having coffee? They are rather good at coffee."

He said, with an air of almost unnecessary brusqueness: "I can't afford coffee." How very naïve of him! Divine discontent even in the denial of little drinks! She did not invite him to share her coffee. He lighted a cigarette, and sitting down, watched a string of motor coaches and cars roar past in the road below. His face suggested that the noise and the dust were an offence against nature.

"Beastly things cars."

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"Doesn't that rather depend upon whether one is in them or outside them?"

"O, possibly. I'm never in them, so I'm a prejudiced outsider."

"I use a car, with emphasis on the use. Besides, it's another method of living dangerously."

"Need one? I mean, the thing has enlarged competitive caddishness into a sort of murder club."

She poured herself out a second cup of coffee.

"Aren't you talking rather wildly?"

He was, and he knew it.

"Sorry. But the modern scramble makes one rather sick. I sometimes feel like one of those old Norse fellows who used to go killing mad."

"Please don't begin here."

"I won't. After all, I suppose it's rather futile to crucify one's self. Besides, we all have to shout in chorus, and if we are Reds, clench our silly fists. It ought to be rather lovely down by the lake."

"It is."

"You've been?"

"O, yes, there's a path there, orchards and little gardens, and the hay fields and quiet water. They have been cutting the grass. It seems to smell when the dew comes down."

He glanced at her quickly, momentarily.

"How good. You wouldn't care to stroll?"

"Why not?"

She humoured him and herself. She was beginning to think of him as one of those difficult creatures with only half a skin. It wasn't a pose, but just pure temperament. Too much temperament, perhaps. Rather a devastating luxury these days, unless you could afford it, or had nothing to lose. She found herself walking with him along a path between the village gardens and the water, water that was both pearly and polished

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under the evening sky, and suddenly he began to talk to her about himself, with a kind of wilful frankness that puzzled her until she realized that something singular might be happening to them both.

"I live in an attic, you know, off the Gray's Inn Road."

Quite the Chatterton atmosphere, but how could it concern her?

"Bloomsbury, isn't it?"

"Thereabouts."

"Rather highbrow."

"That's a loathsome word."

"Labels. You don't——"

"O, it's only the silly cult of cheap phrases, trying to cram the indefinable into penny press headlines. You must think me an explosive sort of ass."

"So many people don't."

"What?"

"Explode. Damp squibs."

He paused to look across the lake.

"The explosive spirit doesn't pay. You get sat on by all the good people who want to stay put. Yes, I have an unearned income of fifty-three pounds a year. I'm a parasite to that extent. And I make about a pound a week, reviewing books, and that sort of thing."

Almost she said: "So, poetry doesn't pay," but that would have been brutal and obvious. And why was he telling her this? Had he developed an attack of dreadful sincerity, and wanted her to understand?

"You sound rather fierce against life."

"O, not really. Not against this."

He pointed to the lake, growing steel grey under the looming mass of the mountains.

"Let's go on. Open country can be like a large cool hand on your forehead. Crowds and cities are the devil. The world's shop-window, with one's little pug-nose pushed up

against it. It's beastly to feel bitter. Such a confession of failure."

"Or divine discontent?"

"One flatters oneself it may be that. Let's go on."

As they strolled towards the sunset she became aware of his lost-dog's eyes looking at her with a kind of boy's awe. Was he so very susceptible, or were the occasion and the woman different? She had no quarrel with the suddenness and the strangeness of his interest. It flattered her as woman; also, the secret woman in her preferred it to the backside slappings and easy-osy intimacies of a cad-in-a-car world. She saw rather too much of that hearty, Breezy Bertie world.

He stood pointing.

"The twilight's quite blue. And do you see that little silver streak of mist over there?"

She saw it, and said: "Like a piece of white chiffon over the night's hair."

Gosh, was she becoming poetical?

He was silent for a moment.

"Rather a snub for you when you start talking for effect."

"Were you talking for effect?"

"I don't know. Motives are so mixed. I say, do you live in the country?"

"Yes."

"You're lucky. I do when I can."

Soon, she was to realize that he was trying to find out where she lived, and what her job was. She did not tell him. Somehow she did not want to tell him on this perfect and unvexed night. Petrol and rubber and oil, they had not yet been transmuted into poetry, nor had Mr. Siegfried Mallison, though his breeches were purple patches, and his hair the colour of honey.

Meeting for early *déjeuner* in the veranda of the Hotel Schiller, they began the day together in the cool of the morning, with a

little breeze blowing over the lake. She noticed that he was wearing trousers and a tie, and she could assume that it was not to be a tramping day.

"Hot again."

"Not quite so hot, I think. I took your advice about beauty culture."

"Successful?"

"Very. Think I'll keep out of the sun to-day. I suppose you are booked for something?"

"No."

He looked across at her with those very honest eyes of his, and his tone was tentative.

"It's rather lovely and cool up in the spruce woods. Shade's soothing to the soul and the skin. But, probably, you need neither."

"Not consciously so. Any flowers?"

"O, yes, just above the woods, acres of them. The hay is like a Persian carpet. Would you come?"

"I might."

"Do. I'd feel frightfully honoured."

Honoured! How very old-fashioned of him! The Breezy Bertie world did not talk of honour when it asked you out to a petting party with the prospect of persuading you to allow it to confer upon you the ultimate favour. Who was it who said that seduction was a matter of technique? Would he want to hold her hand, and pretending to be brotherly, attempt to help her where the climb was steep? He did nothing of the kind. He did not attempt to touch her, but in the shade of the woods he took off his coat and spreading it on a rock, made her sit on it. He squatted at her feet, long legs drawn up, arms wrapped round them.

"Isn't it good here. Trees are such calm creatures."

"Don't you want to climb?"

"No. My skin is resting, and so is myself. Just lights and shadows."

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He had crisp and rather rebellious hair, and she studied him. An unusual creature this, or was he unusual to her?

"The dignity of things, the dignity of woman."

She was conscious of feeling startled. The dignity of woman! What a strange theme! It sounded like dear old Tennyson. She sat in silence, a silence that might have been either challenging or defensive.

"It does matter, you know?"

"What?"

"Dignity. A quality we've lost. Nasty lot of precocious kids pulling things to pieces. One's got to recover the essentials."

She was thinking of Siegfried Mallison and his pagan flippancies and conscious cleverness. "Not even the fig-leaf, my dear. The fig-leaf shrivelled with the simper." She seemed to feel the strange silence of the woods about her, and she saw a little burr of light playing upon his fairish head. This man was dangerous.

"Do you really believe——?"

"What?"

"In woman being——"

He turned and looked at her.

"Absolutely. This freedom idea, what is it, but a kind of universal priggery. There's that prize prig Siegfried Mallison who preaches promiscuity, and says that jealousy is the supreme sin. Jealousy! Good God! As if woman wasn't different. She is, you know."

She sat, frozen.

"Do you think so?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know."

His eyes were a little fierce.

"Of course you know. There are certain lovelinesses in life that even a brilliant bastard like Mallison can't desecrate. Have you read any of his books?"

"One or two."

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“Get rid of woman’s virtue, smash up the family, set sex free. And why? Just so that philosophical pornographers like Mallison can put both feet in the sex-trough and guzzle. That’s at the back of all his preaching.”

She was feeling stifled.

“How do you know?”

“Instinct, or whatever you like to call it. Any bright child could see through Mallison. He’s just a smear on the glass.”

She was fascinated, and yet she wanted most terribly to change the subject. How extraordinary that he should have come suddenly into her life, and then that both of them should have stumbled upon Siegfried Mallison. Almost, she could imagine Mallison squatting like a tawny-haired satyr in the shadows, listening with a smirk to ideals that he would have described as “Very young bow-wow stuff.” Ideals! Did anyone wear them these days, save as propaganda or coloured shirts in the pursuit of power? And yet, this perilously intense young man was obviously and passionately sincere.

She tried flippancy, the ironic touch.

“You ought to carry a duster about with you.”

“And why?”

“For smears on the glass.”

She saw him flinch. His shoulders seemed to stiffen. He sat and looked at the lake far down beyond the trees.

“Sorry. I hope I’m more ass than prig. Supposing we leave it at that.”

She had hurt him, and she was angry with herself, and angry with him. No one should go about the world waving flags and expecting you to join in shouting “Excelsior.” All urges were out of date, save those which were sexual and economic, and if you were sufficiently envious you could preach the Class War like an angry and chattering monkey. There was a pause, and then she told him that she was moving on to Interlaken.

She saw his head lift in a little jerk.

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"So am I. By boat?"

No, she was going by road. She had to confess that she had a car with her.

"I can give you a lift."

His face seemed to close up.

"No, thanks, I'll tramp it. Where are you staying?"

"The Victoria."

She remembered that the Victoria was the most expensive hotel in the place.

When she came downstairs next morning to take her coffee and rolls in the hotel veranda she saw that his chair was empty, though coffee pot and milkjug and plate and a basket of rolls remained upon the table. So he had gone, nor was she in a mood to ask the waitress questions. But she was provoked and troubled, and moved, in spite of her casual cynicism, to see in him one of those rare and sensitive creatures who persist in taking life and love with passionate seriousness. Yes, love, not lust. She sat and wondered about him. Had he funked his crisis and fled, because he had scruples on the economic question? That too was rather rare. She knew half a dozen young men who lived loudly and largely and almost imper- tinently upon the incomes of wives, their own and other men's.

She was piqued. She packed, paid her bill, ran her sports coupé out of the garage, and took the road to Interlaken. She would arrive there in less than an hour, whereas it would take him several hours to do the journey on foot. It was a peerless day, but hot, and the road swung up and down between the lake and the sloping meadows and the woods, and some seven miles from Brienz she saw him ahead, climbing a long, sun-scorched slope, with his baggage on his back.

She overtook him, and slowing to a crawl, she bent over and lowered the offside window.

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"Good morning. Why not ride?"

His brown eyes gave her a quick and brittle glance, and then he looked at her car. It was a luxury car in sparrow's-egg blue, and she felt that his eyes hated it.

"No thanks. Exercise, you know."

"Well, why not drop your pack in here. I can leave it at your hotel."

But he was determined to bear his fate and his burden.

"Please don't bother. Besides, I haven't got a hotel yet."

"O, all right," and she drove on.

The Victoria Hotel could give her all that she desired, easy garage for her car, a perfect bedroom with bathroom attached, and a view of the Jungfrau, space, tranquillity, a garden to sit in, excellent food served with the sauce of courtesy. But she was not feeling tranquil. She took her tea under the pollarded chestnuts of the Café Bristol, listening to the orchestra and watching life passing as on a stage. She was watching for a particular figure, his long-legged, loping walk, and the young intensity of his rebellious head. She did not see him. Nor did she see him when she displayed herself in the hotel garden after dinner, with the sunset flushing the Jungfrau, and the fountains playing, and the smoke from her cigarette floating in blue drifts. She was hoping that he would come to her, but he did not come.

She might call herself a sentimental idiot, but she wandered about Interlaken the whole of the next day, sitting on seats under trees, or idling about in the hotel garden, and watching for a figure that remained invisible. Was it mere curiosity or a provoked vanity, or something more that vexed her? Had her luxury car and an emotional crisis frightened him? She began to believe that he had passed out of her life, and that she would not see him again. How very tantalizing! She even questioned the hotel concierge. Had a gentleman called to see her? No, no one had called. "Well, if Mr. Skelton should call, tell him I shall be in this evening."

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She dined. She asked for her coffee to be served in the hotel loggia. She sat listening to the play of the fountains and the conversation of her fellow guests. Their chatter irritated her. And then, suddenly, she saw him, standing in the right hand gateway of the hotel garden, hesitant, his hands in his pockets, his rebellious head catching the light. The Victoria's loggia was full of boiled shirts and evening frocks, and his sports jacket and grey flannel trousers did not conform.

She waved to him and he raised a hand, but he remained where he was. Was she expected to humour his pride? She left her chair, and walking slowly to the gate, she felt like scolding him. "Don't be such an ass. Come up and have some coffee." But when she saw his face she ceased to be angry with him.

He did not smile.

"O, I just wanted to tell you that I'm going back to England to-morrow."

She made herself smile.

"Come up and sit for a while. I'm having coffee."

He looked past her at the paraded prosperity of the Victoria Hotel.

"I'd rather not. Above my standard. I just wondered——"

He hesitated, and then blurted it out.

"Whether you'd tell me where you live."

He had yet to learn that a woman has to be pursued through all her moods, and that only when the particular mood is on her may she be pursued with safety. Otherwise, she may turn on you even in the moonlight, and like Diana, stab an arrow into you.

"Why should I?"

He had kept her waiting, and she was peeved with her own petulance. A man should know when a woman is ripe for kissing, and when, like a good fool, he has missed that moment, she may remain un-kissable for many a long day, if ever.

"Of course not. Why should you?"

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His hurt face made her relent. But she wanted to tell him. O, yes, she wanted to tell him.

“O, well, I live in Sussex.”

“Sussex.”

“Place called Bluewater. Heard of it?”

“No. I can’t say I have.”

“Such is fame! I don’t think you would like it very much. Too modern and hearty.”

He looked at her with strange, young gravity.

“I’m not quite medieval. Good-bye. I hope you will have good weather for the rest of your time.”

She was aware of him giving her an abrupt and brittle smile. He stepped back, nodded, shoved his hands into his pockets, and left her.

III

MR. SIEGFRIED MALLISON had designed the posters that were exhibited at railway stations in splashes of blue and green and gold, for sea, sand and sky. In making this appeal to the public, Mr. Mallison had allowed the philosopher to be replaced by the commercialist, and had reverted to the inspiration of two generations of ship-owners and colliery magnates.

“Come to Bluewater.
Bathe at Bluewater.
Build at Bluewater.”

Mr. Mallison may have put off the family cloak of a crude commercialism, but in disposing of his interest in coal and shipping, he had been careful to take with him more than half a million in hard cash. You might preach anarchy of a sort, but the power of the purse is not to be frivolously discarded, and a new dispensation that is planned to arrive when you are dead, is surely the most comfortable and convenient of all worlds. You can be both prophet and preacher, and suffer your forehead to be crowned with bay leaves, while retaining your power and your possessions.

Miss Lester stopped her car just below the Bluff on High Pine Ridge, and leaving it with the near wheels on the grass verge, got out to look at Bluewater. She saw an arc of hyacinthine sea, a semilune of sand, Arthur's Head and Culverin Cove on the west, Spaniard's Point with its martello tower rising on the bay's eastern horn. It may have occurred to her that the

Mallison nomenclature was as universal as his autocracy. It was he who had done the christening, and stamped a picturesque playfulness all over the Bluewater Estate Map. High Pine, The Squelch, Ye Golden Hinde Inn, Culverin Cove, Pieces of Eight, Stane Street, The Strand, Mermaids' Walk, Love and Lavender Lanes, Spaniard's Point. Yes, no doubt he had enjoyed to the full the planning of this Toy Town, nor had his colourful playfulness confined itself to bricks and mortar. You might play with people's lives on paper, but it could be even more stimulating to amuse yourself with the actual, live puppets, set them jiggling upon wires, or performing emotional strip-tease acts for your private pleasure.

She stood at gaze, for this was her world, and having abandoned it for a month, she could appraise it with impartial eyes. In primeval days Bluewater Bay had lapped the heights on which she stood, but the sea, receding from a drift-pile of sand and shingle, had left the little plain upon which this Toy Town stood. Ten years ago there had been nothing here in the way of bricks and mortar save an abandoned coast-guard station, but Mallison had changed all that. His humanism had retained a shrewd feeling for profit, and as a gamble in real estate Bluewater had prospered. It lay spread below her, the Golden Hinde Inn in stone and tile, the motor-boats and sailing dinghies in Culverin Cove, the Jetty, the Dance Pavilion and white bathing huts above the curving sands, the Estate Office, the pantiles of Freda Nuttal's weaving-house, Gilda's Olde Shoppe, the Village Store. How Mallison had put his tongue in his cheek in playing up to his public! There, in a little sandy waste was the workshop of Paul the Potter. Stane Street and the various lanes were lined with bungalows and gardens, their names as fanciful and various as the temperaments of their owners. "Non-Such" where Montague Dax and his wife made whoopee at week ends. How she disliked the Dax man with his hairy chest and assumption of cave-man insolence! "What About It." Yes, how apposite was the phrase

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where Eileen Mewburn was concerned, Eileen with her drawl and her green jade cigarette holder. "What about a little sin, my dear?" Augustus Barter the Bald One lived at Green Gates. He functioned on the London Stock Exchange. Douglas Tew the novelist owned "Gehenna." At the corner of Love Lane, Jim and June Jettison had their studio. Poor little people, very much Mallison's monkeys! Then came White Ways, her country club and service station with its bathing-pool and tennis courts, her own cottage standing behind it and apart where the ground rose to the Furze Hills. There were other places and other people in Toy Town, but they had no particular significance for her save as occasional patrons, people to whom she was supposed to be polite. She knew that she was not always polite, and that she had the reputation for being tough.

Her gaze changed its direction, traversing the high ground and its wooded bluffs. She saw the tiled roofs of The Squelch, and that nasty, austere, slated spire that Mallison had christened Plain Jane. Who but Mallison would have thought of calling a church spire Plain Jane? And The Squelch, that congerie of cottages that antedated Bluewater and was stolidly Sussex! She saw the valley north of White Ways, and the crumpled green boskiness of Rustling Park, and Rustling Thorn itself, that rather sinister old house squatting on its terrace and snarling at the sea. Or, was it a smirk? Yes, Rustling Thorn was Bluewater's Olympus. God dwelt there, Zeus with a honey-coloured head, and a face that sometimes made her think of butter melting in the sun. A little smeary and insolent and rancid.

Mallison!

Had Mr. Siegfried Mallison accepted the symbolism of her snub, or would he persist in pestering her? O, damn Siegfried Mallison! She had her life to live and money to earn; her job interested her, and morals themselves were relative—with Einstein. When would men learn that certain women are

content with some particular purpose, and do not ask to be messed about and soused in sexual self-expression?

She returned to her car and drove on down Stony Hill in a mood that did not welcome casual confrontations. She passed the Estate Office and Freda Nuttal's window full of scarves and jumpers. Freda was standing in the doorway, pince-nez on her nose, her mouse-coloured hair drawn back tightly from her forehead. Someone had nicknamed her the Grey Squirrel, perhaps because of her teeth and profile, and gestures that suggested the nibbling of nuts. Freda waved to her with a kind of starved eagerness.

Poor Freda! She was permitted to dress a show-case in the White Ways lounge, and she was always piping: "My dear, do send me anyone you can," but Freda was not so colourful as her jumpers.

Ye Olde Shoppe, and Gilda Latham speaking to a young man in a car. The young man was turning opposite the shop, and blocking the road, and Miss Lester had to pull up.

She exchanged glances with Gilda.

"Hallo, Nan, glad to see you back."

Was that the truth, and did she and Gilda really like each other? Men spoke of Gilda as a good sort. She was more successful in selling her antiques than was Freda in disposing of the products of her loom. To Siegfried Mallison she was Goldilocks, mature and Junoesque, but how much more she had been no one knew. Gossip had it that in the beginning Mallison had stocked her shop for her and Mallison was not a man who gave something for nothing.

The road cleared itself and Ann drove on. She saw Gerald Fuchs emerging from Miss Mewburn's gate, a goat-faced young man in a yellow shirt and shorts, and wearing bangles. The bangles dated him. He nodded at her with cold-eyed casualness, and she returned an even more casual salutation. Blue-water's prize faun! Her home-coming mood grew less and less consenting.

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June Jettison in a flowered overall planting out pink petunias in their minute garden! She pulled up and spoke to June. She was ready to be kissed by June, and to be glad of the artist's wife's round and simple face.

"My dear, it's good to see you back."

June Jettison meant what she said, just as a nice and naïve child means it. She planted her trowel in the soil, and ran out into the road, a little cabbage-rose of a woman with queer dark eyes under tawny hair. Ann had stopped her car and opened the near door, and Mrs. Jettison flounced in, bringing with her suggestions of warm breasts and cheap scent, and flocculent motherliness.

They kissed.

"My dear, things have been rather hectic. Yes, your face always is so nice and cold. So cleansing."

Ann laughed, but her laughter was brittle.

"Alarums and excursions?"

"Yes, poor Paul; one of his thirsty periods. And a fracas outside the Mewburn woman's gate one night. And the Sage has been peevish. Well, and how's life? Had a good time?"

"Yes. And Jim?"

"Just finished his portrait of Douglas Tew. So necessary, I mean, the money. Jim will be glad you're back. He says we're so short of normality."

"Thank you."

"Sometimes, you know, this place makes me want to scream. I'm not jazzy at all, really. Had tea?"

"No."

"Come and have tea with us?"

"No, I mustn't, dear. So many things to do. One always expects trouble and needlessly."

"You're nearly full."

"Am I? What sort of crowd?"

"O, not bad, Nan, not too one-piece and pink fingered."

"I'm glad."

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She drove on to White Ways. People were having tea in the loggia, and a mixed fours was in progress on one of the tennis courts. She saw Robert waiting, spruce and prim, as though he had been standing at attention there all the weeks she had been away. She saw Alfred running in his white garage coat, his big boy's face shining.

"Glad to see you back, miss."

Robert's eyes were twinkling at her.

"Well, Robert, any trouble?"

"None at all, miss. We've been doing quite nicely."

She said: "God bless you, Robert," and went in, conscious of being stared at by all the people who were sitting in the loggia.

Her cottage waited for her, nestling rather like a brown bird on the green apron of the Furze Hills. The cottage was her summer home, whereas in winter she lived in the club. Alfred was following with her suitcases, one in each mutton fist, and there had been occasions when she had been glad of Alfred's fists in dealing with irresponsible young cads.

She reached her gate, and saw the little garden full of flowers, Canterbury Bells and delphiniums, clove pinks, pansies, red valerian. Someone had been active here, and she was touched and consoled by the garden's neatness and beauty. It was good to come here and find that the folk who worked for you had not let you down, and could prove their good-will by way of loyal service.

"George has been busy, Alfred." George was her man-of-all-work.

"Yes, miss."

"Everything O.K. with you, Alfred?"

"Quite, miss. Only one bright lad tried to welch us on petrol."

"And didn't get away with it?"

"No, miss."

Alfred carried in her luggage, and she stood at her gate,

surveying this little world that was hers. What a gamble it had been, this enterprise, but it had prospered, and in prospering she had found it good. A job like this kept your wits working, so many things to think of, so much to organize, so many improvements to be made, so many people to study. Menus and minds both demanded excursions into psychology. She smiled to herself over the provocation of her thoughts, and while smiling, saw handsome Rachel her head-waitress coming up the path from White Ways with a tea-tray.

"Thought you'd like tea up here, miss."

"Thank you, Rachel."

And Rachel blushed. She might be a handsome and a strapping wench, but she was sensitive and no fool, and knew how to treasure her dignity when middle-aged men went ga-ga.

After tea and a cigarette Miss Lester went down to White Ways. She had a month's slacking to make good, but even Mallison's intrusions had not destroyed her confidence in her own capable hands. She found Robert waiting for her in her office, and as she sat down at her desk she had a vision of Robert as she had first seen him, rather like a poor shabby, half-starved old rat, somebody's butler who had fallen on evil times. Somehow intuitively wise as to man, she had given Robert his chance, and she had not regretted it. Clean and spruce and courteous he stood there looking at her with his bright eyes.

"Would you like to see all the correspondence, miss? I have it filed."

Letters! And suddenly she was reminded of those other letters, written at a time when she had not known her Mallison, and had been perhaps a little flattered and excited by an emotional experience that had surprised her when she was feeling lonely. What a fool she had been to write those letters! And what a cad he had been to refuse either to destroy or to return them.

"Secret treasure, my dear; human documents."

She had hated his serene smirk.

"Anything important, Robert?"

"No, miss. Just the usual. I have dealt with all of them."

"How are the bookings?"

"Good, miss. We shall be full next month. I have brought the ledgers up to date. Here's Alfred's garage-book. I've checked all the figures."

"Any complaints?"

"No, miss, nothing of consequence. One gentleman complained of his bed."

"With reason?"

"Well, yes, miss. I tried it when he was out. Gone a little lumpy in the middle. I ordered in a new box-mattress. I hope I did right, miss?"

"Absolutely."

"And we are getting low in hock and sherry. I took the liberty of sending in an order."

"Quite right, Robert."

"You'll find the bill in the file, miss. And we wanted some new napkins. I ordered in half a gross, and two dozen new bath-towels."

"You are a pearl, Robert."

"Thank you, miss."

"Kitchen all right? Mrs. Peters more settled?"

"I think much more settled, miss. Florrie, the new girl, is doing very well."

"You seem to have no shocks for me, Robert."

"I hope not, miss. We did not want you to come back from your holiday and find anything wrong."

She smiled at the little man, and then, picking up a sheaf of bills, turned them over with casual but deliberate fingers.

"I hear there have been one or two happenings, Robert."

He moistened his lips with the point of his tongue.

"Not here, miss."

"But in the neighbourhood."

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"Well, miss, in a place like this, things are apt to be a little jazzy sometimes, as you know."

She smiled up at him, and then her face grew grave, but guardedly so.

"Mr. Mallison in residence?"

Robert's bright eyes looked over the top of her head.

"I understand so, miss. We have not seen him here. O, by the way, miss, the petrol lorry failed us last week, and nearly let Alfred down. I expect you will write to the company about it."

"I shall, Robert, most certainly I shall."

When she had gone through the accounts with Robert, and inspected at his request, the bank slips and passbook, and taken over the petty cash, she locked money and ledgers up in the green office safe. She was apt to be a little careless about ready money, and more than once Robert had warned her against keeping too much cash in the safe. He would remind her that these were strange days, and that Bluewater was a somewhat sensational place and that it would be easy for bright young things to arrive as guests, and rifle her office in the night.

"Do you think it is likely, Robert?"

"I do, miss. Young gentlemen short of cash do queer things."

She had laughed, while realizing that Robert might have indicated one or two of Bluewater's *habitués* and employees who were suspect, but then a business such as hers could not be run like Freda Nuttal's shop. People asked her to cash cheques for them, and she did so, when she knew her people.

"I think I will have a look round, Robert."

"Yes, miss. Any particular orders?"

"I'll dine in the restaurant. More looking round, Robert!"

He twinkled at her.

"Quite so, miss."

Her tour of inspection was thorough. She went everywhere, into bathrooms, lavatories, bedrooms that were empty for the

moment. Were baths greasy, or toilet rolls in need of reinforcement? In the kitchen she found white-capped Mrs. Peters lecturing one of her wenches. Well, that might be necessary, if it were done without a bitter tongue. The still-room did not quite satisfy her as to neatness, and she spoke to the still-room maid about it, but as one who sought efficiency and not a grievance.

She had a particular table reserved for her in a corner of the dining-room, near the door, so that when the door opened she was concealed from those who entered. Invariably she wore a simple black frock when she dined with her clients, a woman apart who could observe both the people and the service, and assure herself that things were as they should be. She cultivated a nice air of aloofness and a dignity that could keep its place and retain other people in theirs. She was her frank self to very few of her guests, and only to those who were neither snobs nor too familiar.

On this particular evening she was presented with a study in contrasts. Mr. Montague Dax had brought in a party to dine, two young things in navy blue trousers, and a wife who wore a kind of yellow robe over a green jade beach frock. Mr. Dax was in shorts and singlet, hairy as to chest and legs, and displaying this hairiness with primitive insolence. He could be described as a splendid animal, or as a fine figure of a man. So much for the Dax party. They were drinking champagne, which, of course, was good for the house's finances. At a little table by a window sat Mr. Richard Jekyll, completely correct in dinner-jacket and carefully knotted black tie. Mr. Jekyll was very tall and very lean and very dark, a bachelor and exceedingly wealthy, a Sherlock Holmes of a man in his physical make-up, and mordant as to eye, and to tongue. He travelled about the world with a Rolls Royce, an elderly chauffeur, a valet, a wonderful collection of medicine bottles and chronic dyspepsia. He described himself as an anarchist.

"And why, dear lady? Because my stomach is completely anarchical, and a man is the slave of his stomach. Mine is a fierce individualist. Utter self-expression. I humour it."

She liked Mr. Richard Jekyll. He had never tried to make love to her. He was witty and courteous and irritable, and sometimes she had wondered why he came to Bluewater. She had asked him, and he had crinkled up his eyes at her.

"Caviare, my dear lady. And your cuisine, and my particular bed. One asks to be amused. One does not ask for virtue."

Did Bluewater amuse him? Apparently, it did. You could see all that was to be seen at some little Ligurian pleasure resort without travelling all that way to visit it.

"The sands well peppered, and stippled with nudities. All the new paganism."

She observed Mr. Jekyll observing the Dax party. It piqued him, and though he preferred to dine conventionally, his sharp dark eyes were delighted with the Dax hairiness. Dazzling the nymphs with your maleness, and making them envious of that most fortunate creature, your wife! She ran into Mr. Jekyll after dinner, or rather, she found him at his solitary table at the far end of the loggia, sheltered by a glass screen. He stood up and smiled at her. Quite a number of men did not trouble to do her the honour of standing.

"Have coffee with me? Please."

He drew another chair to the table, and she sat down to light a cigarette.

"How's Tartarin of Tarascon?"

Tartarin was Mr. Jekyll's motor-boat in which he tore at dreadful speed up and down Bluewater Bay. He asserted that the motion was good for his gastric organs. It appeared to be definitely bad for those of his poor chauffeur-mechanic.

"Resting. We did seventy yesterday, and poor Sandys was sick."

"Poor man."

"He said it was the smell of the engine. Tartarin comes from the garlic country. Did you observe Tarzan?"

She laughed.

"You mean Mr. Dax?"

"Who else. It should fill one with envy."

"What?"

"That a man should dare to dine with a doormat on his chest. So ruthless and buccaneerish. I suppose young things like it. They terrify me."

"The young?"

"The trousered specimens. My impulse is to smack, but my natural, Victorian awe prevents me."

"Awe! Isn't that——?"

"Superfluous? Quite. Trust Tarzan."

If Mr. Jekyll divined in her a sudden drift of aloofness, he did not comment on it, for he was ready to allow an attractive woman her temperamental atmosphere. The pity of it was that a pretty face tempted you to postulate an equally charming interior, only to disappoint you when the inward garnishings showed themselves to be as lightly vapid as the furniture of an ultra-modern flat. Not that Mr. Jekyll asked for bric-a-brac, but he did prefer a woman who had work to do, and did not dangle like one of those absurd mascot-dolls in the back window of a suburban motor-car. Had he trod indelicately upon Tarzan? Did that kind of male ape appeal to——? Surely not, though you could never be sure how the feminine organism would react.

He heard her say: "I hope Robert looked after you properly."

So, whatever her mood was, it had turned aside to wander down a byway, and he left it unvexed and unchallenged. He said that Robert was one of those unique little men who can father a fellow without fussing him. Coffee had arrived, and he poured her out a cup. "Black, I think, and no sugar?" She gave him a transient smile, drank her coffee, listened for

five minutes to his considerately casual conversation, and then excused herself.

"I haven't unpacked yet. Holidays mean so much catching up."

"Or catching out? But not in your case."

"Thank you. One does appreciate people who are not peevish."

"Shall we say peevish to the wrong person?"

He stood up as she rose, and smiled at her with kind shrewdness. Yes, Mr. Jekyll was rather a lamb, or if not a lamb, a wolf who had become dog. She went up to her cottage by way of the Club garden, pausing to notice how carefully George had staked and tied up the delphiniums. Stately flowers, these. Dignity, awe. Yet, it was that one word of Mr. Jekyll's that had set her dreaming in other gardens where your pragmatism found itself becoming tinged with emotion, and your reputation for hardness melted in a kind of conspiratorial twilight.

The parlour window of her cottage faced the sea, and gave her a view of all the newness of Bluewater. It was a long, low window, latticed and casemented, with apple green curtains looped back against buff-coloured walls. An Empire settee covered with black and gold brocade stood beside the window, lavishly supplied with cushions, and here, when her busy life allowed it, she liked to laze. The room's carpet was Chinese, a camel ground with patterns of soft blurred blue touched with purple. She had been somewhat lavish in the furnishings of this room, for it was here that her intimate, secret self could relax with a book and a cigarette, or in idle meditation.

She lay down on the settee with a cushion under her head. She could watch the sun setting, and the cliffs by Culverin Cove becoming black beneath a cornice of rich colour. The sea was pearl grey and at peace. Lying relaxed she suffered her inner self to ask those poignant questions. Was a certain

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person thinking of her as she was thinking of him? Would he come to this garish, pagan little place, and if he came what would he think of it?

Did she want him to come?

Yes and no.

She would have felt so much less troubled about the future, but for those wretched letters of hers which Mr. Siegfried Mallison held as hostages to fate. How had she come to write such emotional stuff to a mere sensualist like Mallison? Yes, how? What a damned fool! And Mr. Siegfried Mallison was no damned fool. He liked to play with his puppets, make them jig to his malicious moods, especially so when the male in him had been thwarted.

IV

A FAINT sound disturbed her. Someone had opened the garden gate, and she threw the end of the cigarette she had been smoking through the open casement, and sat listening. Footsteps, a man's footsteps, and suddenly she felt challenged and on edge. Could it be the one man whom she did not wish to see? She twisted round, and kneeling on the settee, with her hands resting on the window-sill, remembered that the door was locked and that no lights were showing in the summer dusk. She waited for the bell to ring, or for the sound of a knock, realizing that if she kept quite still her visitor might think the cottage empty.

Suddenly, she drew in her breath and held it. Her arms grew rigid. She saw a figure appear at her window, silhouetted against the fading afterglow. She recognized the mop of rebellious hair. Paul Hattersley, Paul the Potter! And for an instant she had been reminded of that other head. Well, thank God, it was not Siegfried Mallison!

He stood, staring in at her, his eyes like dark holes in a pallid mask.

"Hallo, Nan. Afraid I startled you."

She remained kneeling.

"O, that's all right, Paul."

His face made her think of a man peering through the dark bars of a cage.

"Glad you're back."

"So am I."

"Had to come and say so."

"Thanks, Paul."

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She tried to make her voice sound casual, for instinct warned her that she was on the edge of yet another emotional crisis. She was conscious of feeling impatient. Would men never cease from thrusting unwanted emotion upon her?

"Had a good time, Nan?"

"Yes, very. I was just turning in. Rather fagged, you know. How's life?"

"Pretty lousy. I suppose you've heard?"

"What, Paul?"

"The usual ruddy gossip. O, damn humanity! It doesn't understand. Chuckling fools. I——"

And suddenly he was leaning through the window. He had hold of her wrists. She felt him trembling.

"I'm not such a swine, Nan. Some things help one."

She felt dumb.

"Paul."

"I may be muck, sour starved muck. Dirt and failure and all that. O, my dear, but I'm not such a swine. If there's any savour and sweetness in things, you——"

His anguish frightened her. She wanted to shrink away, for, as a man he repelled her with his drunkard's breath, and his bitter and deformed attitude to life.

"I'm so sorry, Paul."

"Can't you help me?"

"I?"

"You seem to be about the one clean thing in this besotted place."

"O, my dear, it's not quite so bad as that. Please be good."

He seemed to sense her resistance, and suddenly he dropped her hands with a gesture that was almost that of flinging something from him.

"Good! O, my god! I may be a damned fool, but I don't want that sort of pity. I thought you might understand."

"I do understand, Paul."

She put her hand on the catch of the casement and was ready to close it should his violent mood persist, and he must have noticed the gesture, for he stood back, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

"Do you, my dear? Not a bit of it. You needn't get ready to slam that in my face. I'm not one of your bright and breezy blackguards."

"I know that, Paul."

"O, do you! Fact is, my dear, you're too nice and conventional for a squalid failure like me. You're hygienic. Well, I don't blame you. Most women seem to be made that way, the women who matter, and one can't spend one's soul on a giggling tart. Well, what does anything matter, after all? Sorry I broke out like this. Good night."

She did not call him back. She knelt there feeling chilled and shaken, as though her fastidious self had been accosted. Was she just a self centred, refined egoist, loving herself too dearly to care or to understand? Poor devil! She closed the window, and feeling suddenly tired, or as though some virtue had gone out of her, she went upstairs to bed.

Mr. Archie Stout of Ye Golden Hinde, taking a morning stroll in blue beret, white sweater, grey bags and gum-boots, and looking big and burly and somehow seaworthy, saw Miss Nuttal taking down the blue shutters of her shop. Mr. Stout had business with Mr. Maggs at the estate office, but he turned aside to help the Squirrel with her shutters. He was that sort of man, large and blue eyed and cheerful, going a little bald but not troubled by his baldness.

Miss Nuttal nibbled at him.

"I'm afraid I overslept myself, Mr. Archibald."

Archibald indeed! Why not say Bald Archie and be done with it? Hands in pockets, Mr. Stout looked down at this little creature in her black skirt and plum-coloured jumper. Miss Nuttal wore a hat, a hat that was innocently rakish and

poised too much on the back of her head. She was never seen without a hat. Some people said that she went to bed in it.

"Had your breakfast, Freda?"

"No, not yet."

"You go down to my place and get some breakfast. Now, no nonsense."

Miss Nuttal blinked at him through her pince-nez.

"O, I couldn't think of it. You're always too——"

Mr. Stout eyed her with genial truculence.

"Enough said. You go and get some breakfast, or I'll smack you. Understand?"

He strolled on, thinking-how strange it was that some people should be half starved in a world that could produce an abundance. Decayed gentlewomen. What a phrase! He crossed the road towards the estate office, yet another of Mallison's experiments in white rough-cast, green slates and yellow paint. A sound of whistling came from within, and Mallison hammered on the door, and shouted.

"Maggs, hallo!"

The door was opened by a youngish man half of whose face was white lather, and whose right hand held a safety razor.

"I'm just shaving."

Stout's blue eyes laughed. The ritual was obvious, and did not need explaining, but Maggs was that sort of man, with a narrow, cheese-knife face, dead eyes, and a skin the colour of veal. He did not tone with Bluewater.

"As a matter of fact I like to shave before the post comes in. Wanting anything, Mr. Stout?"

Maggs had attempted once to call him Archie, and Stout had snubbed him so savagely that even Maggs's suburban soul had reacted to the shock.

"Did that fool who drives the carrier's van drop a case of cigarettes here by mistake?"

"As a matter of fact, he did, Mr. Stout. I had a client in the office——"

"Thanks. I'll send up for it. Good shaving, Maggs," and he rolled off full of inward chuckles. Did a fellow like Maggs ever cut himself while shaving, and if so, did some sort of snail's juice exude instead of blood? Stout walked down Stane Street, and turning up Love Lane, strolled largely along it past the bungalow gardens until he saw the green and white palings of Paul Hattersley's fence and the painted sign of Paul the Potter. The little white building was roofed with red pantiles. It had a loggia, and yellow window-frames, and an apple-green door. Painted pottery and statuettes were displayed in one of the windows. At the back of the building Hattersley had his workshop where interested visitors could watch Paul at work in his white smock, modelling a Pan, or painting a vase with squids and snakes and crocuses in the style of Crete.

Archie Stout was feeling responsible for Paul, but without asking himself why any man should trouble to constitute himself his brother's keeper. It was just Archie's nature, perhaps a part of his digestive qualities and his musculature and cheerful laugh. He found Hattersley's green door unlocked. Bluewater had lost the habit of locking doors, emotional or otherwise, and Eros entered as he pleased.

"Paul, hallo!"

"Who's that?"

Hattersley was in bed and awake. The bedroom door was ajar, and Stout pushed it open and walked in.

"Archie, old man. The old familiar bellow. Hallo, got a headache or something?"

The blind was down, and the interior of the room dim and dishevelled, a pile of clothes on the floor, a white enamelled jerry in evidence. Hattersley slept on an old box-mattress. His head was visible with its black mop of insurgent hair, hollow eyes and intense pallor. A sugar-box by the bed served as a table.

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He growled at the man in the sweater.

"Yes, bit of a cracker. Be all right in an hour or two."

"Got any aspirin?"

"Bottle's empty."

Stout nodded at him. He knew that the one thing Hattersley could not tolerate was pity, for there was in him a secret pride that raged against life's frustrations, and the penury that the world imposes upon the creative artist who is not popular. There were occasions when Paul erupted like a volcano.

"I'll send you along some tea, old man, and a couple of aspirins. Save you trouble. Now, for God's sake don't make a scene over a cup of tea. I'm feeling a bit liverish myself."

Hattersley made a little, writhing movement in the bed.

"O, all right, and go to hell."

"Thanks. I am going back to bacon and eggs with the Squirrel. Like the door shut?"

"Yes."

He had reached the outer door when he heard Paul's voice.

"Archie, I know I'm a damned swine."

Stout turned back for a moment.

"That's news to me. Don't be silly. Breakfast and Mallison's new age calling."

"Damn Mallison!" said the voice; "someone ought to make a eunuch of him, or cut his throat. You can tell him that from me."

"Not worth while, old chap. Someone will take the breeches off him before we find ourselves in paradise."

Archie retraced his steps down Love Lane, reflecting that poor Paul lived at the very end of this lane, and that a man's poverty might be symbolized by his inability to buy himself a bottle of aspirin tablets. And why aspirin, why should the world need aspirin, anyway? Headache and heartache! Yes, Mr. Siegfried Mallison was responsible for many things, this super-egoist who talked eloquently of other worlds, and played with other people's lives like a mischievous and amoral small

boy. Damn Mallison! He had lured disciples into his Toy Town, and made economic slaves of them, monkeys whom he could prod with a stick, poor Paul, the Jettisons, young Fuchs, Freda Nuttal. Some had escaped like Gilda, and Ann Lester. And he himself, but for the grace of God and an instinct for running a country pub, might have been one of Mallison's monkeys.

Archie Stout crossed Stane Street, and diverged to take a short cut through the sandhills. He heard laughter and young voices. Someone, silhouetted against the blue sky, flagged him with a towel, one of the Wilmer girls in bright yellow bathing dress.

"Oy, Archie!"

"Hallo, kid."

"Coming to wash in ocean?"

"No. I did it in my bath. Get on with the business."

Stout climbed one of the tussocky sandhills, and stood there watching Bluewater running down to take its morning dip. A strip of shingle separated the sandhills from the sea, and the way each bather crossed it was individual and characteristic. Jimmie Jettison, rotund and blue, wriggled over the pebbles as though they tickled him. His wife, in a cerise-coloured wrap, walked stolidly like a solemn child. Gerald Fuchs minced over the shingle like a self-conscious and prancing faun. The two Wilmer girls dashed in, holding hands. Stout saw Mr. Monte Dax pick up Eileen Mewburn, and throwing her over one shoulder like a Roman with a Sabine woman, bear her into the sea. Douglas Tew, lean and sallow and somehow suggesting a smiling snake, carried a blue pneumatic mattress under one arm. Augustus Barter and his wife tripped down together, hand in hand. From the direction of White Ways another party came trotting over the sands, three young men and two girls, but Ann Lester was not with them. The white bathing-huts spilled yet more figures across the shingle. The sea was full of splashings and shoutings and laughter. Dax had swum out to the

raft, and climbing it, was standing to display his hairy maleness to the morning.

Stout heard a voice addressing him.

"Hallo, Archie, watching the young."

He turned and saw Gilda Latham in the hollow below him. She was dressed in an amber-coloured jumper and beige skirt, and she seemed to glow in the pale hollow of the sand. Great woman, Gilda!

"Yes, my dear, tolerantly and fortyishly so."

"No competition?"

"I'm not Daxish. No provocation there. I rather prefer my illusion dressed."

She smiled up at him.

"Illusion?"

"Well, you should know. I've asked you twice, and you've snubbed me badly."

She joined him on the sandhill.

"O, no, my dear. I'm still feeling rather responsible for the two kids."

"Need one be a slave to nieces? After all, Gwen and Maisie——"

"So very young still, Archie. And the Dax creature, and dear Gerald——"

"Yes, we're a bit promiscuous, I know. And you don't believe in it?"

"What woman does, if she has any ideas on the art of living."

He slipped a big hand under her arm, and she did not resist.

"Compassion. I'm a compassionate sort of ass, Gill. Rather necessary if one's not to make a putrid mess of life. I observe that Eileen is the Dax victim."

"Eileen doesn't matter."

"Not at all?"

"She's tough, my dear. Sensation without illusions."

Stout pressed her arm.

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"Well, damn it, I must get those two young things married. But, seriously, my dear, I have been serving my apprenticeship very patiently."

"True, O king. Ask me again, some time."

"Not now?"

"Say, when those two kids are——"

"But, hang it all, supposing——?"

"I'll take that into consideration."

Archie Stout raised her hand and kissed it, and descending with a shining face from the sandhill, went his way. What a damned fine woman Gilda was, so maturely wise and magnanimous and steadfast. And what a wife and comrade! Stout strode like a happy colossus to Ye Golden Hinde. A man was cleaning golf-clubs in the loggia, and sucking a cigarette. They exchanged curt but cheerful greetings.

"Pity you haven't a course here, Mr. Stout."

"Yes, it is a pity, having to go five miles."

But that was an idea; he would pass it on to Ann Lester; she had plenty of space round about the Furze Hills. Stout, with his beret pushed back, walked through the lounge into the dining-room where Miss Nuttal was waiting for him.

He called to a waitress.

"Florrie, I want tea and toast taken up to Mr. Hattersley's. Be a good girl and send the boy with it."

"Yes, sir."

"Charge it to the hotel. And, Florrie, ask Miss Jones if she can find a couple of aspirins."

"For you, sir?"

"Do I look like aspirin? No, put 'em in Mr. Hattersley's saucer."

It has been said so often by irreverent people that your philosopher is apt to become testily unphilosophic when his luggage is lost or the Inland Revenue authorities demand from him some explanation of his private accounts. Also, it might

be considered a little unseemly for a philosopher to smirk over the pages of his bank's pass-book when his balance at the bank runs into five figures, but that was Mr. Siegfried Mallison's expression as he sat at the bureau in his library. He purred like a cat over a saucer of milk. How potent was the golden fist, more potent sometimes when expressing itself in a cheque than in a poem.

The sunlight shone obliquely through upon him, touching his soft pink hands, and honey-coloured head. He was wearing a jerkin of amber velour and black breeches of the same material. He had just completed the writing of a cheque, and he held it in his right hand and eyed it quizzically.

Before him lay a letter.

"DEAR MALLISON,

I shall be much obliged if you will settle with me for the pots I made for your terrace nearly nine months ago. The account is long overdue.

Yours truly,

P. HATTERSLEY."

Mallison re-read the letter. It caused him to smile with a little quirk of malice. Then, with deliberate fingers he tore up the cheque he had written and dropped the pieces into the waste-paper basket. Hattersley could wait. It would be amusing to keep that awkward, bitter beast growling for his money.

Mallison stuffed the Hattersley letter into a pigeonhole, and unlocking a little central cupboard in the bureau, drew out a packet of letters tied up with a thread of blue silk. He held them in his hands, and his face continued to wear a little smirk of malice. Dear Ann's letters, the woman who had run away from him at the moment when he had claimed surrender. Well, well! And how was dear Ann feeling about things after a month amid the mountains?

She had called him a cad.

It had been crude and rather foolish of her.

Well, well, the letters could go back into their cupboard. They might prove more provocative and persuasive in that secret place. They gave him power. It might be amusing to exert power at the expense of that attractive and rather fierce young woman.

Mr. Richard Jekyll was out for exercise in obedience to the advice of the German savant who was his physician. He had taken a capsule of glandular extract with his early morning tea, and a teaspoonful of liver granules, chocolate coated after a light breakfast. In summer weather, that is to say when the English summer did not put its tongue in its cheek, Mr. Jekyll wore nothing but silk; vest, shirt, coat and trousers, also, a Panama hat, and an old Leander tie of dubious pinkness. The German savant had said to him: "Walk for three hours each day, eschew cocktails, and when the wind is in the north or east, wear a rabbit-skin over your liver." Rabbit-skin indeed! Mr. Jekyll walked up Lavender Lane and took the path up the valley in the direction of Rustling Thorn. It was a very beautiful valley with hanging woods of beech and oak, and steep and secret meadows losing themselves between the woods. Mr. Jekyll's long legs did not hurry, for the day was hot. Moreover, he was debating in his mind a problem that had been piquing him for some little time. Should he or should he not buy land and build a house on the Bluewater estate, and if so should he choose a site on the hillside amid the beechwoods or down by the sea at Spaniard's Point?

Mr. Jekyll continued to follow the path until it brought him to a belt of young Scotch firs and larches, and a gate in a cleft chestnut fence that suggested limitations. Beyond the fence lay Rustling Park, magnificent with old trees and grassy slopes and tangles of wild fern.

This particular path happened to be Mr. Siegfried Mallison's

private short-cut to Bluewater, but Jekyll was ignorant of the fact. The gate had no lock or chain, and since the park pleased him and he was not a timid person, he chose to trespass, ignoring a white board that warned him that trespassers would be prosecuted. Also, there may have been provocation in the notice, in the fact that a man like Mallison who preached that the land belonged to the community, should seek to segregate himself and exclude the vulgar. It was as amusingly anomalous as the facility with which a Labour minister could accept a title and acquire an estate, but a sincere consistency is the rarest of human virtues in a world that worships force and power.

Mr. Jekyll had not walked more than a hundred yards up this private pathway when he saw a figure rise like a human sun above a green swell of the grassland. It was Mr. Siegfried Mallison's butter-coloured head and amber jerkin moving in the sunlight. Mr. Jekyll did not hesitate. His leisurely stride continued, and the confrontation was inevitable.

Jekyll had never met Mallison in the flesh. He knew the great man only by his books and through Bluewater's irreverent gossip. Did the world ever say kind things about its celebrities? He would have admitted prejudice, prejudice that was not mollified by the great man's style of dress.

"Good morning, sir."

"O, good morning."

"May I suggest that you are trespassing? Well, continue to trespass if my park pleases you."

"Most magnanimous of you, sir, I'm sure. I'm afraid I must plead guilty to having seen your notice, but these trees—"

Now every woman who had experienced things with Siegfried Mallison could have told Richard Jekyll that Mallison could exercise charm when he was in the humour, and on this July morning he happened to be in the humour. To most men he was either polite and supercilious, or cleverly insolent. But he was smiling upon Jekyll, and even Jekyll's shrewd

hostility was disarmed. He looked with interest at one of the world's thinkers. Undoubtedly, the fellow had a striking head, though the peculiar flatness of its occiput was not without significance. Also, the mouth was sensual, but the almost tawny eyes were fine and intelligent, and the forehead had serenity. Or was it calm arrogance?

"You are interested in trees, sir?"

"I am. Unpolitical creatures. You'll forgive me."

Mallison laughed.

"Excellent. That's why I like to live among them. Impartial in thinking, passionate in action."

Jekyll seemed to savour these sayings. They might have described the man's face as he saw it, serene above, sensual below. No, Siegfried Mallison was not the charlatan that plain men wished to think him. Histrionic he might be, and full of poses, but all this might be the froth that a mischievous soul liked to blow at the public.

"I hope I understand you."

Again Mallison laughed.

"I wish my critics were as modest, sir. But go where you please. I have some fine cedars, and a unique sequoia. Yes, go where you please."

Mr. Jekyll, feeling rather like an honoured boy, raised his Panama hat.

"I will. Thanks very much. I appreciate the favour."

Mallison, giving him one of the smiles he gave to women, passed on, and Jekyll was aware of a queer squeaking sound which seemed unexplainable until he realized that the stridulation came from the rubbing together of the legs of Mallison's corduroy trousers.

Rachel, Miss Lester's head-waitress, had made herself responsible for the flowers in the dining-room and lounge, and for that purpose George kept a reserve border at the end of the hotel garden. Rachel gathered her own flowers, and

looked even more handsome while gathering them, and walking with her bosom full of blue delphiniums. Poor George had betrayed an eagerness to help her, and been calmly repulsed. Alfred of the Service Station had essayed to court her, but Rachel was marble, and a mystery. Men did not seem to matter in her life, and so unkind people had said that at some time man must have mattered too much. All that was known about her was that she came from the West country on the Welsh border, and that her parents were dead, or dead to Rachel.

Siegfried Mallison walked into the White Ways garden as he walked everywhere, with burnished assurance. It had been said of him that had he appeared at heaven's gates, it would have been with a "Ha, Peter, my man, how are haloes?" The path through the White Ways garden led up to Miss Lester's cottage, and Mallison had not troubled to ask if Miss Lester was at home, for he was not counting upon a happy welcome. Just beyond the rose pergola he met Rachel with an armful of delphiniums, and in her dark beauty looking like one of those stately flowers.

Mallison's eyes narrowed. His face expressed a measure of surprise. La Belle France with a bosom full of flowers, and hair as black as polished jet! A serene, wide-eyed cow, no doubt, but how was it that he had not previously appreciated her?

He smiled upon Rachel.

"Flowers for the house, my dear."

He "my deared" most women, even without provocation, but Rachel walked past him without the flicker of an eyelid.

"Yes, Mr. Mallison."

She had a low, soft and slightly husky voice, and Mallison turned about to look at her. A handsome wench and haughty. And what a figure, what a throat, what legs! And she could walk. Her dark head seemed to float like the head of some eastern woman trained to the carrying of a water-jar from the well. Rachel!

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Ann Lester was spending the morning at the desk in her parlour, making good the lapses of a month's holiday, checking accounts, ordering in supplies, writing cheques. Her desk was placed obliquely to the window, and she was not aware of the Mallison presence until he had his head and shoulders through the window, and had cut off a part of her light. This was the kind of intrusion that angered her, especially so when it was expressed in the person of this particular man.

"Hallo, Nan. Is it peace between us?"

His arms rested on the sill of the window. He was smiling, not at her, but at some inward reflection. Was not the maid handsomer than the mistress, and more interesting and piquing in being unexplored? In the transference of desire one became more tolerant towards the person who had ceased to be so desirable.

"Afraid I'm busy."

She did not trouble to hide her impatience.

"So I see, my dear. Had a good holiday?"

"Quite good, thanks."

She became a profile to him as she resumed her filling in of a cheque, and Mallison's malicious eyes observed her. A hard and intransigent young woman this, one of your modern efficients, and not in the least seductive. Why had he troubled? A porcelain vase might have beauty, but it was a hard and chilly object to embrace.

"You do love yourself, Nan."

She flashed round at him.

"O, shut up."

"Basic truths, my dear. Divide humanity into two sections, those who are incapable of loving anything but themselves, and those——"

"It doesn't interest me."

"No? That is why you will never be loved for more than five minutes. Sad but true."

She pushed her chair back, and faced him.

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"Impudence is one of your specialities. It does not appeal to me."

"Married to your job. What a sacrament! Well, I strolled down to tell you that I have burnt those letters."

He saw her face change suddenly. It became softer, younger. What an incalculable creature woman was. Or, how calculable? You could lie her into complaisance. She became as quickly and unexpectedly ripe as a hard, green pear.

"Have you, Siegfried?"

"Yes."

She stood up; she came to the window. It was as though some inexplicable tenderness had returned, and he could have given her the reason. She loved herself so completely that any salute to her self-love made her kind.

"That's rather decent of you."

"My dear, that horrible word! Much better say indecent."

"Well, magnanimous."

"That's better."

She gave him her hand, and the gesture was almost a caress. Odd, how peculiar a power he had! He bent over her hand and kissed it, laughing inwardly, for he did not want her any longer. The maid was more alluring than the mistress.

V

RED cherries on a coster's barrow.

A July night, hot and oppressive, the Clerkenwell Road, a desultory, dawdling crowd; fat women gossiping; two young Jews flaunting it with a golden-haired girl; a negro, his arm round a woman, pushing open the swing door of a pub. Debased, unfinished faces, oddments of waste paper on the pavement, a general stuffiness surcharged with the smell of sweat, the restlessness of the eternal traffic, trams, buses, a brood of dirty children shrieking as they rushed into the dark mouth of an alley.

Jack Skelton paused by the barrow.

"Ripe cherries, thruppence a parnd."

The hawker was bare headed and in his shirt sleeves, and bawling with the husky voice of a sot. His open mouth showed fragments of rotten teeth.

"Thruppence a parnd."

"I'll have a pound."

He watched the fellow's dirty, scrawny fingers grab the fruit, drop it into a paper bag, and place it on the scales. Kentish orchards, snow-blossom, and then, this! What finality for the fruit! The dirty fingers extracted more cherries, and plopped them into the bag.

"There y'are, mate."

Skelton handed over three pennies, took the bag, and conscious of a protesting nausea, moved off.

Surely, hereditary make-up was a curse laid upon man if he happened to be sensitive and fastidious, and could not afford that luxury. A public school and Oxford, a bath a

day, discipline of a kind, refinement of speech and of feeling, did not help towards the assimilation of that other consciousness towards which he, as an idealist, sought to attain. Beauty, and freedom for all men. The Russian idea, dialectical materialism. How was it that he had always boggled at the Russian scheme, with its negations in the matter of soap and of individual sanctity, and an acceptance of bugs in the hope that a future world might be somehow good? Freedom? Freedom to rub noses with all these unfinished faces, to taste the septic breath of demos? Yes, and though he might remind himself with passion that this shabby world was not the crime of the poor, but of those who kept men poor, he could not stomach the ugliness of it. Even a poet's compassion seemed to fail him and to hold its nose when reality assailed it.

Skelton had left his room in the Gray's Inn Road, and his exodus had been due to fastidious qualms. He had found other lodgings in Summerhays Square, a little Victorian quadrangle, hidden away where Islington met Clerkenwell. Summerhays indeed! It possessed a patch of starved grass and sooty privets enclosed by iron railings, but it did offer man an apology for peace, and an escape from that bloody flux that afflicts modernity, traffic.

He carried his cherries and his heart-burn to No. 7 Summerhays Square, and as he slipped his latchkey into the door he found himself wondering whether he could stomach the fruit. Well, he could wash it. But could water wash away the thought of those dirty, scrawny fingers? Hallo, there was a band of light showing under his door. Had he forgotten to turn off the switch before emerging for his nightly prow? He had few visitors. Neither his prejudices nor his furniture appeared to encourage friends.

He opened the door and saw the little, cold, clever face of Geoffrey Snape. Snape was sitting in his one arm-chair, and smoking a cigarette in a holder that suggested Edgar Wallace. Also, he appeared to have been reading Skelton's

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last volume of poems, an attenuated book bound in sage green cloth. He had little, effeminate hands, and the face of a calf, but it was that of a clever calf.

"How-do, Jack. Mind my smoke?"

His voice was an affected snuffle. He held his cigarette-holder like a man holding a flute.

Skelton sat down on the bed with his bag of cherries beside him. He was not in a mood to welcome Snape.

"Just been out for a breather."

"The exercise fad. Been buying buns?"

"Cherries."

"How sweet! Reminds one of a fox-trot and the fat cads who croon about love, when they mean lust."

"Have a cherry."

"And spit stones over your carpet. Not nice. Well, how's work?"

Skelton knew that Snape was not interested in other people's creative urges. The question was a mere introduction to the personal eloquence of Snape. He was one of those hard-boiled little egoists who came and sat in your chair, and tapped his own shell, and proceeded to spoon out his own yolk.

"Very nice and Bloomsbury, this."

"You mean, my stuff?"

"As it should be. Arcadia in Tavistock Square. Only the urban mind has a proper appreciation of the country."

Skelton looked darkly at him, and getting up, poured water into his basin and emptied the bag of cherries into it.

"I should say the country idea needs washing."

"How?"

"When you buy it in London. Foul fingers."

"How sentimental of you! Ever seen a Hodge blow his nose?"

"O, quite. Need one emphasize the obvious?"

Skelton was sluicing the cherries in the water, and with

sudden malice against himself he plucked his volume of poems from Snape's lap, and lifting some red blobs of wet fruit from the basin, plopped them on to the improvised plate.

"Have some. You can extrude the stones into my waste-paper basket."

Snape showed his teeth in a cold simper.

"What about your respect for literature?"

"O, tosh! One's stuff may need that sort of emetic."

He spoke almost fiercely, and sitting down on the bed with the basin between his knees, he began to eat cherries with a kind of savage wilfulness, but his gibe had given Snape his inspiration.

"Absolutely indicative, John. I have proved my factory process."

"O! What, exactly?"

"Full production sales proceeding, yep."

Some two years ago Snape had conceived the idea of turning himself into a species of short story factory. After all, there were only about four variants of the central human theme, and you just rang the changes on them and shifted your scenery about from Bloomsbury to Timbuctoo. What the paying public asked for was sensation, love and violence. Consider the front page of the penny pictorial press. Also, why put on a pose? Why talk a lot of tosh about literature when your business was to make money? The modern show was nothing without money. Look at Edgar! Sheer flap-doodle. But he, Snape, was going to improve on Edgar. After all, the people who prated about literature were the people who made no money. Yes, sir! The pose of the piqued. Of course, if you wanted to be a Virginia Wolfe or a James Morgan——

Skelton was munching darkly, and dropping cherry-stones into the empty bag.

"Yes, of course, if you want nothing else."

"Who doesn't? The humbug of being proud and precious.

What do you get out of the modern show without gate-money?
Doing what you please?"

Skelton spat a stone.

"Getting results?"

"Yep. Two a week. I've got contracts with two syndicates for one a month. And doing some placing on my own. Thirty guineas from *Piccadilly*. Supposing I make fifty quid a week. But then, of course, I can put my prices up. Become a sales-pusher like Edgar or Phillip Op. When I'm making five thousand a year and saving three, I can become highbrow if I want to and write what I please."

"And still please your public?"

"Educate 'em."

Skelton smiled dourly.

"You might not be able to, you know."

"How?"

"Boiling up skilly for years spoils you for making wine."

"Tosh, my dear chap. I just take my tongue out of my check, that's all."

"It might have become a habit, like sucking your teeth, or spitting cherry stones. Once a sob-stuff or a sex factory, always like that."

Snape prodded the air with his cigarette-holder.

"I'll bet you a hundred quid, old man, that when I choose to I can bring it off. So long as you're fooling the public and not yourself, you can switch over. After all, the precious stuff is only affectation, posing while you're doing the job, playing at being a sort of superior shopwalker instead of getting on with the business like the Commercial Road. You sell stuff like Harrods instead of in the Caledonian Market. You're just self-conscious, a little pompous and dressy about it, that's all."

Skelton put the basin and the remaining cherries within Snape's reach, and getting up, went to the mantelpiece for a pipe. A pipe was indicated in certain crises, something hard

to bite on, not mere paper pap between your lips. Snape might be an exasperating little cynic, and completely material, but considered commercially he was a realist, and it was the realist and not the dreamer who sucked the juice from life, and did what he pleased. Moreover, Skelton's thoughts had passed out of this bed-sitting-room in which Snape sat talking. The challenge of Snape had become coloured and emotional, urging him towards a human contact that had made him flinch.

Did he propose to renew that romantic interlude? Would he shoulder his pack and tramp down to Bluewater in Sussex?

How strange that the thing one called love should take on a tinge of resentment and hostility! But was it so strange? Love and hate, the old platitude. Frustrations which made you writhe. One's damned pride! Or, why not call it self-love?

Snape was eating cherries.

"Why not try a novel, old man?"

"And swell the glut? Waste six months on a gamble?"

Snape simpered at him.

"Well, vetting other people's stuff, and poetry is a mug's game. I'm a realist, mind you. Why not give yourself a chance?"

"With the idea of becoming a best-seller, and going to Egypt or Morocco for the winter?"

"Better than fugging in Clerkenwell. Fact is, John, one shouldn't take oneself too damned seriously. It doesn't do unless you're a Galsworthy. If you can put your solemn self over on the public, of course——"

Skelton was lighting his pipe, and biting hard on the stem.

"O, let's drop literature. Ever heard of a place called Bluewater?"

Snape spat out a cherry-stone.

"Can't say I have. Sounds colourful, and picture-posterish."

"Somewhere in Sussex, on the sea."

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"Arty-arty, or just bungaloid?"

"I don't know."

Snape looked at him shrewdly with his blue, cold, dead calf's eyes.

"Got a girl there?"

"O, shut up. Women and poetry don't mix."

"Good God, why not? Isn't a poet the most promiscuous person? Besides, the domestic idea's dead. Read Mallison."

Skelton blew smoke.

"Mallison! I can't see much connection between Mallison and Bluewater. An international cad, and——"

But he grew silent, realizing that Snape would suspect him of suffering from the modern world's prime passion, envy.

Said youth to its own reflection in the glass while shaving: "Damn it, need one sell one's soul? And damn Snape! Complacent little toshmonger! I'll get out of London for a week. This moving-staircase life makes one too restless."

How were finances? He had a few pounds in hand, and he was something of an adept at billeting himself cheaply. His favourite refuge was some farm, especially if it had an orchard, and the farmer would let you play about with a fagging hook or a hoe. There were times when the primitive creature in him seemed to yearn to blister its hands and shed sweat in work upon the land.

Sponging the remains of the lather from his face he realized that the urge in him was not mere wind on the heath, brother. He was going to Bluewater, not to the conquest of Canaan, but to spy out the land. What sort of world was hers? And the name of her house was White Ways. He visualized it as one of those new, white boxes with a flat roof and much glass in steel frames, and a bright yellow door, and a Vita lounge for sun-bathing. A mushroom growth! Possibly. And what sort of life did a young woman live in such a place? Probably it was not Rye or Winchelsea, and certainly not Eastbourne,

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but a new play-box for the neo-pagans, boasting a country club complete with cocktail bar and squash-court and bathing pool, a modern, cubist five-starred caravanserai, and a golf course and tennis courts. Probably it called its bathing beach The Lido, and was very naked and raffish and boring. Or might it not be a sort of Peacehaven? Ye gods! Bluewater? Did not the very name suggest a syndicate, and the activities of those commercial gentlemen who, in pursuit of profit, hack down trees and erect some cad's town, to the disgust of the natives whom their own bureaucrats seem incapable of protecting against the exploiter?

Bluewater had escaped one superfluity, a railway station. The booking-clerk at Charing Cross enlightened Skelton on that point.

"You can book to Poldermouth. That's the nearest place on the line."

"How far?"

"About ten miles. There's a bus service to Dewhurst."

"How far's that?"

"About four miles. You'll have to walk it or hire a car. Buses and coaches are barred from Bluewater. Can't think why we advertise the damned place."

"Exclusive."

The clerk was needing a holiday and feeling tetchy.

"Snob's paradise. That's what I call it."

Skelton took his third single to Poldermouth, and in the train he reflected upon the clerk's bitterness. If Bluewater transcended trains and charabancs, and was completely car-conscious, then it was not likely to offer accommodation to a young man with the proclivities of an amateur tramp. His baggage consisted of a single suitcase, and reaching Poldermouth about twelve-thirty, he had a light lunch at a local tea-shop, and was advised as to where he could pick up the Dewhurst bus. Dewhurst pleased him. It was still Sussex and English, individual and haphazard, for no official fusspot had

regenerated its frontages. Setting out from Dewhurst on foot, and telling himself that Dewhurst could house him if no farm was to be found, he took the road to Bluewater, and came in due course to that little congerie of old cottages which the Mallison estate-map called The Squelch. There was one pub here, The Wheat Sheaf, an old brick and tile house standing above a little triangle of turf, with two benches under its windows, and an orchard-garden on the west of it. Skelton took one look at The Wheat Sheaf and turned aside towards its white doorway. This was the sort of place that smelt English, of pickled onions and cheese and beer.

The landlord was below, tapping a barrel, and a girl in a flowered overall called him.

"Fayther, a gent wanting a room."

Fayther appeared, bland and bald, with very blue eyes looking at life stolidly through spectacles. Could he provide Skelton with a bedroom and meals? He could, if the gentleman did not object to plain living.

"How long for, sir?"

"O, about a week, I expect. If you've got a room looking over the garden."

"Come and look, sir."

The bedroom pleased Skelton as much as did the pub, for it had a clean austerity, and its lattice opened almost into the green heart of an apple tree. Having made sure that the room was not situated over The Wheat Sheaf's bar, and that if he went to bed early he would not have to listen to a burble of local gossip, he accepted the room and went down for his suitcase. Fayther wanted to know whether the gentleman would require supper. He could supply cold roast beef, pickled onions, a jam tart and cheese. Yes, that would be excellent. And how long would it take him to walk to Bluewater?

Fayther goggled his spectacles at him.

"Why, you be there, sir. We be Bluewater, in a sense. Old wine and new, sir."

"Bluewater's very new?"

"Wasn't a house to be seen down there ten years ago. Nothing but t' coastguard cottages."

"Do you know a house called White Ways?"

"You mean the Country Club, sir?"

"O, that's what it is. I see. Who lives down here?"

"Who, sir?"

"Yes, I mean what kind of people?"

Fayther rubbed his chin, and the function appeared to produce a surreptitious smile.

"Funny lot, if you ask me, sir. Still, it don't do to be narrow-minded in these days. What they call jazzy. Young women walking about in drawers or trousers, and their bubs tied up in a handkerchief," and he sniggered.

Skelton smiled at him.

"I know. That's a rather apt description, Mr.—"

"Bannister, sir."

"Can I get tea down at Bluewater?"

"Sure, sir, and see all the sights. White Ways or Ye Golden Hinde both sell teas."

"Ye Golden Hinde?"

"New sort of pub, sir. Mr. Stout's place. Not my idea of a pub, of course. You sit on 'igh stools at a sort o' counter. No draught beer. All bottles. I 'ad a look in there once. Never seen so many bottles. Reg'lar menagerie in the drink line. But Mr. Stout 'e's not a bad sort. Not like some of 'em. Yer can tell 'e's a man a 'undred yards off."

"And some you can't, Mr. Bannister?"

"God's truth, sir, specially when they be bathing. I've seen a lady go by my door, and I could 'ave sworn it was a man, 'cept for her backside and the way it waggled."

Skelton laughed, for, in spite of his spectacles, Mr. Bannister was a Merry Andrew.

When Skelton came to where the road turned sharply to the south-east just below High Pine and The Bluff he saw Blue-

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water and its bay spread below him under the afternoon sun. The brilliance of the place was so unexpected that he sat down on the grass bank of the cutting through which the road ran, and felt in his pocket for a pipe and pouch. Blue sea, sand that was almost gold, white buildings, the green uplands; Spaniard's Point ploughing into the sea like a grey and mythical monster with a coronet on its head; Culverin Cove, with its blue, white and green boats pooled with shadow under Arthur's Head. It seemed to him that the place was not quite English, but Mediterranean, Greek. With a few cypresses and stone pines added it might have been completely so. Strange, this! He rather flattered himself that he had a feeling for landscape, and the vacillating moods that a subjective and sensitive self imposes upon the objective scene, and this little piece of modern confectionery puzzled him. It seemed to postulate a dominant mind, the planning of a creative and central personality. Most certainly it was not syndicated, and though, as a creation, it seemed self-conscious and posed, it was not the pose of the mere seeker after profit.

Skelton could see the white beach huts, and people bathing, and the dance-pavilion with its semi-circular pillared portico suggesting the Temple of Vesta, and only to the professional eye was the hollowness of those pillars patent. But Skelton, having looked his fill, walked down the hill past the estate office and Miss Nuttal's shop until he came to the village store. The village shop was not up to Bluewater's imaginative playfulness, and the man behind the counter wore the conventional white apron and carried a little red note-book and pencil tucked into a waistcoat pocket.

"Excuse me, can you direct me to White Ways?"

"Straight down the road, sir; you can't miss it."

Skelton found himself glancing over his shoulder at Gilda's Ye Olde Shoppe. Did Bluewater carry its tongue in its cheek? Passing the end of Love Lane, he saw a young man crossing the Strand between the sandhills, and carrying a tea-kettle as

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though it was an offence and smelly; Gerald Fuchs in green shorts and a purple vest and wearing jade bangles. Skelton and Gerald exchanged unfriendly glances, the poet and the parasite, mutually mistrustful. What a nasty bit of work! Did Bluewater breed that sort of maggot? Skelton had not reached the age when a tired tolerance discovers no abnormality in any human creature. He could not say with Mallison that sin is geographical.

Bungalows, and more bungalows, and Mr. Montague Dax going down in all the glory of his hairiness, to bathe. Another symbol. Lavender Lane and the Jettison studio, and rising beyond it the flat façade of White Ways with its loggia. Steel framed windows, bright blue curtains, orange umbrellas, hard courts spread like red linoleum, blue petrol pumps, the high white diving-pulpit of a bathing pool. Why a bathing pool with the sea just over the sandhills? Yes, it was all very gay and modern, with colour splashed about in quick contrasts.

And she lived there! At least, that was the address she had given him.

Well, what about tea? But the desire for tea faded from him as he appreciated the crowded publicity of the White Ways' loggia. All the world and its wife had sat itself down in the loggia or under the orange umbrellas, and it looked such a prosperous world, like the Victoria Hotel at Interlaken. She might be there at one of those tables, and he flinched from the idea of challenging her under the eyes of a facetious crowd. No, it couldn't be done. He would wait until that loggia had emptied itself, and then stroll up casually and ask for Miss Lester.

Head in air, hands in trouser pockets, all profile so far as White Ways was concerned, he walked past the place and its parked cars towards Martello and Spaniard's Point. The sandhills here were consolingly empty, and there was no sound save the sound of the sea on the Point's shingle bank. Skelton made for the squat grey tower planted upon a little cushion of

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turf. It did not appear to be inhabited, and it appealed to him as a place where you could sit in the sun with your back to a wall, and your legs extended. A path led up to the back of the tower, and round it, and the curve of the wall hid that other figure from him until he was within three yards of it.

“Sorry.”

Why should he be sorry? Why should he pretend to sorrow or express it? Her conventional response should have been “Don’t mention it,” but she did not trouble even to draw her feet up, or to break the thread of her serene repose. She was doing what he had meant to do, sitting and sunning herself with her back against the wall, and with nothing but sea and sky before her. She wore no hat, and her very black hair gleamed. Her large, dark eyes looked up at him with calm scrutiny. Were her eyes blue or black? But no eyes are black.

She said: “I’m sorry if I’ve got your place.”

He was standing about two yards from her, and meaning to walk on or turn back, but somehow her serenity and her naturalness made such self-consciousness seem silly.

He smiled down at her.

“That’s all right. I’m the trespasser. Nobody owns all the sea and sky.”

“Aren’t you glad?”

He sat down.

VI

HIS experience of women had not been very extensive, otherwise he might have recognized in Rachel the unusual woman who can sit still and gaze at life without fidgeting, or pulling out a mirror, or bursting into bright chatter. Nor was she the mere ruminating cow, nor the idly subjective dreamer. She remained in just the same position, relaxed and easy, her back against the wall, one leg crossed over the other. No patting of hair, no ordering of skirts, no sudden animation in the presence of the male. Yet, it was not Rachel who was to surprise him, but the things she said, and the intervention that occurred because of her.

It was Skelton who considered conversation to be necessary.

"Rather an unusual place, this."

Yes, everything was new in it, very new, and her summing up of the situation piqued him.

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

He could not place her. Was she the wife or daughter of one of the more prosperous settlers in this toy town? He glanced at her large and shapely hands, strong and capable hands. She wore no rings.

"Do you happen to know a Miss Lester?"

She smiled at him.

"This is my afternoon off. I'm her head waitress."

She saw his sensitive face grow tense.

"Her head waitress. You mean at——?"

"White Ways. Miss Lester owns White Ways."

So, that was it! Good Lord, why hadn't he tumbled to it?

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He sat and stared at the sea, feeling that this pilgrimage in pursuit of the romantic passion had become ironical and dubious. How life upset both your calculations and your illusions. His Lady Greensleeves was a successful commercialist, one of those busy and rather hard and efficient young women who are a challenge to the otiose male, and especially so to a self-proud young person whom a profit-taking world would regard as trash.

But the temptation to wonder had become Rachel's. Did he in his innocence imagine that she did not know that when a young man asks a stranger about a member of her own sex the question is not fathered by idle curiosity? Moreover, she was alive to the way his face had changed, and Rachel was wise as to faces. Her work had made the reading of faces helpful. Friction was saved if you taught yourself to distinguish the sheep from the wolves and to spot those guests who would be difficult and touchy, the little vain souls who expected to be flattered. A quick "Yes, sir," or a "Yes, madam," and a smile which implied that the particular table and its human attachments were the most important objects in the room. Long ago Rachel had realized that most of the people who came to White Ways were intent upon showing off. It was a competitive world in which your social importance was advertised by your wife's frocks, your wine bottles and your car, and in this world Rachel had learnt to cherish her dignity and to deal with middle-aged men who became silly about her.

But this Stranger was different. He did not begin to look at you because you were desirable, like a greedy child ogling a jam tart. He had one of those terribly sensitive faces that seem to open and close abruptly. She suspected that he would be fiercely earnest about things. Such a clever head, and yet so boyish. And had he come down here purposely to see Miss Lester? Was he in love with Miss Lester? Rachel was moved to withdraw her eyes from him, and to gaze at the sea.

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Miss Lester was a quite wonderful person in her way, but as to falling in love with her! Yes, and as this intense young man might be expected to fall in love?

She heard him say: "I suppose you do quite well at White Ways?"

"We are nearly always full all the summer. Miss Lester knows her job."

"I expect so. Is she the manageress?"

"Owner-manageress. She started it herself."

"I see. Full of energy."

"One has to be keen, sir."

He looked at her sharply. It was as though she had lapsed.

"Don't call me sir."

"I'm used to it."

"A damned convention! Nobody ought to be called sir."

She gave him a kind of mother look, and smiled.

"All our gentlemen expect it."

"Gentlemen!"

Yes, obviously, something about Miss Lester and White Ways had disturbed him, or was he one of those persons whom her patrons described as a "Bolshie"?

He asked her a question.

"Do you always come out here when you are off duty?"

She appeared to consider that question. Coming from man as she knew him it would have indicated symptoms of breeziness.

"Yes. Most afternoons. I get from three to four."

"Just to look at the sea?"

"And to sit down. When you are on your feet all day——"

"I can understand that."

There was silence between them, and this silence was to make possible the unexpectedness of an intervention that was to be as disconcerting to the intervener as it was to the two sitting on the grass. Also, a liking for crepe-soled shoes and the soft turf made the third person's approach surreptitious.

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Rounding the tower he surprised the man and the girl as completely as Skelton had surprised Rachel.

"Ha, looking for ships at sea!"

Skelton's upward glance was quick and hostile. He saw this large and colourful figure with the afternoon sunlight on it, purple silk and black corduroy, an Olympian head, eyes that were tawny and like hot metal. And Skelton's impression was that this Jupiter man was displeased, most divinely displeased, as though he had come in search of Leda, only to discover her coquetting with a base mortal. A smile that was almost a sneer. But did the gods sneer? Some shrewd and sensitive impulse made him glance from the man's face to the girl's. She too was smiling, but with a subtle inwardness that piqued him. It was not an objective smile, and it was not meant for man. She looked steadily towards the sea.

"My rest time, sir."

"So I observe."

Skelton's long legs drew themselves up. Like most sensitives he was too ready to suspect himself of being superfluous. And then he got the impression, he could not say why or how, that the woman beside him did not want him to go. His legs flattened themselves out. He looked up half ironically at the colourful person.

"Wonderful weather, sir."

Wonderful weather, indeed! The tawny eyes effaced him. Complacent young cub!

"Miss Lester in, Rachel?"

"I think so, sir."

"Good."

He turned his back on them and stood for a moment surveying the sea as though he wished these two mortals to appreciate his sense of their unimportance. Then, deliberately, his hands in the pockets of his baggy breeches, he idled off round the grey swell of the tower.

Skelton drew his knees up.

"Sorry, if I was——"

He saw a hand come out and touch the turf.

"No, don't go."

"Who was the gentleman?"

"Mr. Mallison."

"Mallison! Not Mr. Siegfried Mallison?"

"Yes."

He was on his feet with the swiftness of a spring that has been released.

"Good God! Does he live here?"

"Yes, up at that big house on the hill. He owns most of the place."

She was aware of him sitting down again almost as though something had given way inside him.

"Well, I'm damned!" and that was all he said.

Did he remember the spruce wood above Brienz and his fiery denunciation of this prophet of progress and of freedom? Most certainly he did, and with hot ears and much speculation. Why had she not admitted to him——? O, well, what concern of his was it? He had said good-bye to Rachel, and was wandering back over the broken country towards White Ways, and his progress was as desultory as his mood. Sand-hills, marram grass, patches of gorse, little valleys padded with turf. What was he going to do, walk into her parlour like a fly? But why this mood of silly, sensitive cynicism? Had he become suddenly and absurdly jealous of Mr. Siegfried Mallison because Siegfried Mallison had materialized as man?

His vacillations continued. He left the sandy road, and approaching White Ways deviously he found himself nearly opposite the Country Club garage. There were hummocks of gorse here, and lunettes of turf. He sprawled on a grass bank, and looking over the lip of it, found himself in command of the Country Club and its appurtenances. Something

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was going on over there. A red two seater sports-car was standing by one of the blue petrol pumps, and a good-looking young man, an offensively good-looking young man, appeared to be having words with a white-coated garage attendant.

"Don't be a bloody fool, Alfred."

The man in the white coat disappeared into the garage.

Something had put Miss Lester out of temper, and when the telephone bell rang in her office she picked up the receiver with a grab of impatience.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Alfred, miss. Mr. Garside's here wanting petrol."

"Tell him to go to——"

"I have, miss. He says he won't move his car until we've filled his tank."

"I'll come across, Alfred."

She clapped the receiver back, and with a face that threatened Mr. Albert Garside with extreme candour, she walked out of her office and through the lounge. Sponging young blighter! He owed her a three months' bill and laughed when she suggested payment, a glamorous and insolent young gentleman with a self-conceit that was as curly as his hair. So, he wanted petrol, and she would give him pyrotechnics. What a pity the law did not allow stout Alfred to operate with his fist upon this modern Narcissus.

From his observation post amid the gorse Skelton saw all that happened, and heard much of what was said, for voices were raised and the summer stillness carried them. Mr. Garside sat in the driving-seat of his car, exuding charm and cheek. The big man in the white garage-coat had reappeared, with a large white face, and large hands gripping the lapels of his coat.

"You'd better clear out, sir. Miss Lester's coming."

The young man smiled at him.

"Don't be such a sucker, Alfred."

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She came. She stood by the nearside door of the red car and said things in a quiet but brittle voice. Until her bill was paid, not a pint of petrol or oil would be allowed him. She did not run a garage for fun, or for the benefit of idle young rotters who—

“O, cut it out, Nan. Have a heart. I’ve got to drive Irma Carstairs up to town.”

“Drive her by all means, but you won’t on my petrol. If your bill isn’t paid within seven days I’ll sue you.”

He threw back his curly head and laughed at her.

“O, tosh! Don’t be so breezy. I’m going to sit here until Alf fills me up.”

Another car had drawn up behind the red one, Mr. Douglas Tew’s big blue American coupé waiting for supplies.

“Take your car off my ground.”

He sat and smirked at her.

“You are peevish to-day. Nothing doing.”

“Go on, get out.”

“Brakes on, my dear.”

She tossed a quick and meaning look at Alfred, and leaning forward over the low door, she grabbed the hand brake with her left hand, and his collar with her right. She was strong, unexpectedly and fiercely so, and her sudden pull rolled him over so that his foot came off the foot-brake. Alfred had dodged round to the offside, and had one mutton fist on the steering-wheel. George, the gardener, who had been hovering, barged out and applied his stocky self to the back of the car. Skelton was on his knees. His impulse had been to rush out and champion her, but he was quick to realize that she and her henchmen were capable of handling the crisis. She had Narcissus sprawling on the seat, and with Alfred at the wheel, and George pushing, the red car was trundled out into the road and propelled across it until its front wheels ended in a gorse bush. Skelton lay low, peering over the top of his grass bank.

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"I give you a week to pay up. And no stumer cheques."

Mr. Garside was upright now, and angry.

"Damn you."

Alfred's large white face loomed over him.

"See here, sir, you keep a civil tongue in your head. If you're looking for more trouble you'll get it."

And, obviously, that was that!

Skelton lay and watched young Garside extract his car from the gorse bush and drive back and away along Stane Street. Miss Lester remained upon the field of battle until the enemy was in full retreat.

"Thanks, Alfred; thanks, George."

Alfred was attending to the requirements of Mr. Douglas Tew. She smiled at the novelist as she passed his car on her way back to the Country Club. "My honour, I think." Mr. Tew poked his sallow, sardonic face over the edge of a blue door. "I rather think so." Skelton's chin was resting on his crossed wrists, while he listened to the ironic reflections of his secret self. Romance and chivalry and the succouring of beauty in distress! Of what value were the old, boyish day-dreams in a world so pragmatistical as this? His My Lady Greensleeves was no Rossetti woman, but a potent and brisk young person who took life by the coat-collar and made it conform to her credo. The dominant and protective male? Well, well! Who was it that said that the naked and defenceless babe of the age was the young man with ideals?

He rolled over, looked at the sky for a while, and then sat up. This peeping Tom pose was not particularly dignified. He had come all the way to Bluewater to renew what the moderns describe as an emotional experience, and it seemed rather futile to flinch from a renewed contact. But flinch he did. He seemed, somehow, so superfluous in this very bright young world where everything was served up for the senses, and the joy of life, or whatever you chose to call it, was traded in picture-poster colours. And what was he going to do about

it? Damn it, he was behaving like some idiot boy paralytic with self-consciousness. He would go across to her place and ask for Miss Lester.

He went. The loggia had emptied itself of people. He got as far as the big glass doors of the lounge, and then something failed in him. He sat down in one of the Dryad chairs with his back to the windows of the dining-room.

Again he heard her voice, brisk and a little on edge.

"Kate."

"Yes, miss?"

"How is it that when Rachel is off duty you seem unable to do yours?"

"Pardon, miss?"

"You heard what I said. Look at this fork. Egg between the prongs."

"I didn't wash it, miss."

"Is that your business? Your job is to see that nothing of that kind gets on one of our tables. Mr. Jekyll's too, of all people. I have spoken to you about it before."

"Yes, miss, I'm——"

"Don't let me have to speak of it again."

Egg on a fork! Meticulous supervision! A dream-woman inspecting all the details of her dinner-tables. Very efficient and admirable and necessary, no doubt, but the boy-lover in him writhed. He got up quickly and slipping out of the loggia, went with long, loping strides into Bluewater. He passed a little fat man in a yellow vest and grey trousers polishing a kind of shop-window in which pictures were displayed. Pictures, beauty, craftsmanship? O, God! Who wanted pictures, or poems, or craftsmanship, or the sweet sweat of your individual soul?

He felt tired and thirsty. He decided to walk across to that pub by the headland and drink beer.

Nor did he know that one minute after he had fled, Ann Lester had walked out into the loggia to see that the tables

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were clean and that the ash-trays had been emptied, nor did she suspect that a young man was feeling rather like an ash-tray, and very empty.

Ye Golden Hinde was very naval, and in catering for two classes of customers, it offered the world two places in which to take its liquor, The Poop or Honolulu. Honolulu was just America, and for the very young of both sexes and by no means for the young in years, a place where you nibbled and sipped, nibbled and sipped. The Poop, built out in a great glass bay over the rock, supported by oak braces and carrying ship's lanterns, was conceived for the robust and the mature and the completely male. Nothing but beer, whisky, rum and port were to be ordered in The Poop, and though this sea-dog's corner bore upon its door the pregnant notice "Trousers Only", that could not prevent the feminine young from penetrating. The Poop carried a brass telescope. It was supposed to smell of the sea, even though its seamen were sometimes young women in blue jerseys and trousers, and whose perfumes were not objectively fishy. Yet The Poop prevailed in the solidity of its maleness. Solemn things were discussed here, Mussolini, and the League of Nations, and the surtax, and Sir Stafford Cripps, and dogs and decadence.

John ran into Archie Stout in Ye Golden Hinde's entry, and Stout made a point of hailing all comers. His good-will had the girth of a growing and beneficent tummy.

"Evening, sir. Anything I can do for you?"

The sir brought Skelton up like a yawing ship. Who was this cheerful bounder? No, not bounder. The buccaneer was playing a part.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I'm in search of a drink."

The return of the sir pleased Archie. He said to himself at once that this long lad with the white teeth and those terribly earnest eyes was likeable. Stout knew a man when he saw him, a man, not a fellow who was half a Miss.

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"Good idea. Pretty hot. Could do with one myself. English or Left Wing Book Club?"

Skelton stared.

"How?"

"Beer, or vodka Stalin or something? I'm being funny."

"Beer, sir."

"Good lad. We'll beer together. Yes, I'm the skipper of this ship."

Stout took Skelton up into The Poop, which happened to be empty, for on this fine afternoon the world was in the sea or on it, sailing dinghies or rushing about in motor-boats. Would Bass satisfy Skelton? It would, and Stout served the beer himself, while Skelton stood in the big bay window with something of the balked air of a sailor-man who had been wrecked. Stout observed him. This serious young person seemed to be depressed.

"Staying here? I don't mean in my house."

"Yes."

"White Ways?"

Skelton's chin lifted sharply.

"No. Up at the pub on the hill. The Wheat Sheaf."

"Ah," thought Stout, "I couldn't place you in Bluewater."

He passed Skelton his glass and smiled at him.

"Sit down there. No, the drinks are on me."

Skelton looked troubled.

"I say, it's awfully good of you, but——"

"Tut-tut, the house can stand it. Bright place, Bluewater, what?"

Skelton sat down with his beer. There was something consoling in the heartiness of this genial person, for it was vital fluid and not like petrol pumped out of a tank. He smiled at Stout, and his eyes were whimsical.

"O, very. London had got me down, and I thought I would explore. I suppose one is piqued by the very old or the very new. After all——"

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He hesitated, and Stout took hold of the conversation.

"Yes, we're very new, if tinged with the mock antique. Friend Mallison's inspiration. Read him?"

"Yes."

"Doubting Thomas?"

"Rather. My trouble with Mallison as a philosopher is that he is so damned rational and convincing, and yet one's not convinced."

Stout's blue eyes twinkled.

"Exactly. You've put it in a nutshell. The chap makes you feel like an ignorant urchin, and yet you want to bung stones at him. Mystic, I suppose?"

"I?"

"Yes."

"In bits. I can see the scheme on paper, but there always seems to be a light behind it somewhere, like a candle burning behind vellum. After all, mere cleverness wears rather thin."

"Absolutely. Hume settles everything, then Kant lays out Hume, and some Johnny lays out Kant. Now it's all Einstein & Co., though Einstein seems to be rather an old dear, and not a promiscuous prig like Mallison. Excuse me."

"Quite. You see, I write poetry, or try to, and according to the Mallison school I'm a mere subjective sponge. There is something I seem to get from you."

"Yes, what's that?"

"That Mallison the philosopher and Mallison the man don't quite tally."

Stout took a pull at his beer.

"Quite so. In confidence, yes. But Mallison is consistent in one thing."

"And that?"

"His attitude to woman. Completely organic and casual. Not even the fig-leaf, you know."

VII

THE complete informality of Bluewater enabled it to take short-cuts and to indulge in startling candours. Garden gates were not always used, nor were front doors. You climbed over fences or pushed through hedges and made piratical entries through back windows with the assumption that life needed adventure.

In the cool of the evening Ann was moved to go and spend half an hour with the Jettisons. There was something sanitary about the Jettisons, like beer and bread and cheese after a six-course Soho dinner. Ann could reach the Jettisons by way of the White Ways' garden, and in the upper part of the garden she met Rachel walking with a red rose in her hand.

Thought Ann: "I suppose it's George. I hope it's George," nor could the mistress divine what was passing in the mind of the maid.

Thought Rachel: "Shall I tell her? Why should I tell her?" and in Rachel's mood there was a streak of hostility towards this other woman. Miss Lester was just and fair and reasonably kind, but Rachel was emotionally prejudiced in favour of romance.

Ann smiled upon Rachel.

"Had a good rest, my dear?"

And suddenly, Rachel felt as woman towards the woman in her mistress.

"Yes, miss, down by the sea. O, by the way, I met a gentleman who was asking about you."

"Oh?"

"He wanted to know where you lived."

"A stranger?"

"Yes."

"Did he give a name?"

"No, miss, a tall young gentleman with very white teeth and wavy hair."

"In shorts?"

"No, miss, grey flannels and sports jacket. I thought perhaps——"

Miss Lester's face had gone suddenly hard and bright, and Rachel had the feeling that she had ventured on to forbidden ground.

"I thought, perhaps, miss——"

"I'm afraid I don't recognize the description. Rather a prevalent type too, Rachel, even as to clothes. Thank you for telling me."

Rachel smiled with her lips, but her large eyes were grave. Why was Miss Lester pretending? Why had the incident peeved her? But, then, of course, Miss Lester had been and was very much pestered by men of all ages, perhaps because she was so much like Coupe Jaques, fruit congealed beneath a crust of ice cream.

Ann Lester opened the gate into the little paddock which separated her garden from the Jettisons and Lavender Lane. The paddock belonged to her, for she had bought with a view to possible expansion. She was feeling convinced that Rachel's mysterious stranger was her poet. Rather tactless of him to stop a handsome wench like Rachel and ask her questions about another woman! Miss Lester was not pleased. Nor was she reassured by the thought that though he might be in Bluewater, he had as yet remained invisible. And why? Because he had discovered that she was the proprietress of a considerably successful country club and garage, and his penurious pride, as he had called it, was head in air? Well, if he was feeling difficult, so was she, and in a mood to resent the renewal of emotions that could be so untidy and dis-

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turbing, especially so to a woman who had work to do. Moreover, the Mallison atmosphere was not likely to be helpful.

She was half way across the paddock when she discovered that it contained trespassers. Two male figures in coloured pullovers were strolling up her field along the backs of the Love Lane gardens. She was in a mood to challenge them, when the significance of their movements persuaded her to refrain. They had their arms round each other; they were a little hilarious; she saw them pause close to the low privet hedge, give each other a playful push, and burst into unpleasant laughter.

“Good ’untin’, cad.”

Well, really! She was no prude, and she knew all about the little colony of realists at the end of Love Lane, people who had taken the Mallison teaching so rationally that they made a joke of sleeping with each other’s wives. Did not Mallison teach that marital jealousy was the prime sin? Rather disgusting! Love, honour and obey! Obey, most certainly not. But love, honour. Was love possible without honour? Well, that depended on your conception of love. And why did the modern world do these things? Because it was bored? Possibly. In a world that is purely sensational, and which lacks even the dishcloth of an ideal to clothe itself with, such excitements may be inevitable.

She went on thin lipped and chilled to the Jettison bungalow, feeling that she would prefer her world to be unvexed by anything in trousers.

Jimmie Jettison had built his wife a little green veranda at the back of the studio-bungalow, so that she could put her feet up in private and be intimately alone in this most free and easy of communities. Ann Lester was one of the few people who were welcomed informally and who could stroll round to this sanctuary without the ringing of bells, and more often than not the Jettison bell was out of order. A laurel hedge screened a grass plot and the veranda. June was lying on a

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long chair with a rug over her, and Jim was emerging from the back door with a pink-covered hot-water bottle in his hand. June had a pain.

That was the way with the Jettisons. Bluewater had christened them the Lovebirds, without appreciating the rather beautiful devotion that united these two. Bluewater saw them as a pair of fussy sentimentalists, absurdly absorbed in taking care of each other, and yet Ann Lester, though she sometimes laughed at them, would have called them the happiest people whom she knew.

"Sorry. Am I——?"

"Nan, dear, come and sit."

"May I? As a matter of fact I've been feeling rather macabre."

Jimmie was tucking the water-bottle under his wife's rug.

"O, come, that's too bad. We're feeling festive, pain or no pain. Tew has paid for his portrait."

Ann kissed June, and then sat down in a deck chair.

"Almost that restores one's faith in humanity."

"Now, now, don't be negative. Fact is, Nan, you ought to get married."

Miss Lester made herself laugh.

"Not likely. Couldn't tolerate it. Much too individual."

"O, yes, you could, Nan, if you cared."

"Having some fool-man always on one's hands? No, thank you."

"Thank you, for nothing," said the husband.

She smiled at him.

"O, you're different, both of you."

"Like a couple of sentimental kids, I suppose."

"No, James, she doesn't mean that. Ann's flippancies are mere face-powder."

"My dear, they're not. I simply couldn't mix. I should want to live with somebody who always gave way, and I should despise him."

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"I should say you want a smacking," said Jim.

She looked bored.

"O, James, dear, not that he-man stuff. I'm the sort that can't suffer from devotion."

They did not quote Mallison to her or accuse her of being one of Siegfried's disciples, for June knew, which meant that Jimmie knew, that much of Ann's prejudice had been inspired by Mallison. But just how serious was she? The whole world might be going to pot in a vast scuffle between Russia and Fascism, and people might say: "Let's celebrate while we can. Nothing matters." Jim might argue that the atmosphere was much like that which hung over society during the war. Death and bombs and a vast disorder, so why take thought for to-morrow? Women and wine, if there was any, and ration cards. Queuing up to be kicked by a dictator. Jimmie would confess that the Russian idea might be intensely interesting, but that he had a personal prejudice against being made a subject for experiment.

"I want to be free, my dear, to paint sometimes, as I please, without having to lick the dirty feet of a ruthless brute like Stalin."

They heard the click of the gate latch, and in the dusk a dark head was pushed through the gap in the laurels. Paul Hattersley. Jim hailed him.

"Come on, Paul. It's only Ann."

"Thank you, James. Yes, it's merely Ann, Paul."

Hattersley slouched through, and stood a moment, hesitant and farouche, before squatting down upon the grass. He kept his back half turned to Ann, and looked with his deep eyes at June Jettison.

"Just felt I wanted pink medicine."

June laughed.

"Am I that? Smoke, Paul?"

"No thanks."

June had given her husband a meaning look, and a touch

of the hand, and Jim turned towards the veranda. He and June understood each other so well that he knew what she wanted him to do, or what part to play.

"Just going in to make a pct of tea, Paul."

"Don't bother about me."

"I'm not. We like it."

It was easy for June Jettison to feel that Paul had come to them with some grievance rankling in him and an empty stomach. A man might try to live on the turnips and potatoes and lettuces he grew in the sandy patch behind his bungalow, but sometimes his gorge rose against such pulp. Meanwhile, a full moon was coming up, and throwing the sharp shadow across what Jim in his expansive moments called their patio. Ann's head and shoulders were in the light; Hattersley sat in the shadow. They could hear the voices of people passing along Stane Street, some of the White Ways guests going down to dance at the Temple of Vesta.

Ann felt Paul's eyes on her, and the dim misery of them made her restless.

"Dancing to-night, Paul?"

Almost he growled at her.

"Not likely."

She wanted to tell him that he was like a dog baying the moon, and to remind him that there were occasions when he danced with a kind of urgent ferocity.

"Well, there's a moon."

"I can't stand that Fuchs pup, especially when he is poured into those gigolo trousers."

"Better than bangles."

"And he stinks of scent. I wish he would make up his mind whether he's male or female."

June put out a hand to Paul like a woman stroking a surly dog.

"Yes, my dear, we shouldn't belong here, but we do."

Jimmie came bustling out with a tray on which he had

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arranged cups, a milk jug and sugar-basin, plates, butter, half a loaf of bread, and some Cheddar cheese.

"Feeling peckish to-night, somehow. I say, Paul, old man, fetch me the table from the corner."

Hattersley rose, and with long and almost simian arms gathered the table. He shot an unexpected question at Jettison.

"Tew paid up?"

"Yes."

Jettison had not meant to mention this piece of luck.

"Good business. Mallison forked up for those panels you painted for him?"

"Yes, last month."

"The swine hasn't paid me. Sorry, my dear, I'm feeling a bit turgid."

Jettison went in hurriedly for the teapot. The problem of the moment was not how to offer poor Paul a loan which he would resent, but to try and get some food inside him.

June's voice sang out:

"Jim, bring the biscuits."

"Righto. Anybody say jam? No jam. Splendid. Paul and I will cheese together."

"You pour out, Jim."

"I will."

The women each took a biscuit with their tea, and Hattersley, who was again squatting in the shadow, legs drawn up and arms wrapped round them, growled at Jettison. "Nothing for me, thanks." The artist stood poised with a plate upon which he had placed two thick slices of bread and a hunk of cheese, and looking like a conjurer at a school treat whose first trick has been challenged by some bright urchin.

"Have a heart, Paul. I can't munch solus."

"Don't want anything, thanks."

Jettison's proffered plate seemed to hover in the moonlight. He looked at his wife and saw her hand make a gesture. It said: "Put it down, my dear, on the grass beside him." And

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Jimmie Jettison did so, and turned about to help himself. Difficult devil, Paul. He was apt to snap at you like a surly dog.

He heard his wife say: "Give me a small piece of cheese, Jim."

"Yes, darling."

There was a short silence. Ann stirred the sugar in her cup. She did not care for tea at this hour, but she was wise as to the reason of the thing. James, as though inspired to gag, began to chatter about a talk he had had with Mr. Richard Jekyll. A courtly person, Jekyll, and rather like a picture of Don Quixote. Talked of building a house down by Spaniard's Point, and might need an architect.

"Kind of job for you, Paul."

Ann had become aware of the fact that Hattersley had fallen to the food. Almost surreptitiously he had gathered the plate, and lowering his legs, put it between his knees. Dimly she was aware of his dark jaws munching.

"Architecting. Not my job."

He spoke with his mouth full.

"That's not veridical, my lad."

"Who taught you that word?"

"Never mind. The point is it is your job, or used to be. You did Stout's place."

"Yes, nice bastard product," said the voice of cheese and bread, "but Stout's a good 'un. After I had that first row with My Lord Mallison——"

"O, damn Mallison," said Jimmie, also making his voice sound thick with food, "Jekyll's almost one of us. Quite a nice taste in water-colours. That's an idea, Nan. Just the man you ought to marry."

Miss Lester laughed.

"He hasn't shown any signs of asking me."

"Well, my dear wench, isn't that the sort of man you desire. Contrary Mary! You'll marry a man who tells you to go to blazes."

"And how?"

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"You'll run after him."

"Shut up, Jimmie. You're becoming rude."

When Ann said good night to them, Paul Hattersley got on his feet with the obvious intention of walking back with her. She did not want Paul with her, for she knew that she could never give him what he desired, and being rude to Paul was rather like scolding a half-starved dog.

"Good night, Paul."

"Coming too."

"I'm going straight home, and to bed."

"Did I say you weren't?"

She realized that she would have to suffer Paul as far as her own door, and she chose to go back by way of the road and not across the field. He stalked along beside her in his jerky, angular fashion, one shoulder up, the other down. The moon threw two shadows that were distinct and separate.

"No need to be afraid of me, Nan."

"My dear, I'm not."

"O, yes, you are. Prickles out. By the way, is there anything in what Jimmie said about that chap Jekyll?"

"I'm not sure. I'll try and find out."

"Mind you, I don't want to be boosted."

"No, Paul."

"I'm nobody's tame pup."

She made as though to turn into White Ways, but he laid a quick hand on her arm.

"Said you were going to bed."

"So I am."

"No need to fob me off. I'll see you up through the garden like your best brother."

"All right."

She understood him and his strange, surly way of proving to her that he was safe, and together they walked up through the garden in the moonlight to her cottage.

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"Good night, Nan."

"Good night, Paul."

"Mind if I take a short cut home, over your fence and across the field."

"Not a bit. There's no barbed wire."

"Good. Life's got too much barbed wire. Good night, my dear."

So, it happened that two people saw a man walk up Miss Lester's path with her in the direction of her cottage, and not return, and the inference was problematical.

The White Ways staff-quarters had been built behind the service-station, and Rachel, standing at her window, and looking across the car-park and hard courts saw the two figures pass up through the garden. It was Rachel's privilege to have a bedroom to herself, and to think her own thoughts without sharing either moods or floorspace with a stranger, and her rendering of the incident was very simple. The tall young man of Spaniard's Point and Miss Lester had come together, and perhaps Rachel felt just a little sad about it. Miss Lester's lover! But to the other watcher, the conclusion to be drawn was far less happy.

Skelton had been sitting in the moonlight amid the furze bushes keeping a young man's vigil, and trying to persuade himself that further procrastination was ridiculous. Ann Lester and Hattersley had passed within ten yards of him. He had recognized both her figure and her voice, though he had not been able to catch what she had said to the man. But her voice had sounded too intimate and kind.

Why the devil had he come to this beastly place? and what a beast he was to squat there playing the spy! For what was he waiting? To see whether the man's figure emerged from that white gate? And if not, what was the inference to be? O, damn, why was one's sensitive self so fastidious and possessive about a woman? Silly, romantic illusions. If a modern woman chose to amuse herself— How rotten of him to

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think of her as he thought about a bath, squeamishly resenting the smeariness left by some other user. Damn! He got up raging against himself, and life and woman and this pestilent place. The sea. Yes, he would go down and sit by the sea, but as he scrambled up and down sandhills and brushed past furze bushes, his youth was chased and caught by that facile cynicism which turns white to black and love to hatred. For youth panics so easily, lacking the whimsical, tough humour of the veteran. Of course, those Swiss days had been incidental, a mere passing of the time for her. Silly, sentimental ass!

And then he blundered down into a sandy hollow, and disturbed two figures. He was aware of scuffings and quick adjustments, and of a white face glaring at him. He concluded that he was being cursed. A little path suggested immediate escape. He was aware of music, the sound of a waltz coming from somewhere, and then he blundered upon another dim couple, and sheered off like a shying horse. Damn it, the whole place seemed to be on the prowl! He emerged from that sandy wilderness within twenty yards of the Dance Pavilion, and saw its lights, and heard its suborning sounds. A waltz, sweet sex stuff! Reality provoked him. He walked up to the white temple shining in the moonlight, and entered, and found himself in a little vestibule and outside two glazed doors. The doors were open. He saw people dancing, conventional figures, dinner jacketed and evening frocked.

He approached the doors just as a young man appeared in the doorway. It was Mr. Gerald Fuchs who combined the duties of radio and gramophone expert, gigolo, and doorkeeper. He wore very wide trousers flopping over his patent leather shoes, a jacket pinched at the waist, and padded out at the shoulders. His white tie somehow suggested a feminine bow.

Mr. Fuchs eyed Skelton superciliously.

"Can't come in here in mufti."

Skelton gave him back an even more unfriendly look.

"I don't want to, thanks."

And he turned his back on the gigolo.

Assuredly, the day had given him sufficient emotion, and concentrated and contrasted emotions can be exhausting. He would go back to the Wheat Sheaf and the friendly apple tree at his window, and bed. The trackway from the Temple of Vesta to Stane Street was a pale streak in the moonlight, a private and personal via dolorosa. He set out along it, and some seventy yards or so from the pavilion he saw the figure of a man lying on a patch of grass amid some furze bushes. His cynicism had its label ready. "A drunk, I suppose. Gosh, what a place!" And then, something in the figure's limp spread, the way its arms were flung out square to the body, made him pause. He turned aside, went nearer, and saw the figure's white shirt, and black evening clothes, and the folds of a cloak flung aside.

The face had a splash of blood on it, and Skelton bent down, and stared at the face. Was the fellow dead? He was conscious of a feeling of unreality. Hang it all, Bluewater might be a breezy place, but you did not expect to find a corpse lying about in evening dress. It was both shocking, and too much like a Crime Club thriller.

He touched one of the hands. It was warm. But, before he could decide what should be done in such a crisis, the face opened its eyes at him. The face spoke. It said: "Where, the devil? What's happened? Christ, my head!"

Helped by Jack Skelton, Mr. Richard Jekyll managed to sit up. Skelton was on one knee and supporting Jekyll, and Mr. Jekyll put a hand to the back of his head, and found a warm, sticky wetness there.

"How did it happen, sir?"

Jekyll was contemplating the dark smudge on his fingers and palm.

"God knows. I had been dancing in there. I can remember stopping here to light a cigarette."

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He insinuated his left hand into the breast pocket of his dinner jacket.

"Wallet and cigarette-case gone. Well I'm blowed! Fancy being thugged in Bluewater!"

His sharp white face crinkled into a brittle smile. He looked up at Skelton.

"Pretty impudent, what? Seen anybody about? Christ, my head!"

"Yes, one or two couples, but nothing of the thug order. Where do you live, sir?"

"Staying at White Ways."

"I had better get help. Someone must have knocked you. Feeling faint?"

"Not so bad now. Don't want to make a fuss. I think I might manage White Ways with your help."

"Do you think it's wise?"

"Well, I'll have a shot. By the way, who are you?"

Skelton's very white teeth showed.

"I'm staying down here, up at the Wheat Sheaf. Name of Skelton. No, I'm not a gangster."

"Didn't think it, my lad. Well, give me a lift, and I'll have a shot at walking."

"Why not let me get a car?"

"It isn't the first time in my life that I've been knocked out. Used to box a bit. I think we won't fuss. Now then."

Skelton helped him to his feet, and held him steady with an arm round him below the shoulders.

"That's it. Just a moment. Little giddy."

"I wish you——"

"No, I think I can manage. It's not far. Now then."

They had three hundred yards or so to cover, and this tall lean person with the Sherlock Holmes face appeared to be what the crowd calls a tough guy, and though Skelton respected this toughness, it seemed to him a little unnecessary. Also, whether he wished it or not, this particular happening was

introducing him to White Ways, and while a part of him was attending to Mr. Jekyll, his more urgent self was confronting other possibilities. Less than twenty minutes ago he had shaken the romantic dust from his feet, and fled, scattering wilful illusions. "Hallo, hold up, sir. Feeling faint?" Mr. Jekyll's feet dragged a little, and the moonlight showed his face twisted into a pale smirk. No, he was just a bit giddy, but he could manage. Skelton braced himself to take more weight.

"Why not sit? I can fetch a car. There seems no need, sir——"

"For this painful pilgrimage? No, perhaps not. Just egregious vanity."

"They don't appear to have slugged your sense of humour."

"Ah, that's so English and absurd. Not much further, is it?"

"No, I can see the lights."

"Good. Look here, Skelton, when we get there I'd be terribly obliged if you would help me straight up to my room."

"Of course."

"Loathsome affairs, scenes. Like being caught unbuttoned."

"Quite, sir," said Skelton, more and more appreciating Mr. Jekyll as a character, and liking the whimsical, stark temper of him.

The White Ways lounge happened to be empty, save for a desiccated and military person deep in a cross-word puzzle, and the maid who was on duty to serve late drinks. Mr. Jekyll succeeded in reaching the middle of the lounge, and there his legs failed him. He doubled up in the quick and encircling grip of Skelton's arm, hands trailing, his chin on his chest. Mr. Jekyll had fainted.

Skelton lowered him gently to the floor. He was aware of the military person's astonished and peevish face, as though he too regarded all such sensational alarms as outrageous. His lips moved, searching for some elusive word.

"Bless my soul, what's this? Jekyll! What, intoxicated?"

"No, sir, hit on the head."

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“Hit on the head? Preposterous!”

“But true.”

The maid, with one shocked glance at the figure on the floor, had fled. Skelton might have heard her calling “Miss Lester, Miss Lester,” but he had snatched a cushion from a chair and was slipping it under Jekyll’s head. He paid no attention at all to the military person, who was mincing around, making clicking noises with his tongue.

“Better send for a doctor, what? Someone ought to phone. Where the devil is the bell?”

Skelton was busy unfastening Jekyll’s tie, collar and shirt. Meanwhile, Colonel Fuss Pot had found the lounge-bell, and was keeping his thumb on it, a quite futile gesture, for the club staff had gone to bed, and the maid on duty had fled to fetch Miss Lester from her cottage.

Skelton was in no mood to avoid the too vivid contrasts of the occasion. The two women were kneeling opposite him, with Jekyll between him and them. One face, Miss Lester’s, looked thin and pinched and secretly peeved about something. The face of the other woman was compassionate.

Miss Lester had come striding into the lounge, wearing a tight green mackintosh over her pyjamas, her hair hidden by an austere lace cap, and carrying the impression that she was not pleased. Skelton was not likely to forget the stare of astonishment she gave him. You! Her stare had lapsed into an abrupt and defensive lowering of her lids. Certainly she was not pleased. Possibly, she did not welcome messy and violent adventures in her tidy and efficiently organized world.

“What happened?”

Her voice had been sharp and urgent, and Skelton, sitting on his heels, had wondered how it was possible to fall in and out of love so quickly.

“I found him lying on the grass. He had been hit on the head and robbed.”

"Indeed!"

Almost, she had seemed as sceptical as the military person, and moved to question the victim's sobriety.

"It doesn't sound credible."

She had given him a sudden challenging glance as though other things were not quite credible. And then Rachel had come gliding in, and knelt down in contrast.

But the situation needed organizing and Miss Lester dealt with it. Mr. Jekyll must be got to his room. Rachel was to run across and fetch Alfred. She herself would phone up Dr. Brough at Dewhurst. She ignored Skelton, almost pointedly so. The manner of his rebirth as man had been badly staged. Was she aware of how hard she looked in that tight mackintosh and skimpy little cap? She hurried off to the telephone in her office, and Skelton, still kneeling there, saw Jekyll's eyes open.

"Hallo! What's the situation?"

"You fainted, sir."

"Damn it. I say, I'd like to get up to my room. Lying about in public——"

"Which floor?"

"First."

"I'll carry you."

"The devil you will! I weigh twelve, six."

Skelton, somehow aware of a returning presence, looked up and saw Rachel in her cherry coloured dressing gown. Her cropped hair was loose.

"I can help."

"Rachel, my dear, I'm not going to——"

Skelton and Rachel looked at each other, and there was consent and a secret smile in their eyes.

"We can manage, sir. One on each side."

And this was what Ann Lester saw when she came back from the telephone, Mr. Jekyll embraced on either side by youth, being half carried up the broad staircase. And again, she was not pleased.

VIII

SHE waited at the foot of the stairs, after having dismissed a collarless and dishevelled Alfred whose strength had become superfluous. The military person, Colonel Duveen, wholly unconscious of the fact that he too was actively superfluous, sat perched on the edge of a chair like a wrinkled and obfuscated monkey.

"Most extraordinary. Explanation doesn't seem quite satisfying, Miss Lester, what?"

Other things were far from satisfying, and she wanted to tell Colonel Duveen to go to bed. His inquisitive wrinkled face seemed to leer at her.

"People don't get hit on the head."

She said: "Why not? People who will carry too much money about with them——"

The man-monkey took her up.

"Ah, there you are. Rather indicative. Sounds like a local tough."

"Oh."

"Someone who knew the fellah's habits."

Duveen had a way of referring to all other males as fellahs. The Egyptian touch! And his desiccated and wrinkled face was rather like the face of a mummy.

"Very fishy, if you ask me."

She was not asking him. She wanted him out of the way.

"There may be some quite natural explanation."

"Think so, dear lady?" and he smirked at her with cynical cunning. "Not very likely. Who's the lad who brought him in?"

"Mr. Skelton, Mr. John Skelton, the poet."

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"Poet! Never met that peculiar sort of bird. Between ourselves I should like to ask that lad some questions."

"I don't suppose he knows."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You lay a man out and take his money, and then play the Samaritan. Good camouflage."

She lost her temper with Colonel Duveen.

"Don't be such an old ass."

He got off the chair as though some insect had stung him.

"Well, really! I think I can suggest, Miss Lester, that even our egregious police may be interested in that young man's movements."

She recovered herself, and smiled at him.

"Perhaps. But I would rather you did not interfere."

"Most certainly I shall not interfere. Good night, Miss Lester," and he took the insult to bed with him. Ass! Yes, but old ass! The old was unforgivable.

Miss Lester glanced at the lounge clock. The dancing crowd would not be back yet, and in turning she caught a glimpse of herself in a long mirror. Shades of all the Poets, but in that tight mackintosh and austere cap, she looked like some indignant spinster! And what was Rachel doing? The petulant question was answered by Rachel reappearing on the stairs.

"You've been rather a long time."

Rachel stood serene. She reminded Miss Lester that Mr. Jekyll's valet was on his holiday, and Sandys the chauffeur off duty. She had been helping the young gentleman with Mr. Jekyll. Yes, the young gentleman was undressing Mr. Jekyll and putting him to bed.

Miss Lester's forehead was ruffled.

"Thank you, Rachel. Yes, you can get back to bed. The doctor will be here soon. I'll wait for him."

But when Rachel had gone Miss Lester, after collecting the cushion from the floor and finding bloodstains on it, tossed the cushion into her office, and went upstairs. Mr.

Jekyll's room was on the first floor, the door the third on the left. It was the most expensive and the quietest room in the house, with private bathroom attached, for Mr. Jekyll objected to listening to all vicarious noise, especially to the discords of the car-park and the garage. He had said to her: "If it is possible to purchase peace in this pestilent period of progress, I pay for it." A fine, alliterative effort, and completely rational.

She stood listening outside his door. Should she knock, and offer her sympathy and help?

She heard Mr. Jekyll's voice say: "Damn it, I have a sudden desire to make use of a certain article. Thanks, my lad. Quick wits. Yes, I can manage."

She strolled away down the corridor, paused, stood for half a minute, and then returned. She had just reached the door when it opened, and Skelton came out. She was aware of his face becoming shut and anonymous as he confronted her. He closed the door.

"Comfortably in bed."

Assuredly, like most of the young, he was a difficult person, and though she belonged to the same generation she had suffered her distemper and survived it, and had become the hardened pragmatist. She knew what youth said, or rather those poor, clever whimperers to whom life was a malady rather than an act of joy. They seemed to live in a world that was lit by Neon lamps, a world in which every face became sickly and green.

"Nothing is worth doing, because nothing matters. We may all be dead in ten years, bombed to blazes. The world is sick, and so are we."

He came from Oxford and he was a poet, and so she supposed he must be one of those sick young men who appear to suffer from an insufficiency of glandular secretions, and who conceal cowardice behind the superciliousness of the cynic. She and her damned pub, and her wretched little

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bourgeois greeds, and her stale suburban clients who played bad tennis and indifferent bridge. Yes, in all probability, that was his attitude. He was afraid of life, and so posed as a sceptic. Well, well! She would prefer the contumaciousness and the squawking vigour of Donald Duck.

She said: "Come down into my office. I would like to hear a little more about things."

He followed her, and half way down the stairs she asked him a question.

"Just how long have you been in Bluewater?"

He seemed to hesitate.

"Not quite twelve hours."

"How interesting! Was it you who met my head-waitress?"

"Yes."

"And gossiped?"

"Well, not exactly."

If she was minded to use a whip, he was in no mood to accept it.

"Don't be cheap."

"Thank you. Yes, shut the door. Like a drink? I keep some here."

"No, thanks. What I wanted to say was——"

"Well?"

"I don't think you were quite frank with me."

She sat down at her desk, picked a cigarette out of a box, and pushed the box towards him.

"Is that so? Any idea why?"

"Various ideas."

"You accuse me of lack of candour. Don't be guilty of it yourself."

"I won't be."

"Right. Shoot away, and then I'll have my turn."

He sat down in an arm-chair, and bending forward, elbows on knees, looked at her.

"There's the Mallison complex, for instance."

She laughed.

"So, you've found that out. Still hating poor Siegfried?"

"I've seen him."

"What reaction?"

"His trousers were pretty marvellous. I rather think he is in pursuit of your head-waitress."

Her face grew sharp.

"Aren't we diverging too much? Mallison would not like the idea of being described as a red herring."

"He isn't."

"Just how?"

"I'm not so sceptical as I was. There are points in his philosophy——"

"Becoming a disciple? Women are made to be romped with, what, not put on pedestals?"

"Perhaps."

"Meanwhile, what about this Jekyll business? I should like to be a little more wise before I phone the police."

She had finished her cigarette and she lit another, and observed him.

"Need the police know?"

"Certainly."

"I think he will be rather peeved."

"Possibly. You say you found him——"

"Just lying on the grass beside the road to that dance pavilion place. At first I thought he was a drunk."

"And he wasn't."

"O, no. He told me he had stopped to light a cigarette. Someone must have been hiding in the furze bushes, and sneaked up and hit him. His wallet and cigarette-case were taken."

She sat considering him and the story.

"Any idea?"

"Not the smallest. Might have been a tramp, or someone who was desperately short of money."

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"Quite. All sorts of people might be suspect. Hallo, I believe I hear the doctor."

She rose, and he rose with her.

"I think I'll be getting along. I'm up at the Wheat Sheaf."

She nodded at him.

"I think you had better stay there for a day or two."

"Oh?"

"An official witness, you know. Good night."

He stood aside for her to pass into the lounge where Dr. Brough of Dewhurst was depositing a bowler hat and a surgical bag upon a table. She appeared to forget the poet in hailing the physician. "Doctor, I'm so glad you've come. Yes, I'll take you up myself. Really, a most puzzling business."

Skelton stood to watch her shepherd the doctor up the stairs, and as he listened to her bright, explanatory voice, he wondered whither the sense enchantment of yesterday had flown.

The police sergeant sat beside Mr. Richard Jekyll's bed. He had placed his helmet on the floor at his feet, and produced a note-book and a little stubby pencil. To Mr. Jekyll, lying with his head swathed in bandages, and the blind down because the sun was shining very brightly and his head still ached, this beefy and bronzed man conveyed a sense of extreme solemnity and the aroma of healthy sweat. The officer had cycled from Dewhurst, and the day was hot. He fixed Mr. Jekyll with his full blue eyes and was professionally sagacious.

"Sorry to have to ask questions, sir."

"Need you? I'm not worrying, officer. Is it necessary to pursue the subject?"

The blue eyes looked shocked.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but we can't allow a case like this——"

"I see. Well, go ahead."

There was heavy breathing and scribbling with the stubby pencil. At what hour had Mr. Jekyll left the dance pavilion?

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He was not quite sure. Well, approximately? About thirty. And the gentleman would excuse him, but had he had anything to drink?

"One whisky and soda at dinner. Sober as a judge, whatever that may mean."

Could Mr. Jekyll give any account of the attack? No. He had seen no one hanging about? No. The first thing Mr. Jekyll could remember was Skelton bending over him. The pencil scribbled. Wallet and cigarette-case gone. Yes. How much money? Oh, about ten pounds, probably. One five pound note. Did Mr. Jekyll know the number of the note? No, he did not. Well, as to the origin of the note? Yes, Miss Lester had cashed a cheque for him, and she banked at Dewhurst. The bank would have a record of the note's number.

"What brand of cigarettes do you smoke, sir?"

This was quite a bright question, and Mr. Jekyll was able to answer it.

"De Morgans, cork tipped."

"Thank you, sir. Anything particular about the cigarette-case?"

"Gold. Plain surface. My initials on it."

"Know anything about the young man who found you, sir?"

"Absolute stranger. Nice lad. Couldn't have been kinder."

The blue eyes grew suspicious.

"Might have been the guilty person, sir."

"O, no, officer. Most unlikely."

"Need looking into. Can you describe the exact spot where you were found, sir?"

"Afraid not. Mr. Skelton may be able to."

"Did anybody know you had money on you, sir?"

"Can't say. Miss Lester may have done."

"I understand you have a valet and a chauffeur, sir."

"Don't suspect them, do you?"

"It's our business to suspect everybody, sir."

"Dear, dear! Well, my valet's on his holiday, and I under-

stand that my chauffeur was out fishing. Both of them have been with me for years. Personal friends, in a way."

"I see, sir."

"Anything more? I have rather a rotten bad head, officer."

"I'm sorry, sir. I think that's all for the moment."

"By the way, you might pass me that aspirin bottle as you are going out."

The sergeant set forth upon his investigations, and the next person he proposed interviewing was Mr. John Skelton, but on his way to the Wheat Sheaf he stopped at the estate office, and leaning his bicycle against the fence, went in search of Mr. Maggs. Mr. Maggs and Sergeant Price both happened to be cricketers, and Maggs played for the Dewhurst club. Such good friends had the game and sundry glasses of beer made them, that they were on terms of Bert and Fred.

"Hallo, Bert. Got a moment?"

Mr. Maggs was disengaged, and he took Sergeant Price into his sitting-room behind the office. O, yes, he had heard the news. Any developments? Sergeant Price looked knowing.

"There's one thing you could do for me, Bert."

"What's that?"

"In confidence, mind. I suppose you know all the seedy cakes in this funny place, anybody who's hard up."

"Any rock-cakes, in fact," and Mr. Maggs giggled at his own joke. "Well, yes."

"I'd be much obliged—— Yes, you know. In strict confidence."

Mr. Maggs reflected.

"Well, there's Hattersley, the potter chap, out and out Bolshie, and always on the rocks. Eccentric blighter. And then there's young Fuchs, tame gigolo, wears bangles. Nasty bit of work."

"Anybody else?"

"Not that I can think of. We get a queer crowd down here."

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"Don't I know it. Lido ladies and what not."

"Yes, but we haven't gone Edgar Wallace, quite."

"Well, thanks, old man. I'm just nosing around."

Skelton happened to be in the Wheat Sheaf orchard, sitting in a deck chair, and putting a sceptical mood into verse, when Sergeant Price called. Mr. Bannister turned the policeman into the orchard, and left him there, and Skelton, struggling with a congealed sonnet, looked up and saw officialdom in blue. He had been expecting some such visit, and he laid his writing-pad on the grass and smiled at Sergeant Price.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Mr. Skelton?"

"Yes."

"I've come about the attack on Mr. Jekyll. I understand you were the person who found him."

"Yes, I found him."

The note-book and stubby pencil came out. Sergeant Price did not sit or relax. He stood in front of Skelton and over him, and his attitude was unfriendly.

"I shall be glad if you'll give me an account, Mr. Skelton."

Skelton gave it, and the pencil scribbled, and the blue eyes shot at him occasional searching glances.

"You'd know the spot?"

"I think so."

"I'll get you to come down with me. By the way, Mr. Skelton, how long have you been staying here?"

"One night."

"And what were you doing down there?"

"I? O, just strolling about."

"I see. Meet anybody?"

"In a sense, yes; couples. And I looked in at the dance place for a moment."

"Speak to anyone?"

"Yes, a fellow who seems to run the show. Don't know his name, of course. Wears bangles and shorts in the daytime."

"Ah!" said the sergeant. "I know the gentleman. Was he wearing shorts and bangles?"

"No, full war paint, and very much so. He turned me off."

"Ah, did he!"

"And it was after that——"

The pencil scribbled, and Sergeant Price's nose remained in his book, while he asked his other questions.

"You're here, Mr. Skelton, for——?"

"O, a holiday."

"Home address?"

"No. 7 Summerhays Square, Islington."

Sergeant Price looked at him sharply.

"Islington! H'm. Profession?"

"Poet."

The pencil paused, as though hesitating to accept the strange word.

"Writer?"

"Yes. You can call me that."

Sergeant Price appeared to reflect. He rubbed his chin. A bit suspicious and surreptitious all this. Islington, poetry, Bolshevism. He would get the Inspector to phone up Islington and have Mr. Skelton's antecedents inquired into. The man might be known. After all, violent political prejudice could be associated with acts of violence against the rich.

Sergeant Price snapped his note-book to.

"Now, Mr. Skelton, I'll trouble you to come and show me the place."

Skelton got up with one of his bright smiles.

"Glad to. Words are rather sticky this morning."

So was their conversation, as, with the sergeant's bicycle between them, they walked down into Bluewater. Skelton might be no more than seven and twenty, but he was sufficiently old to have experienced the blight that falls upon conventional men in the presence of the creative artist. Poet, novelist, a creature uncomfortably clever and critical, and perhaps not

quite male! His impression was that Sergeant Price had no very high opinion either of his profession or of his clothes, and when he had presented the official mind to the place where the outrage had been committed, and even demonstrated a blood-stain on the turf, he asked to be excused.

"Nothing more you want, I suppose?"

The sergeant had his note-book out, and was prepared to carry out a minute and meticulous investigation.

"No. But we may want you, Mr. Skelton. How long are you staying up there?"

"Can't say. Perhaps a week."

"Well, no clearing out without notice. I suppose that London address is all right?"

"Quite. Nothing for you to worry about, Sergeant."

"I'm not the person to worry."

Skelton strolled off. Confound the fellow, did he suspect him of having hit Mr. Jekyll on the head and pinched his wallet? O, possibly. Being responsible for social order appeared to render the official mind as suspicious as that of an income-tax inspector. A poor sort of urge, that, sniffing at every taxable lamp post! It occurred to John that he might go and ask after Mr. Jekyll. He was no longer shy of White Ways, for all emotional tremors had vanished with the passing of his sense-enchantment. He did not and could not know that Mr. Jekyll had been asking for him, and that the person asked had been Ann Lester.

"Where's that nice lad who helped me home? I'd like a chat with him."

Miss Lester had answered with bright casualness that she understood that Mr. Skelton was staying at the Wheat Sheaf. Should she tell Robert to phone the Wheat Sheaf? Well, then, she would. And was Mr. Jekyll satisfied that he was feeling better, and fit to see visitors? He was.

So, John Skelton was met by an urbane Robert who was able to tell him that Mr. Jekyll had been asking for him, and

if Mr. Skelton would wait in the lounge, he, Robert would go up and announce him. The office door was closed, and Skelton sat down in a chair that commanded Miss Lester's door, but there was no thrill of expectation in his mood, nor did her door open. Robert came down the stairs with the news that Mr. Jekyll would see him, and Skelton followed Robert to the Jekyll room.

"Good morning, sir. I had come to ask how you were."

Mr. Jekyll rather objected to being called sir. It dated you so badly, but this nice lad's courtesies did not pique him.

"Very good of you. Sit down. How do I look in my nice white wimple?"

Skelton smiled at him.

"Not quite the nun, sir."

"And how's the Good Samaritan?"

"As a matter of fact, I believe the police rather suspect me of being the guilty person."

"What?"

"Rather humorous, but the official world is not expected to indulge in humour."

"Ha, just like the people who have no sense of mystery. Same brand. But do you mean to tell me——?"

"I have just been catechized by the police."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"And I haven't an alibi. When you tell a policeman that you were just mooching around, he could never credit you with being moonstruck."

"And were you?"

"Well, what you might call emerging from mooniness into sanity."

Mr. Jekyll chuckled, and the movement seemed to hurt him.

"Dash it, don't make me laugh. But there is one thing that interests me, Mr. Skelton. Your name seems a little familiar."

"That's rather unusual."

"Why?"

"Because I write poetry which nobody reads."

Mr. Jekyll's very dark eyes grew bright under the chaplet of bandages.

"Good Lord, what an idiot! *Passion & Pain*. You'll find it on my bookshelf with Stephen Phillips and Rupert Brooke."

"You bought a copy, sir?"

"I did."

"Then I owe you fourpence halfpenny and my best thanks."

"O, come now, I owe you more than that. 'In the night, when I lie with the stars.' Yes, I can quote, you see. I suppose you young things never read Stephen Phillips."

"How's this, sir?" and Skelton gave him four lines of "Marpessa."

Mr. Jekyll lay quite still, watching him.

"Well, well, as Donald Duck is fond of saying, this is the real introduction. Last night was mere sensationalism. But, my dear Skelton, what a jest!"

"What's the jest, sir?"

"That the dear police should go about thinking that the author of *Passion & Pain* could slug people for their petty cash."

"That, to them, might seem a very good reason, sir."

"Think so?"

"For to a poet cash is apt to be very petty."

IX

SERGEANT PRICE, having discovered nothing very evidential on or near the site of the assault, wheeled his bicycle to the Temple of Vesta, where he discovered Mr. Gerald Fuchs tinkering with the wireless installation.

"Good morning. You in charge here?"

Fuchs turned the eyes of a supercilious goat upon the officer. It was one of Fuchs' many grievances against life that the supernumeraries of Bluewater would never address him as sir.

"You may presume so."

The sergeant's note-book came out; so did his eyes. He was not going to be cheeked by a thing in bangles, and the interview became a wrangle.

"I'll be obliged if you'd answer some questions. On duty here last night, I gather?"

"I run the show."

"Mr. Jekyll was here?"

"He was."

"Sober?"

"As you."

"What time did he leave?"

"No idea."

Sergeant Price glared at him.

"Look here, my lad, not so pert, if you please. This business is serious, and not bangles and jazz."

Fuchs' goat-like head tossed itself.

"I beg your pardon!"

"I'm asking you when Mr. Jekyll left."

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"I've told you. Any time between ten and eleven. That's the nearest you'll get."

"Did you leave the building?"

"No."

"Do you remember a Mr. Skelton calling?"

"I don't know a Mr. Skelton."

"Tall young man in sports jacket and grey bags. Very white teeth."

"O, that fellow! Yes, I turned him out. Improperly dressed."

"You don't say so!" and the officer eyed Mr. Fuchs' naked shanks. "Well, what time was it?"

"Between eleven and ten."

"Fond of that period, aren't you? Well, was it after Mr. Jekyll left?"

"Probably. I don't keep a note-book."

"Look here, Mr. What's Your Name, if you're put in the witness-box, you'll have to remember."

"What I don't remember, even on oath?"

"You say you don't know this Skelton?"

"Why should I? No obligation."

The sergeant closed his book and snapped the black elastic round it.

"I see. Not inclined to be helpful, are you? Well, that's all for the moment."

"Much obliged. Ta, ta," and on the whole the laurels remained with Mr. Fuchs.

Price went away peeved. Damned young pansy! Well, what about this Hattersley chap who had the reputation of being red and tough? He would go and have a look at his place, and perhaps put in a few questions. He mounted his bicycle, rode along the track to Stane Street, crossed it, and pedalled slowly up Love Lane, glancing critically at the various bungalows and the names upon their gates. Blue-water's reputation was sufficiently dubious to allow Sergeant

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Price much latitude in the range of his suspicions. Rum place, this, and rum people. The policeman's mind was all for finality, and in him the plain man's dislike of the original and the eccentric was reinforced by the peculiarities of his profession. He belonged to a little section of the community which spent its energies in supervising the respectability of the unofficial crowd, and since all officials are inclined to swollen-headedness and self-importance, Sergeant Price could not be pilloried for being what petty authority had made him.

Gosh, but he would like to catch a few of these people bending! It wasn't that Bluewater indulged in indiscriminate love. Love, provided it did not solicit, could not be interfered with, but Dewhurst believed that Mr. Mallison's Toy Town was infected with other vices. Half way up Love Lane Sergeant Price got off his bike and left it against a convenient fence. He approached Paul's Pottery on foot, like a good spy investigating Canaan. Hattersley's bungalow showed no signs of life, and Price strolled up to the white fence enclosing the little, derelict garden.

His blue eyes set in a stare. He had seen something lying on the edge of the path. Swiftly and almost surreptitiously he slipped in through the gate and picked up the object. Well, was he damned? He held in his fingers a De Morgan cork-tipped cigarette!

Smart work this! Very carefully he swathed the exhibit in a page from his note-book, and put it away in his tunic pocket. He walked up to Hattersley's door and knocked. There was no response, so he strolled round to the back of the building and through an open door, saw the potter at work, sitting on a stool and modelling the figure of a Pan.

Hattersley, becoming aware of a darkening of the doorway, looked up and saw the figure in blue. His stare was completely surprised and innocent, but to Sergeant Price all things went by opposites.

"Morning, Mr. Hattersley?"

Paul nodded.

"You'll excuse me. We're inquiring into an assault and robbery that took place last night. News to you, perhaps?"

"Quite."

"It's my job to make inquiries. I shall have to ask you to answer some questions."

Hattersley's face darkened.

"What the devil has it to do with me?"

The sergeant shrugged.

"Nothing, sir, perhaps. But, all the same——"

The note-book came out, and Hattersley watched it and the man's big hands.

"Mind telling me, sir, where you were last night between ten and eleven o'clock?"

Hattersley was looking dangerous.

"Not for God."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I shall have to——"

"Look here, you get to hell out of this. You have no right to come here and catechize me, and you know it."

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I have a right to collect any information that may——"

"Help, eh?"

"Precisely so, sir."

"Well, what the hell have my affairs to do with it?"

"I'm just asking you, sir, to——"

"I see, checking up suspects," and suddenly Paul laughed, and his laughter was unpleasant. "All right. Take it and get out. About nine I went to see Mr. and Mrs. Jettison. I sat in their garden till, I suppose, about ten. Miss Lester of White Ways was there. I walked back with her to her cottage. Then I went straight back to the Jettisons. Was there till about eleven-thirty."

"Straight back you say, sir."

"Across Miss Lester's field. Took me two minutes. Yes,

write it all down in your bloody little book, and then go and check up on my alibi.”

He laughed, and Sergeant Price went rather red.

“Smoke cigarettes, sir?”

“No, a pipe.”

“Always, sir?”

“When I can. By the way, who was the injured person? I don’t even know?”

“A Mr. Jekyll, sir.”

“O, Jekyll! Bad luck. He’s a person and not a Nosey Parker in uniform.”

The sergeant went still more red.

“I could get you for that, sir. I’m only doing my duty——”

“Quite. I was wrong. I beg your pardon, officer. Our morals and private property have to be defended. I hope Mr. Jekyll was not seriously hurt?”

“Rendered unconscious, sir, but I gather that he is not in danger.”

“I’m glad. Well, we’ll stay upon our dignity, officer. Yes, good morning. I’m more innocent than any babe unborn, but babes, you know, are really full of potential sin. You ought to do something about it, you and the Eugenists.”

“Good morning, sir.”

A most unpleasant person this, without respect for law and order and a uniform. His politeness was more offensive than his candour, because Sergeant Price felt that he was being laughed at, and no official, however obscure, should be laughed at. The offence is more heinous than any sin against the Holy Ghost. Sergeant Price hurried off on his bicycle, eager to catch Mr. Hattersley bending, and to procure evidence that might add to the significance of the finding of that cigarette, but his checking of the Hattersley alibi proved discouraging. Paul’s movements appeared to have been exactly what he had said they had been. The Jettisons and Miss Lester confirmed his statements. The only gap lay in the crossing of

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Miss Lester's field, an interval that could not have allowed the gentleman to dash down to the Pavilion, wait for and waylay Mr. Jekyll, and return to the Jettisons' place in the course of a couple of minutes.

Sergeant Price was considerably peeved. Like even the most impartial of scientists his investigations operated above a substratum of prejudice. It would have been so much more pleasant to pin the crime on the person you disliked, and to splosh him for being rude to you. But, damn it, what did that cigarette suggest if Hattersley could not be entangled in the time-space scheme? That some person had dropped the thing over Hattersley's fence? Malice or mischief? Or had Hattersley had a visitor, and was shielding him?

Yes there might yet be a chance to get at the fellow.

Sergeant Price returned to White Ways, and asked for a second interview with Mr. Jekyll. It was granted.

"Can you identify this cigarette, sir?"

"A De Morgan, certainly."

"From your case?"

Mr. Jekyll looked whimsical.

"One could hardly swear to that, officer, could one? Where did you find it?"

Sergeant Price became the mysterious official.

"I think we'll keep that to ourselves, sir, for the moment."

Mr. Jekyll smiled at him.

"I quite understand. It is so much easier to trip people up if they are not expecting to be tripped."

"You'll excuse me, sir, but I don't think that's quite fair."

"No? My experience has been that everything is fair when the official world is out to catch us bending. That's why I'm an anarchist."

Almost, the sergeant's jaw dropped. To him an anarchist was just a lurid and dangerous person who threw bombs.

To John Skelton, lying prone in the sun upon the Furze

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Hills came a vision of another Bluewater, a fantastic Bluewater, save to the eyes of poets and prophets.

If it is youth's fate to dream dreams, bubbles which are pricked by the bristles upon venerable chins, then John Skelton dared to dream them, though he knew that all the John Keats in the world would be left to die obscure and in penury. Well, one just went on dreaming if one had the courage and the optimism inherent in a healthy body. You might picture Bluewater peopled by the sentimental socialism of William Morris, or if you suffered from the urge towards uplift you might imagine those yellow sands strident with dear little children from Bermondsey or Camberwell. But John Skelton was not sentimental about children. He had been for a year a very junior master at a rather unpleasant prep. school.

No, if one could do something with a place like Bluewater, something that was sane and of the soil, untainted by the smug fussiness of social service. Grow real people? And who were real people? Miss Lester? Not quite. She was a little too capable and ceramic. Mr. Jekyll? Possibly. That gigolo fellow? Wasn't one rather too hard on that sort of parasite? Though a totalitarian community would have taken him and made something of a man of him by setting him to dig ditches. Doing things with your hands? Not arty-crafty, oh no. Being a sort of ploughman or shepherd, though the cult of the soil was quite out of favour with a generation that liked to be warm and protected and to punch bus tickets without getting muck on its boots. Youth had courage, of a sort, but even the men who held speed records were men of mature years. Campbell, yet in the fifties, nor was Eyston exactly a beardless babe. Why did youth whimper and join some rotten little intelligentsia clique or claque? The Intelligentsia! Hitler and Hitler's Germany had tidied them up into the dustpan, and perhaps the Germans were right.

He gathered himself up and strolled down over the furzy slopes towards Spaniard's Point. Was he under the uncon-

fessed illusion that he would find a real person down by the grey tower? More sense-enchantment? Not quite. Perhaps he had begun to distrust a feminine world which spent so much time and care upon helping nature that the product became mere confectionery, and ceased to be real.

She was there, sitting in the same place, with her back to the sun-warmed wall, and if his coming had not the unexpectedness of yesterday's, she did not appear disturbed by it. Whatever inference was to be drawn, she drew it with a kind of handsome serenity, somehow sure of herself and of him.

"Do you mind me here?"

Why should she either mind or not mind? Where a Victorian might have simpered and looked coy, and a modern been pert, she just remained put like a comely black cat, yet without the suggestion of any feline qualities.

"If you don't mind."

He sat down.

"Quite sure? I mean, if that other person——"

She smiled at the sea.

"He'll just have to walk on."

Skelton felt for his pipe.

"How is Mr. Jekyll to-day?"

"Much better. Poor man. I can't think who could have attacked him like that."

"The police rather suspect me."

She looked at him and laughed.

"How ridiculous!"

"You think me incapable, Rachel, of——"

Her eyes seemed to steady themselves as he spoke her name. People used your name so differently, just as they knocked so differently at a door, and his way of knocking reassured her.

"You couldn't do such a thing."

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

"No, and not to Mr. Jekyll. He's popular, isn't he?"

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"Very. You see, he's got what we girls call an easy face."

"Easy face! That's rather expressive. You mean?"

"He's kind, without being silly, and considerate. His voice doesn't change when he speaks to us. It's the same to us as it would be to you, sir."

Skelton frowned.

"If you call me sir, I shall put on a snob's voice."

She laughed.

"You couldn't."

"O, couldn't I! What's Mr. Jekyll do?"

"For a living?"

"Yes."

"Nothing. He's terribly rich. He just goes up to London once a week."

"That sort of richness. He doesn't smell of it."

"It's not like a new suit, Mr. Skelton."

He glanced at her quickly, appreciatively.

"I say, you can sum things up. Enjoy life, don't you?"

"Why, yes."

"Wish you'd tell me the secret."

"Don't you?"

"In bits, yes. But when one starts thinking about things."

"Bad things?"

"Let's say ugly things."

"Can you make them different by thinking about them?"

He flung out his arms and laughed.

"My God, you do seem to get at the fundamentals, Rachel."

"What's that?"

"Rock bottom, soil, reality."

She appeared to be amused by his boyishness. After all, why use such long words for things that were so obvious and simple?

She said: "I'm not at all clever, Mr. Skelton."

"I should thank God for it! The point is you enjoy life, find it good?"

"Well, I do."

"Without thinking about it?"

"Yes. I enjoy waking in the morning and getting up and doing my hair, and breakfast, and work, and my time off, and going to bed, especially when your feet ache a bit. But that's natural. I suppose I'm made that way."

"The complete and healthy animal. No, I don't mean that, Rachel. What I mean is that you seem to have a wholesome capacity for living. Yes, just being alive ought to be good."

"But, Mr. Skelton, thousands of people are just like me."

"Are they?"

"Of course, people who work."

"Yes, I dare say our intelligentsia has got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Wage slaves and all that sort of rot. Oceans of self pity. Highbrow horrors. Fact is, Rachel, you don't seem to follow Freud. Never heard of him, I expect? So much the better. We poor, sick, understomached little ceribrants! Bored at twenty. Thinking everything about life rotten and finished. Too much gin and tobacco and negation. Damn it, a healthy body ought to find life good. But then, you see——"

She looked at him with a kind of mother-look.

"Bodies aren't all healthy."

"Exactly. Right on the mark, again. Slums, or little deadly suburbs that seem to suffer from chronic indigestion, and have shabby anæmic faces. Fear. Frightened eyes. It all seems so bloody silly. In a properly planned and balanced world, all this wouldn't be. Get rid of the ugliness of living, the sour taste of making a living, and life would look after itself."

She sat reflecting.

"So, you're a socialist."

"I'm damned if I know what I am."

"But I wouldn't make things too easy for everybody."

"No?"

"You see, my father was a gardener, a head gardener at a big place down west. All sorts of problems, sir. Pests. Silver leaf on the plums. Frost when you don't want it, when the

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fruit blossom's out. Life's always got you guessing, in a way. My father used to say that a man who wanted things easy wasn't any use to him."

"Wise man. I should like to have known your father. I suppose doing a difficult thing well is about the best urge a man can have. Trouble is, most people funk doing the difficult things. That's why they're inferior. That's what sticks in my throat when I contemplate communism. Everything so easy-osy for the crowd. Life served out from a sort of social sausage-machine. What's your idea?"

She smiled.

"I have three waitresses under me. They may be good girls, but I have to manage them, see the job's done properly."

"And it wouldn't always be done properly?"

"No. And the easier you made it for some of them, the less you'd get done. Besides, Mr. Skelton, in my idea of heaven there would be work to do, and the easy-osy people, as you call them, would always be the trouble."

"You're a realist, Rachel."

She laughed.

"I'm the child of my father. Besides, he was a religious man."

"And you?"

"Not quite in his way. But he always said: 'Life's a mysterious business, my girl. You don't get far by being a know-all.' And isn't life mysterious? Aren't we like a lot of kids building sand-castles?"

He looked at her steadily.

"My dear, you're exquisitely wise."

They were to be surprised on this summer day, and not by Mr. Siegfried Mallison. It was one of those disconcerting occasions which can be edged with active discomfort for all the persons concerned, and in which the pursuit of a suspicion leads to the finding of the apple of discord. Not one of the three

had anything to say for the moment, and Miss Lester with a bleached face and a primness about the mouth, was passing on when Skelton got to his feet.

"I was asking after Mr. Jekyll. Do you mind if I——?"

She gave him a devastating look.

"Mr. Jekyll's much better. Why not go and see him?"

Surely she wasn't jealous of his talking to Rachel? Such a reaction seemed so inadequate in a woman of the world.

"I think I will. Are you going back?"

"When I have been to the Point."

"I'll come, if I may?"

He glanced at Rachel, but Rachel's eyes were not his for the moment. The sweetness had gone out of her face. She had the look of a woman who had been secretly humiliated. He did not understand it. Things could pass wordlessly between two women without his comprehending the emotional clash.

Miss Lester walked on, and he joined her. She was insolubly silent, and speech proved no solvent.

"You're rather lucky to have a woman like that."

What an opening! She gave him a swift, sidelong stare.

"Yes, Rachel's quite an asset to us. So many men make fools of themselves about her, without fooling her."

He flushed up.

"I didn't mean that."

"No?"

The sceptical lift of her voice angered him. Confound it, couldn't you be caught talking to a girl without an intelligent person inferring——? But was intelligence only a veneer, and emotion, of sorts, the eternal background?

He said: "I'm not going to apologize for talking to your head-waitress. As a matter of fact I found her extraordinarily interesting."

Idiot! Almost, she sneered.

"Yes, Rachel is really very good looking."

He seemed to catch his breath.

FANTASIA

“Well, if you will misunderstand me——”

“Is it necessary?”

“What?”

“My interest in the subject. Why assume it? A rather superfluous piece of cheek.”

Well, really! He felt a little breathless. And suddenly, he paused like a young horse drawing too heavy a load on a steepish hill.

“I think I’ll go and see Mr. Jekyll.”

“I should.”

“Well, I will. You’ll forgive me, but——”

He glanced at her face and refrained from any further attempt at reconciliation. After all, as she had said, was it necessary? Some clashes could be too crude. And as he turned and walked back to the tower he saw that Rachel was no longer there. Something flinched in him. Had he somehow caused her to be hurt?

X

JEKYLL was sitting up in bed, propped against pillows, and wearing a turquoise blue and gold silk dressing-gown. His bed was so placed that he had an oblique view of Blue-water from the little white Temple of Vesta to Culverin Cove and of Arthur's Head. Two books lay on the table by the bed, Cronin's *Citadel* and Henshaw Ward's *Builders of Delusion*, but Jekyll was not reading at the moment. His face expressed an amused serenity.

"May I come in, sir?"

"Hallo, John. Splendid. Stay and have tea with me."

"If it won't tire you. How's the head, sir?"

"Stupendous, as the publishers say in their advertisements."

Skelton saw an armchair piled as high as its armrests with what appeared to be a mass of letters and circulars. Mr. Jekyll indicated it.

"Dump all that mess on the floor, John. Yes, three days' mail. Haven't had the desire to be bothered with it."

Skelton proceeded to stack the stuff in a corner.

"You must have a very heavy correspondence."

"Advertisements of things I don't want to buy. Commercial bumph, charitable blackmail, and begging letters."

"All of it, sir?"

"Mostly."

"Could I help?"

Jekyll's face seemed to sharpen.

"Jove, that's an idea! I'm full of ideas. That crack on the head seems to have let things loose inside me."

FANTASIA

Skelton was about to sit down when Mr. Jekyll's hand pointed to the bathroom door.

"Go in there, John, and tell me if anything strikes you."

Skelton disappeared into the bathroom. It was just an ordinary bathroom with a green bath, green tiles, green linoleum, green washing basin, hot pipes, glass shelves, towels.

"Anything strike you?"

"Rather green, sir."

"Nothing else?"

"You seem to have a rather wonderful collection of bottles."

A sound rather like a chuckle came from the bedroom.

"You've got it, John. I have just realized that one of my principal hobbies has been the cultivating of an interesting chronic dyspepsia. Before you go I'll get you to do something for me."

"You want a dose, sir?"

"God forbid! I'll get you to dump all those bottles into the wastepaper basket, if it will hold 'em. The funny thing is, that I appear to have experienced a change of heart, or of stomach. Stomach, probably. Most of humanity's ills arise from the stomach."

Skelton returned to the bedroom. He sat down in the arm-chair between Mr. Jekyll's bed and the window.

"Ever read philosophy, John?"

"I have, pretty much."

"Did it ever get you anywhere?"

Skelton was momentarily silent.

"No, I can't say it has done. Life's got me completely puzzled."

"No pattern or purpose?"

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle which some kid has chucked haphazard on a table."

"A rather mischievous child. Read Mallison?"

"O, yes."

FANTASIA

"I'll lend you this book of Henshaw's. Full of twinkles. He catalogues the various brands of philosophy and analyses their sources of inspiration. The one that appeals to me most is that philosophy is just a game."

"A game?"

"Throwing up metaphysical balls and catching 'em. Juggling with soap-bubble hypotheses. And sometimes a mischievous game, like Mallison's."

"Does he strike you that way?"

"Absolutely. He likes playing with postulates as he likes playing with people. Damned dangerous. Almost thuggery in some ways. It delights a man like Mallison to hit some fundamentalist god over the head, bludgeon a superstition or a rival sage. I could even imagine him hitting me over the head just to discover the thickness of a plutocratic skull."

Skelton sat watching Mr. Jekyll's face.

"Do you believe in evil, John?"

"What is evil, sir?"

"The opposite of good, eh! Damned difficult proposition. Never define anything. Too dangerous. To-morrow will make an ass of you. Personally I can't get beyond the sentimentalist's credo. Not hurting people, or failing to help 'em. Very lowbrow, of course. Certain things and people have an odour, sort of sinister psychic smell. That reminds me. I have remembered something."

"About the other night?"

"Yes. It was very still and warm, and I was going to light a cigarette, and I remember now a smell drifting across me, like honeysuckle or clematis flamula on a quiet night. Must have been just before I was hit."

"A sweet smell, sir?"

"No, hardly. Pomardy, hair lotion, or something. Might have been the sort of stuff a Frenchman might use on his body when ablutions are rationed."

"You mean, the smell came from the person who hit you?"

"Exactly."

"Might have been a woman."

"Not very likely. This was a male, barberish, decadent sort of smell. If I ever sniffed it again, yes, I might connect perfume and person."

"Then, I'm exonerated, sir, I hope?"

Mr. Jekyll crinkled up his eyes at him.

"Absolutely. Wholesome soap. I've got rather a keen nose. And Bluewater is full of strange smells, almost what the dear journalists would call exotic."

"And you don't?"

"No, stuffy, John. Not Victorian, but a sort of pagan stuffiness. Imperial Rome must have smelt like that."

"Told the police, sir?"

"Is it likely? Never tell an official anything. He will think you are lying, or trying to fool him. The police! O, dear no. You might ring the bell, John, for tea."

A maid answered the bell, and Jekyll ordered tea for two.

"O, by the way, Florrie, you might ask Rachel to send me up a whisky and soda with my dinner."

"Yes, sir."

The girl took a look at Skelton as she closed the door, for John was much more attractive to women than he knew, and his innocence may have accounted for a part of the attractiveness. Mr. Jekyll was examining his fingernails, and he decided that they needed trimming.

"Can you find me my nail-scissors, John?"

Skelton found them.

"Thanks. Seem to be making use of you. Funny to think that if that fellow had hit a bit harder I should not be bothering about fingernails. By the way, do you like the tinted sort?"

"Not much."

"Pretty loathsome. Never marry a girl, John, who titivates

too much. They tell me that a part of Bluewater paints its toenails."

"Possibly, sir."

"Toenails used to be private; now, they are public. Really, I don't think it would interest me whether a woman's toenails were decorated or according to nature. Funny place, Bluewater. How does it strike you?"

"A little sinister."

"Now, that's interesting. Were I to use the word, I should be catalogued as an old stuffer. But, youth——"

"Then you do use it, sir?"

"I do. We moderns may not know what the devil to make of life, but I do believe that letting go is pretty ugly. Lambs at play? Not a bit of it. Mallison is making a rather beastly sort of monkey-show here."

"Because he thinks of people as monkeys?"

"Probably. One may be simian by heritage, but just as man has shed superfluous hair, so he has shed certain simian things."

"But Bluewater is only a spot."

"Spots can be indicative, my lad. Infection. A massed infection isn't so improbable in the age of the pictorial press. I think I must be a bit of a Puritan. Yes, in spite of Mallison and the social liberations."

"You believe in being the lord of your body?"

"That's not a bad way of putting it, John. Man rather than monkey."

Mallison was writing a letter in his library, and when he had tucked the letter into its envelope and sealed it up, he put it under a letter weight, and sat reflecting. His hand went to his little blond beard, and stroking it seemed to caress a smile. He got up, walked to a book case, lifted out half a dozen copies of Havelock Ellis and placed them on a table. The library was panelled, and a portion of the woodwork in

the space uncovered could be slid back. Mallison pushed it to one side, revealing the steel door of a small wall-safe. He unlocked the safe, took out two objects, smirked over them, and returned them to the safe. He was about to close it when he appeared to remember something, and going to the bureau he drew out Miss Lester's letters from their pigeonhole, slipped them into the safe, and locking the door, replaced the panel and books.

Mallison rang the bell.

A man-servant answered it, an elderly person with a dry and non-committal face.

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll have tea here, Santer. O, by the way, didn't you hint to me that Mrs. Praed was feeling a little unsettled?"

"Yes, sir, but I think she has got over it."

Mallison walked to a window. Mrs. Praed was his house-keeper.

"Once moody, always moody, Santer. I think Mrs. Praed had better go. Give her a month's notice and double her wages."

The man appeared to hesitate. His eyes were regarding his master's profile with a glint of secret hatred.

"I think she would prefer, sir, that you——"

"Nonsense, man. What do I pay you for? I can't be bothered with these domestic details."

"Very good, sir. And do you wish me to try and engage—?"

"I think I have someone in mind, Santer. If nothing comes of it, you can engage a new woman."

"Very good, sir."

Mallison took his tea with lemon in it. He was one of those who pretend to suffer from the Russian superstition, and though he had not Stalin's brutal smirk, and was too hairy to be the thorough Mongol, it might have amused him to remove by starvation millions of monkeys who did not conform to the great idea. But he had affairs of state in Blue-

water, he took the private path through the park, and coming down towards Love Lane, he saw Paul Hattersley's place, and Paul himself in white shirt and grey flannel trousers busy in the vegetable patch. He had a quip to try upon Hattersley, and he stood to watch him forking up potatoes in that back garden. Gossip had it that the potter lived largely and leanly upon spuds, and Mallison had a creature who passed to him all Bluewater's gossip.

Mallison strolled across to the flimsy chestnut fence. He had a full view of Hattersley's posterior, and it showed signs of dirt and of wear.

"Evening, Hattersley. Turned Hibernian, I observe."

The other man straightened and swung round as though someone had smitten him.

"O, it's you, Mallison."

"It is. How's the crop?"

Hattersley thrust the fork into the soil, and stood with one dirt-soiled hand on the handle.

"Did you get my letter?"

"I receive so many letters."

"About my account?"

"O, that! As a matter of fact, Hattersley, I thought I might just as well hold it against the rent."

"I don't owe you any rent?"

"Next payment due in September, I believe. Maggs manages all this for me. But, if I remember, you didn't pay for a whole year, until pressure was applied. Isn't that so?"

Hattersley's face gloomed at him.

"O, I see, the barter-idea. But a man has other things besides rent."

"Quite so," and Mallison appeared to be studying the knees of those deplorable trousers.

"I'd like a cheque. You owe me more than I owe you."

"I don't think so, Hattersley."

"Damn it, but you do."

FANTASIA

"Did we charge you interest on your rent, when it was in default? We didn't. I'll instruct Maggs to hand over the balance when the September rent has been paid."

"Munificent of you! Yes, you needn't stare at my bloody trousers. I didn't inherit them."

Mallison smiled at him.

"Almost, they look like it. But we won't be ironical. I'll tell Maggs."

He turned to go, and he did not see Hattersley jerk the fork out of the ground, with a flare of murder in his eyes. Nor did he see the tool thrust back again into the soil and the sudden smear of humiliation that swept across the other man's face. "O, go to hell!" But there was no hell left, especially for one of the triumphant souls like Siegfried Mallison. What a pity!

Mallison crossed Stane Street and took the narrow road through the sandhills to the dance pavilion. His Temple of Vesta! That had been another quip, and though the official world had refused to grant this sanctuary even an occasional licence, Bluewater managed to smuggle its own little drinks into the place, and cocked thumb and fingers at the spoilsports. Mallison climbed the steps, and opening the glazed door, heard music. His crepe-soled shoes took him noiselessly into the vestibule, and he stood to watch Gerald Fuchs giving a dance lesson to a large and amorous lady of mature years who appeared to insist upon dancing with both her arms round Gerald's neck. Her foolishly eager face was in contrast to the young man's bored one, and Mallison was amused.

He moved into the doorway, and Fuchs, sighting him over the top of the lady's head, thrust her from him.

"Excuse me."

Her peevish face revolved and focused Mallison, and Mallison, having been amused, was gallant to her.

"So sorry to interrupt. May I speak to Gerald for two minutes?"

FANTASIA

She wriggled.

"Why, of course. Gerald is only polishing up my rumba."
And Mallison wanted to laugh. Which part of her was that?

He went out with Gerald Fuchs into the sandhills, and Fuchs was the ready sycophant, and eager to polish other things as well as the lady's rumba.

"How much is the good lady worth to you, Gerald?"

"A guinea a time, sir."

"You earn it. Polishing her rumba! Do you do it with a duster?"

Gerald was constrained to laugh. A patron's humour should always be appreciated.

"What's this I hear about a fellow being coshed?"

Gerald described the affair, and also the activities of the police.

"Do they suspect anyone?"

"That fellow Hattersley, I believe."

"Ha! Quite probable. A potato bandit. Have you any idea?"

"Not a notion, sir."

"By the way, I've seen a new face hanging around here, lad with cinema hair and an ivory smile, tall, slim."

"Perhaps you mean a chap named Skelton, the fellow who picked Jekyll up."

"He might have knocked him down previously. What is he?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Might be a cheap journalist after a front page scream. You might find out about him."

"I will, sir."

"And now, return to the lady and polish."

"Can I give you a glass of sherry, sir?"

"No, thanks, Gerald. I'm going across to Ann's place. Go and polish the lady's rumba."

FANTASIA

Mallison's approach to White Ways was somewhat circuitous. The Martello tower at Spaniard's Point belonged to him, and he carried the key, for though the tower was often let in the summer to casual visitors, Mallison, for reasons of his own, had retained possession of it for this season. A wooden stairway led to the roof of the tower, and Mallison climbed it, and leaning over the parapet on the seaward side, found no one sitting below. The tower gave him a good view of the coast and sandhills, and squatting on the parapet he watched the landscape. People were bathing still, and on the White Ways courts little figures were active. Mallison played no games. In his younger days he had been something of an expert with the foil and sabre, but Bluewater did not fence.

He descended, locked up the tower, and walked across to White Ways. It was now the hour when the world began to gather in the loggia for little drinks, and Mallison was the observed of all observers. His was not a figure that could be overlooked, and always he was conscious of being singular, and of challenging and courting curiosity. He was like Zeus descending from the Parthenon and surprising Athenian hucksters. He had no illusions as to the middle-class crowd's comments. "There's that fellow Mallison exhibiting himself!"—"Gosh, look at his breeches!"—Yes, humanity, even in its lesser accretions was cheaply critical and smeared with prejudice. It rather amused him to play the Leo above the noses of these jackals. He knew how to pose before such a crowd, to ignore it, to stroll through it with an air of aloof serenity, to behave as though the Stock Exchange and Threadneedle Street did not exist.

There was a table vacant in a far corner, and he took it. Rachel, appearing with a tray of cocktails, saw him and closed her eyes for half a second. A peculiar silence had spread momentarily through the loggia.

"Rachel."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring me a sherry, will you?"

"One sherry, sir."

"Not young thing's sherry. Robert knows my bottle."

Robert was wise as to more matters, and responsible for other subtleties than the shaking of cocktails, and when Rachel explained to him why she wanted more than one glass on her tray, Robert humoured her. "Don't you worry, my dear. I'll mix up an extra Martini. There are three Martinis to come yet. Mr. Hodgson's a certainty. Like me to take him his sherry?" No, Rachel would do her job, provided that she had a good excuse for not being lured into lingering at the Mallison table. "It's best to keep an easy face with that sort of gentleman, Robert." And Robert twinkled at her, and perhaps wondered whether it ever occurred to a genius like Mr. Mallison that the plain people were less purblind than he believed, and could conspire and combine to frustrate great ideas.

Rachel set forth with her two glasses. She could feel those hot and tawny eyes observing her, but she had her bright and easy face in action. She placed his glass of sherry on the table.

"The usual coin, my dear?"

"Yes, sir."

Mallison delved into the depths of those black corduroy breeches. He was in no hurry.

"What's this I hear about assault and robbery?"

"You mean Mr. Jekyll, sir?"

"O, it was Mr. Jekyll. Been causing knights to be bold, my dear, with your handsome face?"

She was completely and serenely stupid.

"I don't think so, sir."

"Didn't see you at Ye Olde Tower."

"No, sir. The sherry is a shilling, sir. I have another gentleman waiting."

FANTASIA

He looked hard at her, fished out a ten shilling note, and tossed it on to the tray.

"You can bring me the change, child, when you have served the other gentleman."

She turned away and walking between the tables to the lounge door, she was suddenly confronted by a young man who was hurrying out. She had to pause abruptly, and some of the Martini was spilt, and Mallison, observing the incident, saw those two young faces brighten to each other.

"So sorry, Rachel. Mr. Jekyll wants a sherry. Supposing I take that glass? I've spoilt it."

"It doesn't matter, Mr. Skelton. This is a Martini."

"Yes, it does."

He put out his hand for the glass, and her eyes were his.

"Shall I book it?"

"No, I'll pay. How much?"

"One and sixpence, sir."

He found the money, and as she watched the two coins placed upon the tray, her face seemed to show that she knew that a shilling and a sixpence were precious to him.

"I'll bring Mr. Jekyll's sherry up, sir."

"No. No need. I'll take it up. Save stairs."

"Thank you, sir."

Siegfried Mallison was not pleased. He was still less pleased when Robert brought him his change, for, even to a very vain man like Mallison, the inference was obvious. He might hold that most handsome women are lacking in intelligence, but Rachel was not so stupid as she appeared. The Olympian gesture had been countered.

XI

IT happened that Richard Jekyll was in pain. He understood that Dr. Brough was a little worried about him, but for the moment nothing existed for Richard Jekyll but his own particular pain, and the emotional transfigurations pain may produce.

Strange, how in the intricate nexus of cellular forces which we call the human body a sudden disharmony can arouse poignant reactions in the intimate mysterious self! Jekyll's Mother of Parliaments was troubled and in debate. He lay aware of those little stabs of pain jerking from spine to armpit and down his right arm. His fingers tingled and pricked. He could suppose that Dr. Brough was postulating some inflammatory mischief spreading from the focus of that black-guard blow, or some slight displacement which was causing pressure.

Dr. Brough had given him two white tablets to take with half a glass of warm water.

He had spoken tentatively of a nurse.

"I don't want some strange woman messing around, Doctor, if it can be helped."

"Well, we will see."

Were those two tablets producing peace? The aches and stabs grew less insistent. Blessed muffling of pain. A kind of strange serenity descended upon him and with it a peculiar clarity of mind, and a feeling of gentleness. Almost he could lie and look with ironical compassion and amusement at the Richard Jekyll of a week ago, the valetudinarian, the slave of bottles, the restless child who had rushed about in speed-

FANTASIA

boats and cars. How very crude, how limited, how like a dog chasing its own tail! His explorations of self travelled farther. Was it that he had become badly bored with the futilities of a rich man's life, and that this crack on the skull had been administered to him by a benignant and sapient fate? Teleology? O, damn long words! And was he becoming sentimental at the bidding of a dose of dope? Well, well! But as he had confessed to Master Skelton, that crack on the skull seemed to have released all sorts of strange things inside him. Nice lad, John Skelton. Clean, but badly bothered about life! Well, who wasn't? Especially the young, in this age of babel and confusion, with a possible and very filthy war hanging over the heads of the younger generations. Geneva or Aldershot? Mussolini referring to the peace professors as humanitarian spinsters!

Meanwhile, he lay in comparative comfort, free from all financial worries and desperate needs, with people to serve him, and flowers on his dressing-table.

What if he had a living to earn?

What if he were a clerk with a wife and three children, and a dozen men waiting to jump into his office shoes?

What if he had seven and sixpence at the bank, and the rent to pay and a family to feed?

Would that little dose of dope have worked so happily?

Damn it, he had been a rather selfish devil!

Someone knocked at his door, very gently, so that he should not be disturbed if he happened to be asleep.

"Yes, come in."

It was Rachel, a Rachel who had brought him up those flowers, not, he hoped, because he was a rich man and tipped generously, but because her impulses were kind.

"O, it's you, Rachel."

"Mr. Skelton's here, sir. He wants to know——"

"Ask him up."

FANTASIA

"Are you sure, sir, it won't tire you?"

"Some people don't tire one, Rachel."

When John came into the room Richard Jekyll seemed to know that young Skelton's spirit was overcast, though he brought with him a bright, sick-room face.

"Sit down, John, and smoke."

"O, no, I won't smoke, sir. How's the pain?"

"Drugged, my lad. One's dear body can be very humble."

"Anything I can do to be of use? Write letters."

"Nothing but begging letters and charity appeals to answer, John, and they can wait. Feeling mouldy?"

"Why, sir?"

"O, just nothing. A feeling."

"Sorry if I——"

"No need to be sorry for nature. How are the police?"

John twiddled his thumbs.

"Damned offensive. Been catechizing me again. Almost expect one to produce a birth certificate and a diploma as to morals."

"That's the trouble with the official mind, John, concerned more with the past than the future."

Skelton looked out of the window.

"What is the future to the young things?"

"Feeling like that, John?"

"A bit. No need to talk about it. Not a cheerful subject."

"But an inevitable one. Feeling rather like that, myself."

"You, sir?"

"I'm not exactly a Methuselah."

"You've got a young spirit, sir."

"Beginning to have. What's gnawing you?"

John put his head down between his clenched fists.

"Life doesn't seem to want us, we young things. It only wants us when a war is on and someone has to be killed. I wouldn't mind that, if I felt that one's blood was a kind of sacrifice for a future that might be rather fine. Youth can

make sacrifices, you know, if its soul is challenged. But as things are we feel we are no damned use."

"Nothing worth while?"

"O, yes, there might be. If one could get rid of humbug, and profit, and the daily press."

"A largish order, John."

"O, yes, I know. We humans are such fools."

"Ever occurred to you, Jack, that man likes being a fool?"

Skelton stared at him.

"How, sir?"

"Why, just being what he is, full of passions and prejudices, that's why life is always a bit of a dog-fight, and why school-masters are hated, especially those pedagogues who try to prove to the grown man that he ought to be a passionless sort of little prig in a pinafore."

Skelton's head gave a sudden lift, like the head of a man who has been startled.

"You mean, that society has grown as it is because it just did?"

"Well, hasn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"And there are all sorts of theories to prove that it should have developed differently, or that it should be made to grow differently. The theorists want to prune and train the tree according to their particular fads. But man isn't quite like a tree. He doesn't always tolerate too much interference. You may fool him with propaganda for a number of years, and then he'll turn on you suddenly and give you a bloody nose."

Skelton smiled at Mr. Jekyll.

"I see. You think life does what it pleases, and laughs at philosophy and all the isms?"

"Well, doesn't it? Look for the emotional urge behind everything, John, the power-plant down in the basement of the most noble and disinterested of edifices. What's behind the Nazis, and Russia, and most of our reformers? Man's passion for

power, or to get more of the good things for himself. In the individualist community it is a scramble of wits. To-day it is more a scramble of organized crowds, but the motive is much the same."

"Self-interest?"

"Of course. Concealed perhaps, or rationalized or sublimated, use whatever word you please. Don't be humbugged by sociological cant. We are much the same as we always were. Do you think Japan doesn't dream of another Mongol sweep? Why, look at me."

"In what way, sir?"

"The Devil was sick, the Devil a saint would be."

Skelton laughed.

"I wouldn't call you either Devil or saint, sir."

"Hybrid. Well, that's pretty normal."

Someone knocked at Mr. Jekyll's door.

"Hallo. Who is it?"

Miss Lester's voice answered. "Dr. Brough asked me to make sure that you were not tired."

Jekyll looked whimsically at John.

"Yes, better go, Jack. Women are always right, and one musn't let down one's doctor."

Skelton rose, and with a smile at Jekyll, walked to the door.

"I hope I haven't——?"

"Not a bit."

"I'm afraid I have been rather normal. Spilling things about myself. I see your point, sir."

"Splendid. I rather think that you and I could collaborate over something."

Skelton found Ann Lester waiting for him in the corridor. In the course of duty, checking linen, she was wearing an apron and a pale green linen frock, and she looked like a nurse implacably guarding her patient. Skelton gave her a shy

flicker of a glance. He felt himself astonished every time he saw her by her transformation, and the chilly drizzle that had descended upon romance.

"I don't think I have tired him."

"I hope not."

Her voice had a resonant sharpness. She seemed to be all angles like modern art, a series of triangles interlaced. No pretty-pretty left in her, and after all a man did ask even for the illusion of softness. Ministering angels! O, sentimental shades of the poets! She walked before him like a young ward-matron to the end of the corridor.

He felt that he must say something.

"Rather a provocative person, Mr. Jekyll."

She half turned at the head of the stairs.

"Yes, rather worth cultivating, I suppose."

She saw his face flinch, and his eyes look both angry and hurt. Why on earth had she said that beastly thing? Just because at the moment life seemed a jangle, and there was sand in her feeling-box? Snapping at people, getting petulant over trifles. She wanted to call the words back, to say: "Don't take any notice of me. I'm rather a hag these days." But he had slipped past her with a stiff face, and was walking down the stairs.

O, damn her sharp tongue! And damn his absurd sensitiveness! Why should he have been offended because a woman ran a show of her own, and ran it rather creditably? Was it just that which had made him go head-in-air and funny? She turned away to return to the linen store. Her face had a sort of ravaged look. He was the very last person on earth to whom she should have said that beastly, cynical thing.

"Sorry, Mrs. Thomson. Where were we? Bath towels?"

The housekeeper looked sharply at Miss Lester's face.

"Tired, miss?"

"No."

"You look as though you'd got a pain. I can manage."

Miss Lester's eyelids flickered.

"No. I'm quite all right."

"You'll excuse me. I know you do hate fussing."

Gwen and Maisie Wilmer, lying on a sandhill after bathing, saw John Skelton pass by between the shingle-bank and the sea. It was low tide, and a stretch of smooth sand curved to meet the rocks by Culverin Cove. Gwen, nibbling a piece of marram grass, considered John Skelton with earnest eyes.

"Looks rather a lamb, doesn't he?"

Maisie was more critical than her sister.

"Rather full of himself, I think."

"Wonder who he is? We've passed him twice, and he hasn't looked at us."

"Want to make him look?"

"Don't be catty. I wonder if he is the lad who rescued Mr. Jekyll? Poor Daddy Jekyll; rather an old dear!"

John was not conscious of being observed by two young things who regarded anything over forty as approaching senility. He too was thinking of Mr. Jekyll and most unhappily so, because to find a new friend and a man after your own heart, and then to be accused of cultivating friendship for possible favours, left a sour taste in the mouth. He had begun to quote Mr. Jekyll to himself, even as a young legionary might have quoted the shrewd sayings of some bronze-helmeted veteran who had fought the barbarians on every frontier of the Empire. No, he would not easily forgive her that. The meanness of the thought had angered him.

And did it imply that he would refrain from cultivating the mordant spirit of this witty friend? No, damn it, why should he be put off by petty cynicism? If Richard Jekyll made any gesture that could be considered as foreshadowing a favour, he could refuse it, and claim a nice integrity.

Someone hailed him as he reached the reef of rock which jutted into the sea and became those polished excrescences that

Mallison had christened Pieces of Eight. He saw a large white figure in a dinghy, standing up and waggling it shorewards most professionally with an oar over the stern. Archie Stout! Just the right and cheerful person to conjure away cobwebs of self-analysis.

"Hallo, Skelton. Doing anything?"

"No, just pottering."

"Come in and have dinner with me."

"Thanks, I'd love to."

It was too early for dinner though Ye Golden Hinde served it at seven. Moreover Archie Stout had to change into clothes that were a little less casual than a sweater, grey bags and gumboots. He put John in The Poop, and left him there with a drink, and a queer and hairy little man who painted strange pictures and somehow managed to sell them. John was rather shy of talking about pictures, because, unlike most of the young, he did not pretend to understand the ultra-moderns, and might have agreed with Richard Jekyll in calling their work "Tongue in the Cheek Art." Nor, as far as he knew, had he ever seen any of the hairy one's paintings, and the artist was equally ignorant of Skelton as a poet.

Somehow, they found themselves arguing on astrology, and John was having the worst of it when Stout rescued him. Archie made a practice of taking his meals in the hotel dining-room, because he could both eat and use his eyes and ears, and watch the service. His table was tucked away in a corner, so as to be not too conspicuously a part of the show.

"I believe that there are some people, Skelton, who still object to a pub-keeper feeding in his own dining-room. What's it to be, beer?"

"I've had a gin and Italian."

"At your age, that's nothing. A pint of draught for two, Florrie."

Skelton sat down and unfolded his napkin.

"I say, Mr. Stout, would you mind if I dine you?"

FANTASIA

"Yes, very much so. I got in first."

"But——"

"My lad, can't I do what I like, when I like, in my own house? Don't fret. Business is good."

"And so are you."

"Well, that's that. Seen poor old Jekyll to-day?"

"Yes. Not so well. I suppose you know all about it?"

"Everybody in Bluewater knows all about it, and a good deal more. I have had the police here, worrying my poor Italian chef. Abyssinia on the brain, I suppose."

"I'm rather suspect."

"What a jest! Law and order are quite up a tree, and chasing imaginary cats up and down trees. But the thing's obvious. Easy for some casual rough, a tramp perhaps, to get into a place like this and lie out in the furze, and sock a likely person."

"You think it was a tramp?"

"I do. Bluewater may be like the curate's egg, but we don't cultivate brigandage. How's the beer?"

"Splendid."

"Yes, and Antonio's quite an expert, though yesterday, after the police business, the dinner was a frazzle. Almost I had to put poor Antonio in the ice-box."

Skelton laughed. This Father Christmas of a man made sorry moods fly up the chimney.

"Staying much longer?"

"Not quite sure. My week is nearly up."

"Rather a pity. By the way, I'm strolling along presently to see Paul the Potter. Met him?"

"No."

"Refreshing savage. Blurts out the hairy truth about things. Why not come along."

"I'd like to. Does he make pots?"

"Yes, statues and things. Used to be a bit of an architect, but was always having rows with the wicked old man in

authority. Too honest, so he and the respectable firm parted. I'm afraid Bluewater's a bit of a backwater for poor old Paul."

Skelton took a pull at his tankard.

"More frustration?"

"I'm afraid so. The craftsman is rather superfluous in an age when the family joss is a mass-production car."

The level sheen of the sunset seemed spread like a yellow sheet above Arthur's Head when Stout and Skelton set out to stroll to Hattersley's. Both of them felt well fed, and both were smoking pipes, Archie Stout a large, curved and voluptuous briar which babbled like a wind-instrument in need of cleaning. Bluewater had an air of limpid innocence, like a girl in a blue muslin frock, and the palisaded pines and beeches on the uplands glowed like an embattled host. Stout's curly pipe made music, and there was something German in the way his big feet and belly spread themselves. At the corner of Lavender Lane they met Jimmie Jettison dashing out with a basket.

"Hallo, Archie, what time is it?"

"About half-past eight."

"What! Our one clock has stopped. And Mother Hubbard's cupboard's empty. Shops shut."

"Indubitably. Go down to my place and get something."

"No. It will be a Welsh rarebit evening. We can rise to bread and cheese."

Skelton had a soft smile on his face, and as they continued up Love Lane Stout explained the Jettisons to him. "Absolute salt of the earth. No guile." Somewhere a wireless was giving tongue to a crooner singing with vulgar unctious about love, and Skelton's eyes narrowed. Ye gods, how the pigs put their trotters in God's Trough! But there were other sounds as they neared the end of the lane and saw the white shape of Hattersley's bungalow, a sudden squirl of laughter as though someone was being tickled and loving it while pretending to be shocked.

FANTASIA

"More love," said Stout tersely, "and of the sort which your crooner understands when he gets busy."

Skelton was biting hard on his pipe. That laughter disturbed some primitive appetite in him, and it angered him.

"Sacred and profane. Ever come across the Sacred Sort, Mr. Stout?"

"Have I? Well, if that kind of caterwauling makes one squirm, I suppose I have. And don't Mister me, or sir me, my lad. It makes me worried about my waistcoat."

"Need you be? I think I'm learning that age is relative."

"Now, now, how am I to take that?"

"In the ageless way of Father Christmas."

"Hang it all, man, I haven't white wool gummed all over me!"

Stout pushed open Hattersley's gate and knocked at the green door. Hattersley's bell had long been out of action. There was no response, and Stout, knowing his Paul, led the way round the bungalow to the workshop door. Hattersley's studio was glazed on three sides, and the sunset showed through it, and the thing it held.

"My God!"

For so large a man Stout moved with the spryness of a boy. Skelton had seen that pendant shape black against the sunset, turning to and fro like a joint on a spit, and still emitting horrible jerky spasms. Stout was picking up an overturned wooden chair, and he climbed on it, and clasping the hanging body, raised it.

"Got a knife? Get something."

Skelton saw a rusty table-knife lying on a bench. He grabbed it, found a box, and mounting it, sawed at the rope. He was conscious of Stout's heavy breathing, a kind of anguished panting as he supported Hattersley's body.

"Good lad. O, my God! There's a chance."

Together they got Hattersley on the floor, and Stout's big hands tore the rope away from the pinched neck. He had

FANTASIA

Paul on his back, and kneeling behind his head, gripped the man's arms below the elbows.

"Just a chance. Had some experience of half-drowned people. Go and telephone, Skelton. Brough at Dewhurst. Run down to White Ways."

Skelton turned to go.

"Just a moment. Not a word. Say Hattersley's had a fit."

Skelton nodded, and ran, taking with him a vision of that blue, contorted face, and of Stout pump-handling the other man's arms, with sweat standing in beads on his forehead.

Skelton ran. At White Ways he was confronted by the very person he did not wish to meet, Ann Lester herself.

"I want to telephone. Yes, the doctor. Urgent."

She looked with wide eyes at his grim young face.

"Someone ill?"

"Please don't ask questions. Where's the telephone. I want Dr. Brough's number."

She led the way into her office, gave him the number, and leaving him alone, closed the door. Was she tempted to listen at it? Perhaps. But she did not listen, though she could not help hearing that urgent, eager voice somehow reminding her of the Skelton who had been a lover. She stood on guard to ward off interference, wondering who could be ill and so critically ill, and how any illness in Bluewater could concern him? Surely there had not been a second Jekyll incident? No, it could not be Mr. Jekyll, for she had seen young Skelton come in by the lounge door. And then she found Colonel Fusspot in front of her. White Ways had labelled him such, and she thought of him always by that name.

"Can I use your telephone, Miss Lester? There's a confounded wench in the club box chattering to her boy."

"I'm afraid not. My phone's engaged for the moment."

"Really, it's most important."

"Anyone ill?"

FANTASIA

"No. I want to ring up my London club. The damned fools haven't forwarded any letters for three days."

"Perhaps there aren't any."

"My dear lady, I——"

But the door opened behind her, and Skelton edged past them with a "Thanks ever so much," and was gone. Why this most unfriendly haste? Well, after the thing she had said to him she could hardly expect him to be matey. What had happened to make him look and behave like a man who had discovered a murder? Meanwhile, Colonel Fusspot was champing the bit.

"May I assume now, Miss Lester, that your telephone is at my service.

She turned on him a hard and sudden smile as though she had just remembered his existence.

"O, certainly. Letters are so important, aren't they?"

The sunset was dying out of the sky when Skelton reached the Hattersley bungalow. The place was darker now, and the interior of that glass box had grown dim and obscure. He heard voices, voices that halted him at the door.

"O, my God, man, why didn't you let me kick?"

The hoarse voice shook the youth in Skelton like some ghastly thing stumbled on in a shelled trench. He could see Stout kneeling there, supporting Hattersley's head and shoulders.

"Damn you, why couldn't you let well alone?"

Stout's voice was strangely gentle.

"Take it easy, old man, take it easy. Everything will be all right. You're not the sort we want to lose."

There was a sound of heavy breathing, and then the half choked, rasping voice went on.

"O, my head, Archie! It's bursting."

"Doctor's coming. Soon put that right."

"Do you think me yellow dirt, old man?"

"Good God, no."

FANTASIA

"I had a row with Mallison a day or two ago. I seemed to go a bit mad after that."

"Damn Mallison."

"He owed me money, and wouldn't pay. I was a dog, and a mad dog. I felt like murder. Seemed better to me the other way."

"Forget it, old man. I'm going to take you to my place and look after you for a week."

Skelton stood hesitant, profoundly shocked by this other man's agony. Should he go in? And then he heard yet another sound, that most poignant sound in the world, a man weeping.

"I'm such a bloody failure, Archie, old man."

"Tosh, my lad. You're too good for this bloody world, that's what's the matter with you. Let it out. I'm a bit of a woman sometimes."

Hattersley's head was on Stout's shoulder. He was blubbing like a child, and Skelton was aware of Stout's eyes fixed upon him. The big man's right hand made a gesture; his lips moved. And somehow, Skelton understood what the gesture meant, and what those lips were trying to say. "Keep out. Wait for the doctor and warn him." Skelton nodded, drew back, and as he did so Stout's face seemed to light up and send him a blessing. "Good lad. This business is best left in my hands."

Skelton walked up and down Lavender Lane. The crooner had ceased crooning, and a Strauss waltz was in the air. God, how tantalizing such music could be, women and starlight and a kind of ecstasy of tenderness translated into movement. He heard a car. It turned into the lane, and its headlights shone upon Skelton.

"Dr. Brough."

"Hallo. It's you?"

They had met in Jekyll's room, and had liked each other.

"May I have just a word before you go in. Stout's there."

FANTASIA

“Yes.”

Brough was a calm, kind person, consoling and deliberate in such a crisis. He stood and listened to Skelton's half-whispered words.

“Like that, is it? I see. Poor devil! Thanks, Skelton, very much. I'm not one who feels it his duty to noise things abroad.”

XII

SO, society uninformed of Hattersley's attempted suicide, could claim no excuse for becoming pompous about it, nor indulge in official interference. Hattersley's neck may have been even more sore than his heart, but he was put into Brough's car and smuggled across to Ye Golden Hinde. Skelton, who had volunteered to clear up sundry primitive and human messes in Paul's workshop, may have felt his gorge rise over the business of mopping up poor Hattersley's vomit, and trying to burn a pair of trousers, but a profound compassion carried him through.

He was surprised by the doctor returning unexpectedly.

"Left something here. Ha, here it is. Not a nice job, Skelton."

Skelton was looking a little wan, and feeding pieces of broken boxwood into the kitchenette stove.

"O, I'll manage, doc."

He was surprised by Brough's opening the door of the small larder and striking a match and holding it like a miniature candle.

"Just as I thought. Look at this, Skelton."

He had to strike another match, and Skelton saw a dry piece of bread, two turnips, and half a dozen potatoes in a dish.

"The man's half starved."

Skelton's face looked haggard.

"Pretty awful! One's told that no one starves."

"O, don't they! Savage pride and an empty stomach. Semi-starvation, anyway, for the people who don't whimper. I'm glad Stout's got him. He's a great soul."

FANTASIA

Brough had blown out the flame of the second match.

"Turnips and potatoes."

Said Skelton: "What's going to happen at the end of a week? I mean, Stout can't——"

"Ah, there you have me! I'd like to stuff that dry bread down Mallison's throat. Infernal sadist."

"Is he?"

"What else? Keeping people in cages and prodding them to see how they'll chatter and jump. That's the long and short of it. I'm not a Red, Skelton, for I'm pretty sure that your fanatical Red can be about the most ruthless and cruel brute in creation, but I would like to see all cash dictatorships smashed."

"Is Mallison really that sort of beast?"

"Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but I should say he is. Likes vivisectioning the human animal in real life as well as on paper. And yet he can purr at you and spout like Plato. Brr, yes, I'm prejudiced."

Skelton went back to the Wheat Sheaf Inn. He felt too challenged by things and too wide awake to sleep, but the pub parlour was not a sympathetic place, and he ascended to his room and to bed. He lay awake for a long time, haunted by Hattersley's tragedy and the accusations it flung at life, and when sleep did come to him it was not dreamless. One particular and absurd dream mocked him. He was hanging in the apple tree outside his window, suspended by the jacket of his pyjamas and minus the trousers, and below a very fat woman with the face of Archie Stout looked up at him with shocked solemnity.

He woke to a perfect day. It was going to be still and hot, and as he ate his breakfast of bacon and eggs, he was conscious of qualms, both physical and spiritual. What a messy business! He found himself thinking of Jekyll. He wanted to tell Jekyll about last night's affair, and to discover how he would react to it. But ought one to worry a sick man with such a problem?

FANTASIA

And what could a sick man do but write a casual and compassionate cheque?

But he would go and see Jekyll. He would not be worried by any suggestion that he might be cultivating the rich man for personal ends. Going out to the Wheat Sheaf orchard to smoke a meditative pipe he discovered the loss of his favourite briar, and then he remembered that he must have left it at Hattersley's.

The sun might be shining, but when Skelton turned up Love Lane he was in one of those brittle moods when life seems to have you both frightened and guessing. Yes, he could confess to having been scared by that figure twitching at the end of a rope, even as a soldier coming suddenly upon some disembowelled body may feel the horror of it in his own belly. "Yes, it may happen to me." Skelton, making his way round to the workshop door, and entering that grim glass-house to look for his pipe, became infected by a sudden fear, a physical shrinking. It was as though this stuffy and sordid little place smelt of the sour struggles and sufferings of some human soul. Almost, it brought a shiver trickling down his back, and made him feel like a scared child in a dark place where nameless and mysterious terrors lurked to spring at you.

He saw his pipe lying on that dirty bench next to a piece of clay-fouled rag. He was conscious of qualms. Would he be able to tolerate that pipe? He had his hand on it when he heard a sudden sound that made him spin round, and almost hiss out the challenge.

"Who's there?"

Footsteps. He saw the inner doorway becoming a frame for that most unexpected and fantastic figure, Mallison, Mallison with his tawny hair and ironic eyes, like some large blond beast smirking at him.

"Mr. Skelton, the poet, I believe."

Skelton stared, feeling dry of mouth. What the devil was Mallison doing here? Gloating over that starved larder?

"Left my pipe here."

The Mallison smile seemed to grow more catlike.

"So I observe. Can you tell me what has become of Mr. Hattersley?"

"He's at Mr. Stout's."

"Ah, at the Golden Hinde."

"Yes."

"Potters and poets, potters and poets. Are you finding any inspiration in Bluewater, Mr. Skelton?"

Damn the fellow! Yet, though Skelton could damn Mallison to himself, he felt himself dominated and outfaced like an urchin caught in a neighbour's orchard. Or like some young beast in a cage being observed by that sinister super-creature, man.

"Not much. Rather too sophisticated."

Why that word? Why any word that did not suggest Thomas Atkins? Bastard! Mallison was amused, at youth tied up in a net of self-conscious irritation. And Skelton knew that he wanted to slip away from the sheen of the Mallison smile and its sneering suavity. Damn Mallison!

He turned to go.

"Yes, I think you'll find Hattersley at Mr. Stout's, but he was rather a sick man yesterday, and Stout——"

"Thank you, Mr. Skelton. If you should produce anything lyrical on Bluewater, I suggest——"

Skelton's glance said: "O, go to hell," but he was feeling like a scared small boy, and he knew it.

No, it was not Mallison who had scared him, nor the suspected sadist in Mallison. As he slouched down the sunlit lane he felt like a man shivering in the grip of incipient fever. Yes, life had him scared. And of what? Failure, the kind of failure that mauled the bodies of men like Hattersley, potters and poets, dabblers, silly sensitives swinging on stalks that were severed so easily. Yes, failure, and poverty, and submergence, a sinking into the urban scum, hunger and shabbiness and

servility, or a bitterness that was like a foul taste in the mouth. Yes, and War. Did not the younger generation live under the edge of a kind of bloody sunset? Fear had him by the guts and was twisting them, a fear that was humiliating and unabashed.

Was Richard Jekyll ever afraid?

But Jekyll was in the forties, and a rich man.

Life ought to be made more secure. What if socialism could plan life for the million, and so organize the human show that no one need fear hunger and humiliation? Yes, if——! But would the product be parasitic people, a kind of fungus growth?

Poets and potters! Yes, he understood the Mallison sneer.

If he could do something real? Fiddling with words had become, somehow, not completely a man's job.

White Ways and Richard Jekyll! He found himself poking his head into the Country Club lounge. He was in no mood to clash with the cool efficiency of Ann Lester, for, indubitably, she thought him rather a poor thing, and he was feeling a poor thing. Through the glazed door of the dining-room he saw Rachel passing to and fro, handsomely serene, and curiously consoling. He slipped across the empty lounge and opened the other door.

"How's Mr. Jekyll?"

She turned and smiled at him, but it was not the smile of a woman exercising sense-enchantment.

"I think he's better."

"Think I might go up?"

"Why ask me?"

"Because you're wise."

Her face became strangely serious.

"Am I? Well, go up. The doctor's been."

"Thanks, Rachel," and he left her.

Jekyll was in bed, but the voice that cried "Come in!" to Skelton's knock was not the voice of a sick man. It had

resonance, vigour. The blind was half down, and the room in partial shadow, and in the armchair reposed the usual pile of letters.

"Hallo, Jack. Chuck all that rubbish on the floor."

Skelton removed Mr. Jekyll's mail, and sitting down with his back to the light, became aware of Jekyll's eyes observing him intelligently. People's eyes looked at you so differently. Some seemed to see the intimate, troubled self in you; others focused nothing or were glazed with an obfuscated digestive selfishness.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"Quite wicked. Much less pain. What's the trouble, my lad?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"You're wearing a war-face. I know it rather well. Used to wonder whether I looked like that."

"Wind up?"

"Exactly. Nasty things lying about in the mud, and crumps coming over."

Skelton sat staring at the carpet.

"Yes, I've got wind up. I don't mind telling you; life has me scared."

"The young seem so very frightened, Jack, these days."

"Are we? I suppose we are. Well, something got me badly scared last night, and I'm still scared."

"May I play father confessor?"

"Yes, I'd like to tell you. One must blurt things out sometimes."

It was not the poet, but the man who described to Jekyll the finding of poor Hattersley dangling at the end of a piece of rope, and who went on to tell of the state of the potter's larder, and of Dr. Brough's reflections upon this particular case. Jekyll's face was whimsical no longer, but bleakly serious. He lay and watched Skelton and listened to him as he had listened during the war to the blurtings of some poor, overstrained boy.

FANTASIA

"Pretty damnable, Jack."

"Yes, but that's not the end of it. I caught Mallison there just before I came on here, rubbing himself against the doorpost like a smirking cat."

"Gloating?"

"That's what I felt. I ought to have landed him one, but, the fact is, I funk'd it. I don't suppose you have ever struck an occasion when you feel rotten and inferior."

"O, haven't I! May be feeling like that now!"

Skelton looked at him wide-eyed.

"But what the devil can one do?"

"Salve one's conscience by writing a cheque? Look at all that stuff on the floor. Charitable appeals, begging letters. Makes one rather sick. I have spent my life writing silly cheques, helping to patch up rotten lives and rotten bodies. It's all wrong, my lad. Funny that a crack on the head should have been necessary to make me see straight. I'm beginning to be quite grateful to that unknown thug."

Skelton's face twitched into a smile.

"Are you feeling like that too, sir?"

"Rather so, Jack. Well, how would you put it?"

"I want to do something real."

"Real?"

"Yes, what is a bastard place like this but a sort of drug-shop for rotten people? Nothing but getting sozzled with sex and little drinks? People who are so damned stupid that real doing and feeling aren't sufficient?"

"A counterblast to Bluewater, John?"

"Yes."

"Any ideas?"

"Not a glimmer of one."

"Same here. You and I seem to be in the same boat, drifting. And what are we going to do about it?"

"God knows, sir! But there ought to be some very simple answer."

FANTASIA

“Just round the corner. It is extraordinary how difficult it seems to be to poke your head round a corner. Chronic stiff-neck! I think I’ll get mine wrenched.”

Richard Jekyll asked for the blind to be pulled up, as though more light was needed for the illuminating of their particular problem, but when the man in the bed offered the man in the chair a secretaryship at five hundred pounds a year, Skelton refused it. It was awfully decent, of course, of Mr. Jekyll, but with frowning sincerity Skelton confessed that he did not see how he would be giving value for money. Certainly, he could vamp on a typewriter, but he could not write shorthand. And Jekyll smiled at him, liking his brittle candour. Obviously, John Skelton was not made to be a rich man’s sponge, or to draw a salary as a minister without portfolio.

“Dealing with fools and cadgers doesn’t interest you?”

It certainly did not, and recoiling from this impasse they were moved to explore hypothetical programmes, some adventure that would appeal to both of them. Uplift? Ye gods and little fishes, no! Avaunt all sociological priggery! Nor did a smug socialism appeal to either of them.

“Too much Pecksniff, John, with you always swathed in conscious rectitude, and the other fellow a mercenary black-guard. I can’t swallow collectivism. Man in the mass is too dreadfully boring.”

No, self-righteousness of any sort was banned, as was the conception of any modern academy on Neo-Platonic lines, with Jekyll as Lorenzo, and a collection of poets and painters posing in the Florentine picture. Such a fantasy would be productive of mere highbrow piffle. It was too Mallisonian. It did not labour or exude good sweat, or bury its teeth in the throat of reality.

“Summer camps for the new poor, John. Easy-Osy by the sea.”

"Don't, sir."

"Or a colony for cultivating middle-class manners in the children of the slums?"

"I think I'd prefer them as they are."

"Same here. But we appear to be posed. No new conception, nor an old one resurrected. You'll have to pray for inspiration, John. I'm tired of motor-boats and cars, and crashing about the world. I loathe aeroplanes. I'm not interested in such machinery. We're so like kids with too many toys. Run the damned thing round the rails once or twice and you're bored with it, or the clockwork gives out. Modern life is too much like clockwork."

"Would you like another war, sir?"

"No, John, no. It will be such a bloody squelch. But I would like to make war on something. Go out and pray for inspiration."

"It may come to you in bed."

"Or in my bath. Like the old fellow of Syracuse. Well, here's hoping."

John Skelton, wandering along the Strand in search of inspiration and Archie Stout, saw all Bluewater bathing, with Mr. Montague Dax standing poised on the raft, and holding one of the Wilmer girls babywise in his arms. Male potency! There were screams and splashings, and shouts of "Oy, Tarzan, chuck her in the sea!" Mr. Dax lifted the female shape, and holding it like some sacrificial offering, tossed it to Neptune.

Skelton strolled on, feeling pinched and irritated. Had he not been rather an ass in turning down Jekyll's offer, especially so when funds were running out and his stay at the Wheat Sheaf could not last more than three days? Damn the eternal cash-nexus! But you had to defend yourself and your friend from any fungoid growth, and refuse to delude yourself into fancying that dealing with a rich man's correspondence constituted a job. Just beyond the Pieces of Eight John saw a white boat anchored. It contained two figures and one of them

was Stout's, easily recognized by its sweated bulk. The other fisherman he assumed to be Hattersley, and Stout's kindness and understanding were obvious. Stout had put poor Paul where he should not be pestered by the intrusions of the crowd. Two men fishing, and smoking their pipes in peace, though one of them might have a sore neck and a queasy conscience.

Skelton turned back. He was too sensitive to intrude upon those two, and the placid idleness of their aloofness. He could suppose that Archie Stout was trying to infuse into poor Hattersley the sustenance and hope of his own large and comprehending self. Yes, Stout might be of Bluewater, but he was not Bluewater. He was no mere pander. God, how he was beginning to hate this little painted play-box by the sea!

A furious restlessness possessed him. He wanted to walk mile after mile, find himself in wild country where sex ceased from assailing you like a Parisian perfume. Oh, for reality! And what was reality? Words, words! He set out eastwards cutting across Spaniard's Point, and over the furzy wastes, pushing through semi-derelict wire fences and trespassing as he pleased. And presently he came to a deep cleft between the hills, a wild valley filled with trees, and far down in the rocky trough of it a stream burrowed through ferns and sedges and a green tangle of hazels to the sea.

XIII

SKELTON scrambled down into this glen, and finding a path beside the stream he followed it upwards under the trees. It was very still here, save for the sound of running water; and the towering trees with their high green groins made him think of Gothic arches. The path climbed gradually past ledges of rock and small cascades where ferns flourished, and presently he saw the trunks and canopy thinning out towards sunlight and blue sky. Reaching the head of the glen he came upon a pool fringed with waterflags, and spreading right and left and up towards the northern sky a green valley edged with woods, and looking somehow desolate and empty. Much of it was grass, but grass patched with stretches of bracken. No cattle were to be seen.

He walked round the pool. It had been a hammer-pond, but he did not know it, but he did notice old grass banks and strange hummocks. A track led up from the pond, a mere grass road whose turfy texture was different from that of the sloping fields. Skelton followed the track. He had gone less than fifty yards along it when he became aware of a house looking down on him from a little plateau backed by trees.

He stood still, returning the stare of its distant windows, and feeling that the house was watching him suspiciously. It was a very Sussex house, the lower storey of sandstone, the upper of hung tiles, and weathered like the roof to the colour of rust. It had a clump of old Scotch firs on the east of it, and on the west a rough orchard sheltered by a high thorn hedge. Jutting out behind and above it Skelton saw

the tiled roofs of barn and byres, and a little to the right an empty wagon shed.

Yes, there was something queer about this farm house. Its two rows of latticed windows might appear to be watching him, but as he stood and gazed it seemed to him that the windows were not alive. No curtains, no smoke, no sign of movement anywhere. Also, that empty wagon-shed was suggestive. He realized that he was looking at a dead house in a deserted valley, and somehow the mystery of it moved him.

He followed the grass track upwards. It forked just beyond the clump of firs, sending one branch towards the farmyard, the other towards a field-gate on the skyline. Skelton turned towards the house. It had a sandstone wall enclosing a derelict garden, and a white wooden porch that was rotting where it stood. A patch of wall-tiling had fallen between two of the upper windows, exposing the battens and the lath and plaster within, and no one had troubled to clear away the pile of rubbish on the rough grass. There was a wooden gate in the garden wall. It too was decaying, and when Skelton tried to open it, the thing sagged with the bottom of its latch-post jammed against a flagstone, and pitying its helplessness he scrambled over the four foot wall, and stood for a moment looking down the valley to the wooded glen and the sea.

How different it was from Bluewater, for this landscape might have been Tudor England, and with an almost boyish excitement he set out to explore. The house was locked up, but he put his face close to windows and peered into empty rooms. One of them was panelled in oak. In yet another room part of a ceiling had fallen, and a mass of plaster covered the floor. In the paved back yard he found a well with hood and winch and trapdoor, and raising the trap he peered and saw water far below. The orchard was a wilderness, but some of the old trees were carrying fruit, and wasps were busy about a purple plum, so busy that most of the fruit had become

sucked husks. Beyond the orchard lay more grass, with oak woods and hazel coppices breaking the sky line.

Skelton returned to the farm. The yard was surrounded by a stone wall, and the buildings still looked stout and solid, save that the ridge of the barn roof was sagging like a saddle. He saw an empty dog-kennel beside the stable door, a door that had once been green. Grass was growing everywhere, between the stones and in the brick paths. The byres were full of weeds. In one corner a dump of old iron and broken implements was smothered in nettles.

Poor old place, strangely beautiful in decay! But why decay? He walked round to the front of the house, and perching himself on the garden wall, filled and lit a pipe. Yes, why decay? Because the growing of food had ceased to be a commercial proposition? Because the urban crowd demanded cheap food, and tribute from overseas in return for the artificialities its factories poured out. So-called luxuries, stuff that was merely silly, futile little gadgets, patent medicines, shoddy furniture, artificial silk. A pampered crowd as dependent upon foreign wheat as had been Imperial Rome. What if the wheat ships from Africa ceased to sail the seas? What if war came again? What would happen to this mob of clerks and factory hands and shopkeepers, and transport men? What would they transport? Red flags and empty bellies! And England, having chosen comfort and a chocolate-box, would starve.

Smoking his pipe, and looking down upon the old hammer-pond that lay like a long mirror let into green plush, Skelton found himself wondering about the house and the people who had lived in it. He was country-born and no ignorant townsman, for his father had been the agent in charge of a Hampshire estate, and young Skelton had grown up on the soil. Seven years ago he had been eager to escape into a more sophisticated world, but now as he looked out upon these derelict fields a more primitive wisdom stirred in him. He

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had heard a farmer's life described as muck and misery. The land starved you. But was it the land? If someone had failed here, and the empty house suggested tragedy, why blame the life on the land when it was the crowd's clamour for cheapness that drove a farmer into bankruptcy?

Yes, youth was recoiling from the soil. Maybe modern youth was too soft, too afraid of hard weather and hard work. But was youth wholly to blame when it could earn seventy shillings or more a week doling out tickets on a bus, and keep its feet dry, and wear a nice green uniform? Mucky byres, beasts to be fed, work on seven days a week, your boots cold pulp, your jacket wet, all on thirty-five shillings a week! Some dull village, when urban lights and excitements called you! No, youth was not wholly to blame. It was the blindness and the selfishness and the softness of a too sophisticated community that was making life on the land unliveable.

He slipped off the wall, and stood at gaze, head up, shoulders squared, and his face was the face of a visionary.

What an inspiration was this! To recover this derelict country, to bring back life to the land, to see a proud peasantry once more gathering the fruits of the earth. Old England, the England of wheat and of beef, not of tomatoes and grape-fruit; no cocktail crowd. Yes, a place like Bluewater belonged to the new world, a world with no roots, a world that was too soft to handle a plough or a spade.

By God, what an inspiration!

What if some rich man could see it as he was seeing it on this summer day?

Some rich man? Jekyll? What if he had happened on the inspiration that a blasé valetudinarian needed?

Skelton did not return by way of the glen. He followed the grass track up towards the skyline and found that the field-gate opened on a main road. Here too was something evidential and significant, an agent's board mounted on two

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legs and announcing to the world the familiar, modern broadcast.

"FORGE FARM"

FOR
SALE.

*Ninety acres of excellent land ripe for development.
Access to the sea.*

So that was it! Some enterprising person, with Bluewater to inspire him, was hoping to persuade a profit out of some other speculative person who would cut up yet another piece of England into plots, and plaster it with the urban crowd's playboxes. Forge Farm would cease to be, and in its place would be found a mess of bathotic little bungalows, which, in the course of years, would rot like mushrooms. Or some world crisis might arrive, and these urban excrescences would be left derelict, but even in rotting they would not fructify the soil.

Skelton saw another gate on the other side of the road, with a cinder track leading from it. This gate also had its commercial pimp beside it, a smaller but equally suggestive board.

"GATE FARM"

110 ACRES. TO BE DISPOSED OF WHOLE OR IN LOTS.

*Nearly half a mile of frontage.
All services available.*

Some boyish impulse made Skelton pick up a stone and shy it at the board, but he missed it, and the stone flew harmlessly into a grass field. He laughed. Did he see himself as the boy David shying a pebble at Goliath in the person of the speculative builder?

The main road ran between Fernfield and Poldermouth, and by climbing on to the gate he could look down into the rich Polder Valley with its arable on the hillsides and its

grazing land in the valley. Also, he could see the roofs and grey tower and squat shingled spire of Fernfield church pricking the north-western sky. Passing an old white toll-house, he made for Fernfield, finding it somehow still unblemished and individually English about its Green and church. It possessed a number of shops, one with Regency bay windows. The village forge still functioned, though the smith had added a small garage to his smithy. The churchyard was magnificent with old yews. A consoling, gentle place was this Sussex village, and yet Skelton got the impression that it was on the edge of decay, and missing the red blood of its agriculture. There were two Tudor houses, beautifully black and white, standing empty. Doubtless they had been condemned.

Beyond Fernfield he asked a roadman who was cutting the weeds on the verge with a sickle whether he could reach Bluewater without touching Dewhurst. Yes, he could. An old lane and field-path skirted Rustling Park. The roadman was curt and unfriendly. He did not appear to regard anything connected with Bluewater as being either English or useful.

“There seem to be a lot of farms up for sale.”

The man spat.

“That be so. Soon, I reckon, we’ll be growing nout but bloody bungalows.”

The field-path, skirting Rustling Park, brought him to the upper end of Love Lane and poor Hattersley’s bungalow, and, to Skelton, Paul the Potter was yet another figure of fate. Surely, Hattersley should be creating other values instead of producing pots for semi-suburban gardens? Skelton’s long legs went swinging towards White Ways, and in the White Ways loggia he saw what was to him a surprising sight, Richard Jekyll lying in a long chair with a figure in official blue standing beside him.

Skelton hesitated, but Jekyll saw him, and raised a hand. Apparently, the sergeant of police had said his say. He and Skelton passed each other between two pillars, and Skelton smiled at an austere and unfriendly face.

"Any developments, officer?"

The sergeant grunted at him. He did not like irony. These young fellah-my-lads did not sufficiently respect the dignity and the difficulties of the police.

Mr. Jekyll was wearing a particularly bright face, an almost polished face shimmering with mischief.

"John, I've been playing with old Archimedes."

"Have they caught the thug?"

"That's not the question. The dear fellow came to confess that the mystery is not yet solved. No matter. After you left me I had a bath."

"Was that so unique?"

"John. Eureka. Taps!"

"Taps, sir?"

"Yes, that's the great discovery. Our civilization is a slave to taps. We do nothing but turn taps and push buttons. We are becoming parasitic upon a system of mechanical gadgets."

John sat down, with his own inspiration big in him.

"You mean things are too easy?"

"Absolutely. We just turn taps and wait for life to gush. Good Lord, why didn't I think of this before? In the language of the dear journalists, the world has become tap-minded."

"And the idea is?"

"To turn off the tap."

But though a hot bath and the brass attachments had caused Richard Jekyll to cry "Eureka," the inspiration was still nebulous and not instinct with reality. It had begun with a negation, or rather as a reaction against a scheme of things that seemed too easy. If one ceased from the turning

of taps what was the alternative? He confessed himself posed.

"One can't go native, John. Our nice social fuss-pots forbid such primitive escapes."

"Bluewater's gone native, sir."

"In a sense, yes, but with its sanitation approved and its little drinks licenced, and its nudities blessed by the pictorial press."

"Supposing one went back to the log-hut idea?"

"Pioneering? Forbidden, in an educated country. Building bylaws, John, a shocked official insisting upon sanitation, and a proper supply of H₂O."

"Funny, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, when you come to think of it, the thing's amazing. Try turning Thoreau, and your dream of a beautiful simplicity would crash over an earth-closet and concrete foundations. Again, the tyranny of taps!"

"Don't they allow things on wheels?"

"The caravan idea! That's just another play-box. No, I'm stumped for the moment."

Skelton was hugging his long legs, and his face was the face of a dreamer.

"I've just seen something. It piqued me. I wonder, yes, how it would strike you?"

"Something actual and English?"

"It was actual and English."

"Where?"

"Quite close. I went for a ramble. I don't suppose you feel up to——"

"I own a car."

Skelton sat up in his chair.

"I don't want to tell you. I'd like you to see what I have seen. I'm wondering whether——"

"I should see it as you saw it, John?"

"Yes."

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When Jekyll's Rolls arrived at the field gate, and Jekyll saw the notice offering Forge Farm to any speculator in real estate, he looked almost reproachfully at John. It is human to err, and especially so to misjudge the urges and whims of a younger generation, but was Skelton other than he seemed? Assuredly he was not dreaming of yet another Bluewater By The Sea, a Bluewater sponsored by some ideological urge. But Skelton was out of the car and speaking to Jekyll's chauffeur, and Skelton's face was almost the face of a lover about to display the world's most mysterious creature to a friend.

"There's a grass road here. I think it will be all right if you go steady."

"Anywhere to turn, sir?"

"Yes."

Skelton held the gate open for the car, and rejoining Jekyll, sat back in his seat with a quick, deep breath.

"I don't think it will shake you up, sir."

Jekyll smiled. His moment of suspicion had passed. He did not believe that this young man had been badly bitten by the money-bug. There was silence between them, for as the big car drifted gently down the grass-grown track, Jekyll saw this Sussex valley open out its heart to him. Moreover, he could divine in the man beside him a measure of suspense, a tremolo of excitement, the hope that other eyes might see something as he had seen it. Forge Farm, a piece of England that was derelict! Then, the group of firs on its green knoll came into view, and the tangled orchard, and the weather-toned roofs of house and outbuildings. Jekyll's hand picked up the limousine's telephone.

"Stop a moment, Sandys."

The car pulled up, and the man of five and forty and the man of twenty-seven sat in silence, surveying this England and its valley on the edge of the Saxon sea.

Said Jekyll presently: "Looks pretty wild, John. What's that down there? Water?"

"A big pond."

"Forge Farm. Of course. An old hammer-pond, probably. What's the house like?"

"Empty, half derelict. Nothing alive but the birds."

"England gone to seed, what? Drive on, Sandys."

The car came to rest in the stable-yard with its empty dog-kennel and grass-patterned paving. Sandys came to the door.

"I'm getting out, Sandys; I can manage."

"Sure, sir?"

"Quite."

They walked round to the front of the house, and Skelton, man-handling the poor rickety gate, let Jekyll into the garden. Forge Farm had been planted on a natural plateau, and its garden shaped itself like a broad terrace. The sun had warmed the sandstone wall, and Jekyll and Skelton leaned against it.

"Incredibly peaceful, somehow. Plenty of bracken, and no beasts. Poor old place."

There was a little, expectant smile on Skelton's face. He had no wish to prompt his prophet.

"A bit grim in winter, of course. Any taps, John?"

"I doubt it. There's a well."

"Well, well, well, as Donald Duck would say! Grim winter to the over-sophisticated, but I don't suppose it was grim to the country folk who lived and washed here."

"Perhaps we have been over-educated with regard to the English winter."

"An idea, John. Too much cotton wool. The silk vest instead of the leather jerkin. Well, out with it."

"The vision, sir?"

"Something has come to me. Let's see if we synchronize. What was the dream?"

Skelton hugged the wall.

"Kick me if I sound sentimental. But what an adventure to bring this dead world back to life!"

"Turn farmer?"

"Well, yes. Bring the life back to the land, but a better sort of life. A kind of experiment. Less muck and misery, new cottages, good wages, not a starvation wage. It seems to me we moderns are such fools, sir. Unless a thing pays it's no good. Always the profit complex. If we had war, or our commerce crashed, where would the profit-mongers be?"

"Grubbing acorns, probably. The man with the plough would be lord and master. Any ulterior motive, John?"

"None."

"I believe you. It's reality you young things crave for, to get your hands on life."

"I think that's it."

"And, by God, I believe I'm with you."

There was a quality which Skelton was to love and admire in Richard Jekyll, the swift attack and the sustained effort. He had temper, but temper that was flexible. He did not hover or mess about, and he was never mean. He drove an enterprise as he drove a speed-boat or a fast car, and he had hands and nerve. Having read upon the notice board the names of the agents concerned, "Messrs. Potter & Potter" of Abingdon Street, W., and "Messrs. Pride & Purchase" of Dewhurst, Jekyll commented upon the prevalence of Ps, and ordered Sandys to drive to Dewhurst.

"Purchase is a good sounding name, John. It's getting late, and the office may be shut. I hate dallying when I am hot on the scent."

Skelton was feeling exultant.

"The thing piques you?"

"Put it more vulgarly; I think it has got my guts."

They found a solitary clerk in the office of Messrs. Pride & Purchase, addressing and stamping envelopes for the evening post. Mr. Purchase had gone home. Yes, but Mr. P. lived in Dewhurst.

"Phone him," said Jekyll, "and say the thing's important."

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The clerk showed them into Mr. Purchase's private room, and they sat on Victorian chairs and looked at walls that were decorated with estate maps and photos of new bungalows and advertisements of sales. The clerk poked his head in to say that he had managed to get into touch with his principal and that Mr. Purchase was coming round. He arrived, and his roundness was apparent in head and face and tummy. He suggested a suave, capable primrose. What could he do for his visitors? Forge Farm? O, yes, a most excellent property dead ripe for development. The Dewhurst U.D.C. had not yet adopted a Regional Planning Scheme, and there were no restrictions save the local by-laws. Electricity was available, on tap, and Mr. Jekyll winced a wink at John, and a water supply could be arranged in case of development. The Water Co. had put down a main to supply Bluewater. Fernfield had company water, and a new main could be laid to any proposed estate.

"And the price, Mr. Purchase?"

Mr. Purchase blinked his eyes and looked dreamy.

"At a knock-down, three thousand pounds."

"The acreage?"

"About ninety."

"Who's selling, the previous occupant?"

"No, a gentleman who bought out the late occupant."

"As a speculation?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"What did he pay?"

"Well, I don't know that I ought to divulge——"

"I see. And the other farm, Gate Farm?"

"Same owner, sir, rather more land, but not quite the same developmental possibilities."

"How much?"

"About a hundred and ten acres, sir. Price two thousand, eight hundred."

"Will you hold both farms for three days?"

"I'll phone the owner, sir, and get his consent."

"And I would like the keys of Forge Farm."

"Certainly, sir. Gate Farm is occupied, but the tenant goes out at Michaelmas, a farmer who's retiring."

Mr. Jekyll was tired, and his tiredness brought a pain, and Skelton, who was to grow sensitive to the changes of that mordant face, noticed the lines and the loss of colour.

"Better go back to White Ways, sir. You've done enough."

Mr. Jekyll smiled at him. Was it not rather unusual for a young man to take heed of an older man's frailties.

"I'll be good, John. Never judge a horse or a house or a woman when you are tired. Here, Sandys."

In the car there was silence between them until Skelton said: "I shall have to be getting back to work in two days or so. If there is anything I can do, tell me."

Jekyll's eyes were fixed on the stout red neck of the chauffeur. "Always choose a driver with a good stout neck. More phlegm. If this adventure is to come off, I shall need help."

"Then, it is——?"

"I gather so."

"You're pretty quick, sir, in mind making."

"I like my leap. I'd like you as my secretary, John."

"Seriously, sir?"

"Of course. Five hundred a year, to begin with. Think it over."

"I like my leap too, sir. But——"

"But?"

"I don't want to be a mere bath-tap."

"Excellent, my lad."

"I should want to get my hands on the job."

"Run a tractor and grade apples."

"Exactly."

"Right, Skelton. I'll see you're not a bath-tap. Think it over."

"I'll take my leap now."

“Splendid! I hate people who perch on fences.”

At White Ways they weré met by Miss Lester, a Miss Lester who was sufficiently woman to see that leaving the car caused Jekyll pain, and to be somehow angered by it, as a woman will be. And instantly she was blaming John, perhaps because she had a secret feud with him, and was moved to hurt the creature that had hurt her. The muscular Sandys helped his master up the stairs, and Skelton, who had a feeling that Jekyll wanted to be alone, turned to escape from Miss Lester’s ominous presence.

“Just a moment.”

He stood looking at her and wondering how he had imagined himself in love with this bossy young woman.

“I’m afraid he’s rather tired.”

Her nose looked pinched.

“Where have you been with him?”

Damn it, what business was it of hers? Had she staked out a personal claim in Jekyll?

“As a matter of fact, looking at bits of Sussex.”

“Did you let him get out of the car?”

“It wasn’t a question of letting. He wanted to.”

“Hadn’t you more sense?”

He flushed up under her tactless tirade. He was beginning to think that Miss Lester was the typical modern wench in a speed car who crashed straight ahead with eyes that saw nothing but her own particular road.

He was rude to her. He said: “O, dry up, my dear, there are lots of things you don’t understand. I’m sorry, but it’s a fact.”

XIV

THE telephone exchange at Dewhurst linked up two voices. Said Mr. Purchase's voice: "Purchase speaking. Is that you, sir? Yes. I've just had an inquiry for the two farms, Forge and Gate. Yes, sir. The gentleman wants a three days option."

Mallison's telephone stood on a wall-bracket beside his bureau, and his yellow head looked rather like a flower being visited by a strange black insect.

"Who is the person?"

"A Mr. Jekyll, sir; staying at Bluewater."

Mallison's mouth hardened.

"Jekyll. Oh, I think I know the fellow. What's he after?"

"He did not tell me, sir."

"Development? Find out, Purchase. I'm not inclined to sell to a syndicate."

"Not, sir."

"No."

Mr. Purchase was looking puzzled.

"Do you mean you object to development, sir?"

"Yes."

"But, sir——"

"It's a whim of mine. Ring up Mr. Jekyll and find out what he's up to."

"I'll try to, sir. And if he contemplates developing——?"

"Say there's no sale."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Purchase hung up the receiver, looking still more puzzled.

Five minutes later Mr. Purchase's voice was linked to a feminine voice speaking from White Ways. Yes, the matter was urgent and he wished to speak to Mr. Jekyll. Miss Lester, who was taking the call in her office, and who still had a feeling that her face had been smacked, told Mr. Purchase rather curtly that Mr. Jekyll was tired and had gone to bed. Yes, Mr. Jekyll had been a sick man and she was not inclined to disturb him. Mr. Purchase's voice persisted. The matter was very important, and to whom was he speaking? O, to Miss Lester of White Ways. Would Miss Lester be so very kind as to take a message to Mr. Jekyll? Would Mr. Jekyll say whether he wished to purchase for development? Purchase what? O, Mr. Jekyll would understand. "Thank you so much, Miss Lester. I'll hang up and wait for your call. No. 31 Dewhurst."

Miss Lester climbed the stairs, seriously intrigued by this mysterious message. Purchase, development! Surely, Mr. Jekyll was not contemplating taking over Bluewater from Mr. Siegfried Mallison? If so, Mr. Jekyll might become even more significant to her than he had seemed, and he had been becoming signally significant. She was inclined to feel a financial *tendresse* for this rich man. She knocked at Jekyll's door.

"Come in."

She entered.

"Excuse me bothering you, but a Mr. Purchase has rung you up. I said you were tired and in bed."

"Purchase. I'll go down."

She was maternal.

"No, you mustn't. I took a message. Purchase wants to know whether you are buying for development."

Damn this interference! Mr. Jekyll swung out of bed and grabbed his blue silk dressing-gown from the bed-rail. A little more gossip, and all Bluewater would be babbling about the business.

"I'll come down."

"Must you?"

But he was not to be caressed into playing the part of sick man. He shuffled into his slippers, and made his way downstairs, and was shepherded by her into her office. She showed a desire to linger.

"Shall I get them? 31 Dewhurst."

He was terse with her.

"Thanks, I can manage. Do you mind; rather private."

She withdrew, rather upon her dignity, and feeling that she had received a second male snub. Mr. Jekyll's voice was linked with Mr. Purchase's. Development? No, he could assure the present owner that development was the one activity he wished to avoid.

"I propose to farm the land."

"Farm, sir?"

"Yes, farm."

Mr. Purchase's face was still more puzzled. Surely, a rich invalid in a Rolls Royce was not so crackbrained as to contemplate an adventure in agriculture?

"May I take that as final, sir? The present owner does not wish to sell for development."

"What about your boards?"

"He has changed his mind, sir."

"Tell him I'll give him a guarantee not to develop."

"Very good, sir. Sorry to have troubled you."

And Mr. Jekyll went back to bed.

Yet he had sufficient energy left in him for the writing of a letter, and Sandys was sent to post it at Dewhurst. The letter was read next morning by the squire of a village in Northamptonshire, and it ran as follows:

"Dear Tom,

I am thinking of turning farmer. Can you, by any chance, recommend me a good agent, youngish, with both practical and scientific experience? I don't want an opinionated

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pup, but I do want enthusiasm. If you know of such a fellow, I should like to have him down here at once to look round and advise me.

Undoubtedly, you will think I am potty.

Yours,

DICK."

Sir Thomas Landale rubbed his baldish head over this letter. In God's name what kind of madness had seized Dick Jekyll, a man who was so comfortably situated that he had not to worry about semi-derelict grassland and dilapidated farm-buildings, and tithe and diminished rents and death duty. For years Sir Thomas had been struggling with an estate that had been impoverished by two deaths which had occurred within ten years of each other, and he was in the act of abdicating and trying to sell his farms for what they would fetch. Perhaps he was feeling a little bitter about it, and very much at the mercy of a body of officials who poured a blight of ink upon anyone who dared to indulge in industry.

He wired to Jekyll.

"Agree as to your mental state. Am sending you my own man, Garton, on trial. Having to relinquish him. Excellent in every way. He will advise. Letter following. You are under no obligation as to Garton."

Sir Thomas's letter arrived before Mr. David Garton, and Jekyll read it just before leaving with Skelton to explore the interior of Forge Farm.

"Dear Dick.

As I said in my wire I am sending Garton to you at once. He is a good lad, and though an enthusiast, will be honest with you. So will I.

My dear man, if you wish to be thoroughly and selfishly

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comfortable in this new world, take a service flat, hire a Daimler car, and do nothing constructive for the benefit of the community. Then, it would appear, that you will be regarded by officialdom as a good citizen, and they will let you alone, beyond demanding income tax and surtax.

Do something positive and useful, and instantly you will be worried and obstructed and hectored by every sort of bureaucrat.

It seems to me that our new masters regard initiative and planning as their own peculiar privilege. We are living in a world of innumerable petty Mussolinis. They are apt to regard individual initiative as an offence. They will set out to penalize you in every possible way.

Unless you want your life to be a kind of perpetual dog-fight, and to subject yourself to every sort of interference, do not build, do not plough, do not employ labour. Do nothing. Keep a large sum on current account at your bank. Let some capable accountant deal with the officials whose only assets appear to be some knowledge of arithmetic and the habit of regarding life with ingenious and sinister suspicion.

I speak advisedly.

Not that I condemn intelligent planning, but at the moment we are wallowing in the interlude between *laissez-faire* and a kind of statistical tyranny. The new age is being ushered in by a new type of young man, secretly envious, superficially clever, afraid of constructive responsibility, but obtaining a sense of power from energetic interference. They call it planning. At present it seems to me to resemble a vast paper factory. They do not understand life in the raw, man in the raw. They function through acts of Parliament and bylaws which no normal man understands. The 'Do' in life is being sacrificed to the 'Don't,' the 'I will' to 'Thou shalt not.'

It is not that you will lose money in any constructive

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enterprise that is connected with the production of food. You will probably lose your temper, which to a rich man may be more expensive.

But if you must be mad, retain the ablest professional brains you can find to fight the officials for you.

You possess a big stick. Brandish it on every possible occasion, and bureaucracy may funk fighting you. The official is usually a bully and a coward.

You can trust Garton. I have told him to be as frank with you as I have been. He is an enthusiast, and like most active and positive enthusiasts he would like to poison the negative people who sit in chairs and issue decretals."

Jekyll took this letter with him to Forge Farm, and forgot it while he and Skelton explored this Sussex farmhouse. It was incredibly dirty and neglected, with peeling wall paper and paintless paint, but, as Jekyll put it, the place was only like a country wench whose comeliness might be recovered by a good bath.

"Open the windows, John."

"Fug and memories, sir."

"And the fug is a bit more potent than the memories. I say, I like this room."

They were in the house's parlour, and they could judge of its age by the fact that the room was panelled. It had two lattice windows letting in the morning sun, and it seemed to glow with a kind of tawny light. The proportions were perfect, after the way of many old houses conceived and built by English countrymen. It looked down the valley to the sea, and its gaze seemed to have a steadfastness and courage.

Jekyll paced out the room.

"Twenty-five by fifteen. Look at the old duck's nest grate. A good yeoman's room."

Skelton was smiling.

"Somehow solid and secure."

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"No damp course, obviously," and then Jekyll looked whimsical, "but with radiators? But radiators ought to be barred."

"If you are going to use oxen to plough with, sir, yes!"

There were five bedrooms up above, two of them spacious and snug.

"*Pas si mal*, John. Jump on the floors."

Skelton jumped and the old floorboards did not tremble.

"Oak joists, I expect."

The kitchen and its quarters were rather terrifying, with nobbly brick floors, and a vast fireplace into which a rusty stove had been fitted. The old beams showed black. There was a dark scullery with a bread oven and a greasy dresser and a series of whitewashed shelves, and a still darker dairy paved with flagstones. The sanitary equipment lived in the back yard in a kind of brick sentry-box next to the coal and wood-sheds.

Jekyll's sensitive nose could be heard to sniff.

"A revolution would be needed here, John. But, after all, we live amid revolution."

Unquestionably the old place had charm. Its structure was sound, and with some intelligent adaptations and additions it would make an admirable homestead. They went back to the big parlour, and sitting in one of the oak-framed window-seats, Jekyll brought out Sir Thomas Landale's letter and handed it to Skelton.

"Read that, John. It does not shout Excelsior."

He sat and watched young Skelton's face and the sunlight on the oak woods in the valley.

"Rather bitter, sir."

"But rather true. Tom Landale and I were in the war together, and it began for us in the desert, and Tom could think of nothing but his soggy Northampton fields. Bred in the bone. And to be pushed out of the life that is yours by the taxmongering world may make a man rather bitter."

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"I suppose so. Will it make any difference?"

"Not a bit. I'm set on the offensive. I rather like rows with office-wallahs and chit-pushers. I've had a good many in my time. Besides, I shall delegate some of the rough stuff to my staff. Think you could live here, John?"

Skelton's face was dreamy.

"I think so. I'd like to try."

"A bit tough in the winter."

"I want to be tough."

Jekyll looked at him with eyes of affection.

"Good man. So many of the modern youngsters seem to funk the spade-work, and expect to begin as managing directors on five-thousand a year."

"Some, sir."

"Wonder what Garton's like. If he's the right sort of lad, and you two can work together—— By the way, I think we'll make this a celibate show. Menservants."

"Much better. Women do mess things up."

"O, John, John, where's your chivalry?"

They found David Garton waiting for them in the loggia at White Ways, a very large, loose-limbed young man, with spectacles and a shaggy head, and a face like a dignified dog's. He uncoiled himself from a deck chair. His clothes were brown like his eyes and hair. He looked shy, and wasn't.

"Mr. Jekyll?"

"Glad to see you, Garton."

David Garton put out a very big hand with brown hair on the back of it.

"Glad to be of use, sir."

He was a somewhat silent person. He could remain very still, and watch you like a large and solemn hound, but when he spoke it was very much to the point, and mordantly so. He seemed to suffer from a passion for sincerity, but in the eyes behind the spectacles there were active fires. He listened

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to Jekyll, and asked if he might smoke. He had a way of biting at his pipe as though trying his teeth on a six-inch nail.

"About two hundred acres to begin with. Mixed. No milk. I wouldn't touch milk, sir. Everything rather derelict?"

"Yes. You see, Garton, my idea isn't just business. I don't propose to pay the minimum wage or to push men into old cottages. Our idea is a rather new sort of colony, with the best of everything in the way of labour and equipment."

Garton's eyes began to burn. Was life offering him the one great experiment he had dreamed of?

"Mechanization?"

"Yes, I suppose so. What's it cost?"

"About five or six pounds an acre, sir."

"New cottages, new roads, electricity, water."

"It will cost you thousands, sir."

"I know."

Garton bit hard on his pipe. He seemed to be willing himself to say something that was unpleasant, and against his own interests.

"You'll make no profit, sir, perhaps, not for years."

And then Jekyll said a surprising thing.

"Why profit?"

"Well, sir——"

"I'm a very rich man. Why should the very rich make profits? I'm coming to think that it is much better to make lives and homes and opportunities. Damn it, this passion for profit is too silly."

Garton was silent. He took his pipe out of his mouth, and looked hard at Jekyll as though he could not quite believe that he was serious.

"You mean, an experiment, in a way of working and living?"

"Exactly. Aren't there distressed areas in the country? Even good old Disraeli foresaw this problem seventy years or so ago. He said: 'If we let our agriculture die, and become

the world's workshop and buy all our food from the world, what will happen if the rest of the world becomes a workshop, and doesn't buy from us, and we can't pay them for the food we need?" And war, Garton."

Garton sat up very straight in his chair.

"You'll forgive me, sir, but you are the first rich man whom I have ever heard talk like this."

"Well, there's hope in that! Others may be educated. I think we might get on rather well together. If you care to take on the job with us, when you have seen the land——"

"It's the sort of thing I've been dreaming of for years, sir."

Jekyll was tired, and when tired the pain in his spine and shoulders reasserted itself, and there was nothing for it but for him to lie down. He sent Skelton and David Garton off together to spy out the land and report. They could take Sandys and the Rolls, but in this case youth scorned the car, and taking pocket lunches from White Ways, set off together.

Difficult young men, both of them, and mute with the wrong people, but their liking for each other had been quick and intuitive. They did not belong to a rotten world; they did not think the world rotten; they believed that they could do better things with it than their fathers had done.

"I'll take you my way. Rather like beginning at the right end of the story."

They had long legs and they used them.

"Been with Jekyll long?"

"About twenty-four hours, as his secretary."

"Seems a speedy sort of person."

"Yes, as he says, he likes his leap."

They were scrambling up the glen, Skelton in front, with his coat slung over one shoulder.

"A rather unusual person. Not just a rich man's latest wheeze?"

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"Hardly. Think he'll last all right."

"You've got to last on the land. If he's in earnest this thing might be big."

They had reached the lip of the valley, and Skelton turned to look at Garton's face. It had a kind of set look, and a sheen in the eyes.

"Bit of a fanatic, aren't you?"

"Well, yes. I've got the soil in me. I say, this is England."

He stood looking up the valley, his brown dog's head thrown back.

"Rather wild. Yes, we begin here."

Garton did not speak, and Skelton seemed to understand his silence, for what some word picture was to the poet, these fields and woods were to the countryman, realities that were mysterious, rhythm, essence, something to be felt and appraised and known in the only way that life can be known, not through text books, and examination papers, but by the groping, intuitive spirit of imaginative man, to whom knowledge comes in a flash and with exultation.

Garton carried a fat note-book in the pocket of his sports jacket. It was his Testament of Youth, his holy writ, his text book. They took the track past the hammer-pond, and Garton made a note of it. "Good pond fed by spring. Water-ram possible?" His eyes were everywhere as they climbed, noting the lie and the contour of fields, and the weeds that grew in them. He had a countryman's eyes and a trained brain behind it. He could estimate the size of a field pretty accurately without pacing its boundaries.

"Bracken. That's bad. Like half England at present, poor worn-out old grass. Still, Stapledon is teaching us how to deal with such land."

"Plough up and sow."

Garton's spectacles focused him.

"Know something about it?"

"My father was a land agent."

"In the blood, what!"

Garton tramped everywhere, surveying and making notes. The arable land had been left fallow, which meant that in this case it was a mass of weeds, dock, thistle, ragwort. He scrambled into the woods, after interesting himself in the soil that rabbits had thrown out of burrows in a hedge. He made a note "Sandyish clay." The coppice had not been cut for years, and was almost impenetrable. Hazel was mixed with ash and sweet chestnut. Garton made another note. "Hurdles, chestnut fencing, wooden trugs."

Skelton was sweating when they ended up at the farmhouse, and lay in the orchard grass for lunch. Garton was less interested in the house and buildings than in the land, for bricks and mortar were less of a problem than the soil. His eyes were at work even while he ate ham sandwiches. Skelton felt that the man was fey.

"Any good?"

"Might be worse. Think I'd graze it. I want to see what's on the other side of the hill."

"A bit richer, I think. Slopes down to water."

"Ought to be some good corn land. There used to be a belt of it along the edge of the Weald."

He lit a large pipe.

"I'm going to have another look round the buildings. I'll give you a shout when I'm ready."

Skelton was footsore by the time they had finished with Gate Farm, for the enthusiast in Garton fell upon Gate Farm and devoured it. This was the goods. He went tramping through every field, and down into the water meadows by the Polder. He saw at once that the two farms were complementary and could be worked in unison to balance each other. Beasts, muck and good arable. Sheep and shorthorns, wheat and roots. He perspired; he scribbled; his spectacles seemed to sparkle. Gate Farmhouse was brick and white-painted weatherboards, a rather stark house without Forge's atmosphere, but it was in

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fairish condition, had good buildings, and two tied cottages near the main road. Garton had a few words with the outgoing tenant, a rather tired and unshaven man in the early fifties. He had been the owner of the farm, had bought it, on mortgage, after the war when prices were good. But it was lack of capital that had beaten him. An understanding landlord might have met him over the rent, but a mortgage was a mortgage; unless you paid you were foreclosed on.

"There isn't a better bit o' land in the Polder valley. I've farmed it till it nigh broke me. One's got a duty to the land. That's a thing you townsmen don't think of. No conscience, most of 'em, that's what I say. Ignorant people."

John and David walked up and back to the main road, and here they surprised a somewhat significant figure leaning over the gate of Forge Farm, and gazing with a countryman's stare at everything and nothing. The man wore a shabby soft hat on a grizzled head. The back of his neck was burnt and seamed, one of his hands knotted with rheumatism.

If he heard their footsteps he gave no heed to them.

"Mind if we come through?"

Garton's hand was on the spring catch, and then he paused. The man drew back from the gate, and his arms fell, and his blue eyes looked with suspicion and hostility at these two young men. They were angry eyes and sad under a shagginess of silvered hair.

"Sorry to disturb you. Know this land?"

Garton's voice was gentle. He was carrying his fat black note-book in his hand. The man glanced from Garton's face to the book.

"Spyin' it out, are ye? Yes, I guess I know t' farm, and I'll tell you for why. I farmed it."

"I see."

"I reckon that bloody board's brought y' here."

He turned his head and glared at the agent's board.

"That's all they think of these days. Bloody little houses for folk to whom the land ain't nout."

"We don't propose to build."

"Y' don't?"

"No, we want to farm."

The man's hard mouth emitted a kind of mocking gurgle.

"Farm? God help ye! When that foreigner who built that place down yonder, bought me out, I guessed the old place was done for."

Skelton's head went up.

"Do you mean Mallison?"

"That's the man. Him as bought Rustling House. Ought to be grateful, I suppose."

This was news, news of curious import. So, Mallison was the seller, and his opposition to possible development was understandable.

"Mind telling us what he paid for it?"

"I don't. Sixteen hundred pounds. I had to take it and quit. No one's after land bar those blasted speculators. I'd have 'em all hanged. What's the country coming to? Just a spill over from London. We don't want 'em here, but we can't stop 'em. They've got the money."

Skelton looked into the man's bitter eyes.

"I'm sorry. I agree with you. Had you owned Forge Farm long?"

"Matter o' three generations. I was born there. So was my father."

"I know. Do you mind telling me your name?"

"Killick's my name. I live up at Fernfield. Got a little place and an acre or two of grass, me as farmed ninety."

Skelton nodded at him.

"You might be able to help us, Mr. Killick."

MISS LESTER listened at a window, which was reprehensible of her, and yet so easily excused when you happened to be interested in a certain person and his affairs. Mr. Jekyll had asked for a ground floor sitting-room, and she had managed to provide him with one, which he and his two tall young men had turned into a kind of office. She had been unable to put up Mr. David Garton, so Garton had joined John at the Wheat Sheaf, and Skelton, lying in bed, had asked himself that question: "Am I going to be jealous of this new chap?" Beastly thing, jealousy, such a confession of inferiority! But in a couple of days he had known that he would not be jealous of David Garton. The man was too big; he loved his job better than he loved himself, and he was not competitive.

Miss Lester was persuading herself that she was weeding the border under and near Mr. Jekyll's window. Jekyll and his two young men, this celibate show, were somehow challenging to her secret ambitions. Perhaps she had dreamed of charming a rich man into buying Bluewater, and of sharing with her in the further expansion of this Toy Town.

She heard Mr. Jekyll say: "I suppose we shall have to pay the blighter his blood money."

Skelton's voice added: "It seems a damned shame. He only paid Killick sixteen hundred."

Now who was the Blighter?

But the conversation got into Garton's large hands. He was talking about Potato and Milk Boards, and the wheat subsidy, and National Mark, and the grading and distribution of farm produce. Yes, and pedigree herds, but the snag there was

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Foot and Mouth disease. Wheat, beef and apples. Was that Mr. Jekyll's idea? Rolling corn fields turning blue at the throat before the wind rippled their tawniness towards harvest. Rather lovely! Well, yes, and with mechanization and the proper soil and the subsidy, profitable wheat growing was possible. The price index worked out at about 132 compared with 76 for the year 1931.

Mr. Jekyll's voice interposed.

"You say the cost price for the crop per acre is about five pounds."

"Yes, for a four quarter yield."

"But I'm not paying a minimum wage. I want to pay three pounds a week. How will that shape?"

"That's the crux of the whole problem, sir. The sole solution of the soil problem is better wages. Otherwise we shan't keep the young men."

"Well, there's our problem. Can the return be expanded to pay the wages?"

"I believe it could be. That's a thing I have set my heart on proving. First-class men, first-class equipment, organization, the elimination of all waste in time and transport, planned marketing, the elimination of the superfluous middle man."

"We'll try and prove it, David. So you think those two farms could be complementary to begin with?"

"I do, sir. I'd graze and fatten on Forge. New leys. Your root crops close to the buildings. Throw down the hedges on Gate and mechanize for wheat. But our ideal should be——"

"More land?"

"At least a thousand acres, sir."

"Can we get it?"

"In time, I should say so. We could still keep the Polder meadows for summer grass. We should want electric power."

"Everywhere?"

"Yes, in all the buildings, light, and power for machinery. It all saves labour and lost time."

"Can we get the men, David?"

"Under your conditions, no doubt about it, especially with new cottages built on the community plan. One could brighten up Fernfield."

"Run a cinema and open a library?"

"Why not, sir?"

"Yes, why not? Seems to me, my lads, we have a whole new world to conquer."

Miss Lester, poking weeds into a small trug, was not exactly pleased. All this maleness did not cater for things feminine. And who, after all, was the Blighter? She wished that someone had been more succinct in the parading of names. Man is a jealous creature, especially so in the scramble for creative self-expression, but woman, having come late into the competitive world, is sometimes more jealous than the male. Perhaps, Mr. Jekyll's summing up of the situation might have been: "Why haven't I married? Because I find most women so bossy. And in the rough and tumble of business they can't compromise; they cut a bargain too fine, want too much of the cake. And if you disagree with 'em on a contract, they take it personally. That's why I haven't contracted myself into marriage."

Mr. Purchase rang up Mr. Siegfried Mallison.

"Purchase speaking, sir. Mr. Jekyll offers five thousand for the two farms, and a guarantee not to develop residentially. He would reserve the right to erect a few new cottages, purely for farm-workers."

"That's eight hundred short of my price."

"Yes, sir, but it appears to be a firm offer. I'd suggest——"

"I'll take five thousand, five hundred, the purchaser to pay your fees and the legal charges."

"Yes, sir. Is that final?"

"Quite final, Mr. Purchase."

"Very good, sir. I'll put it to Mr. Jekyll."

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It was Skelton who took the message. He asked Mr. Purchase to hold the line while he consulted Mr. Jekyll. Yes, it was Mr. Jekyll's secretary who was speaking. Garton had jotted down a very rough estimate of the capital outlay that would be necessary, and R.J. was considering the various items.

"Mechanization at five pounds an acre, David."

"Might be more, sir, if you went in for a combined harvester and thrasher. I haven't considered a drying plant or silo."

"Laying down new grass three hundred pounds."

"Well, seed alone costs a pound or so an acre."

Skelton came in with the news that Mallison would sell at certain terms, and he named them.

"Philosophers can drive hard bargains, John. Tell Purchase we'll close with the offer."

Skelton went off to phone, and was back in three minutes.

"Purchase says will you put it in writing, sir?"

"Tell him I will. There is one stipulation, that it is agreed that we get on the land, at once, when a deposit is paid. The legal gentlemen might keep us waiting six months."

Richard Jekyll had no desire to impose his views upon celibacy on the young. A little naughtiness is necessary, but his David and Jonathan were rather stately young men in their Elizabethan attitude to life, and yet they would have designated Sir Francis Drake a profuse and splendid bounder.

"Go and bathe, you two. Be Bluewater."

Skelton's teeth showed white in his brown face.

"So, the Greeks bathed before Troy, sir."

They bathed, using Jekyll's beach hut to change in. Both of them were strong swimmers, and they swam as far as Spaniard's Point, and Skelton, looking across the ribbed water, saw a figure sitting under the tower. It was Rachel, and he turned on his back and floated, while David swam round him. Bluewater was to be as full of incident this summer day as a

Crime Club novel. Skelton saw a too familiar figure appear from behind the tower, and stand in front of Rachel, Mallison! Ye Gods, was the place full of predatory and importunate males?

Skelton turned over and struck out for the shore, but the impulse died out in him when he realized its superfluous silliness. Rachel was a young woman who could look after herself. But could she? Women can be so incorrigibly credulous. You could never be sure what strange sort of beast might not attract them, and Mallison was a comely beast. But, damn it, what business was it of his?

Garton was swimming beside him.

"Going to land, Jack?"

"No. See that fellow up there talking to the girl?"

"I say, what breeches, regular peachies! Dutch or Zouave?"

"That's the fellow who is selling us the farms."

"Mr. Siegfried Mallison?"

"Prophet and philosopher. Read any of his stuff?"

"Tried to. Too oiled and scented for me. Assyrian bull gone gaga. Who's the girl?"

"Miss Lester's head-waitress."

"I know. Handsome wench——"

Skelton had turned about, and in doing so took a small wave in a frowning face and a mouth that was open. He spat out salt water.

"Handsome is as handsome does, brother."

Garton, glancing across the water at Skelton's face, saw something secret unconsciously revealed, and perhaps not realized, and was silent.

Mallison sat down by Rachel, like some Jupiter who deigned to visit mortal woman. He smiled in his beard, and honey seemed to drop from it, but the sweet stuff could tang itself with humour. Rachel had brought some work with her, pink unmentionables that needed attention. She went on sewing.

"How doth the busy bee, my dear!"

He was supremely experienced as to women. He would have said with Jekyll that you must mix your tenderness with mischief. Satan is the supreme lover, Buddha a flabby failure. Moreover, he was thinking that this handsome creature would shape splendidly in those pink unmentionables, or without them!

"Looking a leetle tired."

"Me?"

How charmingly ungrammatical!

"Yes."

"The height of the season, sir."

"And old gentlemen becoming tiresome. I have a suggestion to make, my dear."

The honey oozed in his beard, and she sat with her eyes on her work, somehow cool and serene.

"I want a housekeeper, and something pleasant to look at."

"Do you, sir?"

"Why not consider——?"

And suddenly she began to laugh, not like a vulgar jade, but as a woman of experience sometimes must laugh inwardly at the posturings of the male. It was quiet laughter, completely spontaneous, and it lasted for some seconds.

Mallison's face lost its suavity.

"Why laugh?"

"I'm afraid you might not understand, sir."

"My dear, I'm completely serious."

Her laughter bubbled up again, but it did not keep her hands from being busy.

"That makes it so funny, sir."

Funny! That was the very last word he expected an admiring world to attach to him. Even his purple breeches seemed to quiver with divine resentment.

"O, if you think it funny."

"I do, sir. Besides, I don't want to leave Miss Lester. I don't suppose I shall leave her till I marry."

Again, she laughed, and Mr. Mallison, looking her sharply in the face, got up and turned to gaze at the sea.

"Is the happy swain designated?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"George or Alfred, I gather?"

She became suddenly serious, capably hostile.

"Is that anything to do with you, Mr. Mallison? Besides, neither George nor Alfred has asked me to be his house-keeper."

That flattened him. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his enormous breeches, and marched off.

"Dear, moral maiden, accept my blessings."

"Thank you, sir."

Paul Hattersley wanted a clean shirt. He did possess two clean shirts, washed and dried by himself at the bungalow, but he had developed so stiff a neck and such a horror of the place that he shirked returning to it.

Archie Stout volunteered to fetch him a shirt. He was calling on Jimmie Jettison anyway about a possible portrait someone might commission him to paint.

"Got the key, old man?"

"It isn't locked. There's a cupboard behind my bedroom door. You'll find the things in there."

Archie set forth, wondering as he had been wondering for days, what the devil was to be done with Paul. The fellow hadn't a bean, and no prospects of earning a pound a week, and he was deep in the slough of despond. Stout had been very gentle with him, but there were some questions difficult to answer, especially the kind of questions that poor Paul persisted in putting to life.

"Why didn't you arrive five minutes later, old chap?"

"Why was I born with a bloody thing called a temperament?"

"Why wasn't I taught to suck eggs?"

"I feel I can't go back to that damned place and stage an encore. So what's a superfluous fool to do?"

Yes, damned awkward questions to answer when a man's ferocious pride was snapping at itself and everything, like a dog that has been run over and is in anguish. He had no job for Paul. No one seemed to have a job for Paul. As a craftsman he appeared to be useless to the community, especially to a community created by that damned humbug Mallison, a fellow who wore Cuban heels to his shoes and stank of scent and sex. Even a week's free board and lodging promised to stick in Hattersley's throat. It was more than possible that at any moment Paul might get into a boat, row out and end things in the sea.

Stout found the bungalow unlocked, and as there was nothing of value to be stolen, and Bluewater did not possess a child population, such carelessness was of little consequence. The cupboard behind the bedroom door was very much like Mother Hubbard's. Stout saw a small collection of darned socks, underclothes of the two and eleven per piece variety, one dress shirt that seemed to have turned a primrose colour, and a pile of three clean cotton shirts. He lifted the topmost shirt, and stood staring.

A gold cigarette-case reposed on the second shirt.

Stout picked it up, and examining it, saw R.J. engraved in the centre of a shield.

Jekyll's cigarette-case!

What the devil——?

He heard voices, and instantly he slipped the thing into his jacket pocket, and walked out with the shirt over his arm, to be confronted by a police sergeant and a man in plain clothes.

Stout smiled upon them genially.

"Morning, Sergeant."

"Good morning, Mr. Stout."

"Just been collecting a shirt for Mr. Hattersley. Anything I can do?"

"No, sir. Mr. Hattersley not here?"

"He has been seedy, and is staying with me for a week."

The sergeant and the detective exchanged glances. Then the sergeant cleared his throat and spoke.

"I may mention, in confidence, sir, that we have a warrant to search the bungalow."

"What the devil for?"

"I'm afraid that's our business, sir. But we don't want to worry Mr. Hattersley, unless——"

"Very considerate of you, Sergeant. I won't mention it. Well, go in and do your job."

Stout could not know that the police had received an anonymous letter hand printed and posted in London, which had informed them that something of interest and significance and with a bearing on the Jekyll case might be found in the bungalow. And thanks to Stout's quest of a shirt, they found nothing.

Archie Stout was strolling homewards, asking himself a number of pregnant questions.

Had Paul, in desperation, robbed Richard Jekyll? He did not believe it.

And if he had, various people were perjuring themselves to protect him.

Ann Lester was lying.

The Jettisons were lying.

Skelton might be lying.

Surely, Skelton himself was not the guilty person?

No, that was incredible.

Had someone planted the cigarette-case in Paul's cupboard?

If so, who?

Anybody in Bluewater could have had access to the bungalow.

Archie was posed, completely so. He had that incriminating article in his pocket. What was he to do with it, or about it?

He decided that complete candour, so far as Paul was

concerned, would be the wisest attitude to adopt. He would hand the case over to Paul and give him the bare facts.

He found Hattersley on the strip of shingle below the sea-wall, swabbing out the dinghy which they used for fishing. You could make Paul reasonably happy by giving him something upon which to use his hands, a form of self-expression which a mechanized world is denying more and more to man, and yet as a tool and an instrument the human hand transcends any piece of mechanism. Hattersley glanced up as Stout's big feet crunched over the shingle.

"Got my shirt? Thanks, old man. I'll go in and change."

Stout glanced up at the sea wall, and saw no intruding head.

"Just a moment. Come round here. I found this among your shirts."

He slipped the case out of his pocket and held it, monogram upwards, in the palm of a large hand. Hattersley peered. His face expressed nothing but almost vacuous astonishment.

"That, among my shirts?"

"Yes."

"R.J. Why, damn it, it's Jekyll's cigarette-case!"

"Exactly."

Hattersley's face grew dark.

"Someone must have planted it there. Ye gods, Archie, there's something filthily malicious in the air."

"I believe you. I wasn't going to tell you, Paul, but the police arrived just after I had pocketed the thing. Someone had put them wise."

"Planted the thing on me, and then——?"

"Just so."

"But nobody hates me as much as all that. I know I'm a bit crusty, but—— By God, I wish I knew——"

"Exactly. Tar and feathering——"

Stout had repocketed the case. Hattersley stood rigid, his face stark and sharp, his eyes staring at the sea.

"Only one person I can think of."

“Who?”

“Mallison.”

“My dear chap!”

“Sounds footling, I know.”

“A rich fellow like Mallison doesn’t go around clouting people on the head and pinching wallets, and planting clues upon perfectly innocent people. Wait a bit, though. Jekyll and Hyde. A weird brand of sadism. Had any rows with him?”

“Lots. But, damn it, the thing’s incredible. You didn’t tell the police?”

“Of course not. Afraid I can’t quite swallow the Mallison theory, even though the chap’s a howling highbrow.”

Hattersley held out a sudden hand.

“Pass it over, old man. There is only one thing to do, return it to Jekyll and tell him the truth.”

“Half a mo’, Paul. Jekyll’s a white man, but——”

Hattersley’s jaw was set.

“That’s what I’m going to do, Archie. Pass it over. After all I’m not much worried about the game of consequences. What the devil do I care? The thing’s his and he shall have it. Nuff said.”

Richard Jekyll was feeling good. After all, it was rather pleasant for a man on the edge of fogeneity to feel that he had two lads like John and David as his intimates in this great new game. Poet and peasant. Stout lads, both of them, who looked you straight in the eyes, and smiled straight in your face. Garton had been the heaviest man of the year in the Cambridge scrum. Moreover things were moving; the contract had been signed, and Siegfried Mallison had shown himself unexpectedly accommodating. He had issued orders to Messrs. Pride & Purchase and to his lawyers: “I wish you to give Mr. Jekyll every facility,” and if he added *sotto voce*. “To make an infernal fool of himself,” that was just Mallison.

Yes, things were moving.

He had had no pain for two days.

He had resigned his various directorships. No more imported meat and timber, no more excursions into the "Baltic."

He had joined the C.G.A.

His sitting-room was cluttered up with catalogues and estate manuals, and treatises on farming and fruit growing.

Skelton had gone off to Poldermouth to interview a firm of marine engineers who now dealt in motor cars, and specialized in hot-water installations. A small, utility car was needed for estate purposes, and the engineers were to measure up Forge Farm and submit an estimate for chauffage.

David had borrowed a spade from Miss Lester's garden and gone forth to dig exploratory holes in every field for samples of top-spit and of subsoil. Thorough fellow, David.

He, Jekyll and Skelton were to make Forge Farm their headquarters, and Garton would occupy Gate Farm.

Sandys, his chauffeur, confronted with a new world, and being a first-class mechanic and electrician, had agreed to stay on with Jekyll and become their electrical expert. Parsons, the valet, a rather precise and urban creature, had jibbed at the transformation, given notice, thought better of it, and engaged himself as valet-butler-housekeeper and male cook. Poor Parsons, he was so fond of the petticoats, and he was to be in charge of two male servants, house-boys who would need discipline and training. "Well-well," as Donald Duck said. "Feathers fly and adventures never cease!"

To Jekyll, lying in the White Ways loggia, and reading a treatise on the latest Cambridge wheats, came Paul Hattersley in a clean shirt and an old blue muffler in lieu of a collar, and a pair of grey flannel trousers borrowed from Archie Stout and very well deserving the title of bags.

"Mr. Jekyll, I believe?"

Jekyll sat up, and offered Hattersley a chair. He tried not to look with too much compassion at this half starved and

farouche creature who had tried to hang himself and had made a mess even of that finale.

"It's Mr. Hattersley, I think? What can I do for you?"

Paul looked up and down the loggia.

"It's a rather confidential matter. Could we——?"

Jekyll got up. Had the poor devil come to ask for something? Well, as a matter of fact—— But somehow Hattersley did not look the suppliant.

"Shall we go to my sitting-room?"

He led the way there, closed the door, pushed a box of cigarettes at Paul, and suggested that he should sit down. But Hattersley remained standing, and with a kind of cramped gesture, produced the gold case from his pocket and displayed it.

"Yours, I think."

Jekyll stared at it, and was attacked by the horrid thought that Hattersley might have come to confess.

"Yes. Where did you find it?"

"In my clothes cupboard. Or rather, Stout found it, hidden between two shirts."

"How very extraordinary."

"Rather more than that. If you believe me."

"Of course I believe you. Perhaps sinister is more the word. I suppose you have no idea?"

"Not the faintest. One can only infer that some nice person planted it there."

"Nice person. Either a rather malevolent joke, or—— Well, I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Hattersley."

"I can assure you that I know nothing more."

"Of course. I accept that unreservedly."

Hattersley smiled at him, a queer, lost sort of smile, and turned towards the door.

"Excuse me, just one moment, Mr. Hattersley, I understand that you are an architect."

"I was."

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"As a matter of fact I am needing technical advice, and perhaps, supervision."

Hattersley stood and stared.

"I have bought two farms, and both the houses will need a lot of reconditioning. You see, I am turning farmer, and I am going to live in one of the houses. Also, there will be new cottages, and probably a series of new buildings."

"In this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, near Fernfield. I don't know whether you would care to act for me?"

Hattersley's knees were trembling.

"I am a bit rusty, Mr. Jekyll."

"Not at your age, surely! Besides, I need someone with taste and understanding, a craftsman. I want my bit of Sussex to continue to look like Sussex."

"I shall be very glad to help you, sir."

"At the usual fees, of course. I may say that we hope to expand considerably, and that if you can spare your services—"

Hattersley's mouth felt dry, and when his voice came it sounded harsh.

"I am very much——"

"O, the obligation will be mutual. Could you spare the time to come and look round with me to-morrow?"

"Yes, certainly."

"What time would suit you?"

"About ten, sir?"

"Let's say ten-thirty. We can drive up in my car."

"Shall I come here?"

"No, I can pick you up."

"I am at Stout's place for a few days."

"I'll pick you up there."

Hattersley found himself in the White Ways garden. His legs seemed to have carried him there, and then allowed him to wake up. Well, it did not matter; he was not in a mood to meet people at this particular moment, and he could escape by

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way of Ann's paddock and the Jettisons' garden. He wanted to tell the Jettisons. He wanted to tell Jimmie that he would be able to repay him a small loan he owed. Half-way through the garden he came upon Rachel cutting sweet peas for the vases. She smiled at him.

"Good morning, sir."

What a wholesome, unsophisticated face the wench had! She was not a mass of self-consciousness made up both facially and mentally to confront a male audience. Well, if one wanted a mate, why not choose a healthy creature like Rachel who was not strong on wines and did not play tunes upon temperament.

He passed on towards Ann's cottage, and Miss Lester, who happened to be at her window, both saw and hailed him.

"Hallo, Paul. Feeling better?"

He had the bemused and dreamy face of a man reprieved, and who was finding the reprieve somehow incredible.

"I'm on God's earth, my dear."

"Why, of course you are."

The little shadow of her patronage passed over him almost unheeded. Poor Paul, such an arty-arty mess, so ruthlessly inefficient! But in some corner of his soul her elder sister voice did leave a little mocking echo, but he was able to smile at it. Some women's attitude to failure was that of a maiden lady to a derelict dog. "Poor old fellow, poor old fellow, then."

Yes, Ann Lester did love herself supremely, and so, no one would love her as she loved herself.

XVI

IT was a very English day, soft and casual as to its colours, and Jekyll's manner was casual in asking something of John.

"Do you mind driving yourself up in the new estate chariot? But of course you can't. I'd forgotten. No licence yet."

Skelton looked a little puzzled until further enlightenment was vouchsafed him.

"I can walk."

"Fact is, I'm picking up Hattersley. I offered him our architecting job. I don't want a possible assumption made too obvious, Jack. Do you understand?"

Skelton did understand. He gave Jekyll a look of pride and affection.

"That's rather great of you, sir. I'll walk. I'm measuring up some of the buildings and yards for David."

If the new relationship was appearing good and pleasant to Richard Jekyll, it was becoming even more so to these two young men. What a chief to serve under, a man whose understanding was as quick and as tempered as a Spanish sword, and who used it like a gentleman. Who but Jekyll would have quietly passed you a cheque for a quarter's salary in advance, knowing that you needed it? Here was a captain who put your soul at ease, and to whom you could talk as to a man of your own generation, and yet was tempered with humour and an exquisite naughtiness. So, Jekyll had picked up poor Hattersley. That was good business, excellent business.

Paul had shaved himself carefully; Paul had put on a clean collar, and an air that was almost professional, and he lost that

air before they reached Fernfield. Surely, the princely person was he who put beggars at their ease, and turned the rags of necessity into human velvet? An English day and an English landscape, not Reckitt's Blue and electric green, but everything a little blurred and gentle like the lichen on Sussex tiles. Hattersley's eyes grew large and gentle. No longer were they bitter squints through which a poisoned spirit peered at the world. He may have seen all kinds of things that Jekyll did not see, or perhaps he saw them differently, in pastel tints, the grey warmth of old stone, bricks ripened by the sun, a grotesqueness of tangled trees, silvered oak, fields stroked by cloud shadows, the distant sea shot-silk.

Jekyll took him over the house and explained the alterations that were needed. The front rooms were to be left as they were, but the whole of the back of the house required remodeling and enlarging, new kitchen quarters built, and the staff bedrooms with a staff staircase separated from Jekyll's quarters. Three bathrooms were needed, and lavatories, for in spite of his vision Jekyll had had to accept the utility of taps. And radiators in all the rooms, staff rooms included.

"Some engineers from Poldermouth are sending up a representative this morning. It all sounds rather complicated. Supposing I leave you to it?"

Paul had been jotting down details in a twopenny note-book.

"I think I have got the idea. And the new work is to tone with the old?"

"Yes, if possible."

"You haven't any old cottages on the estate that could be pulled down and the tiles and bricks re-used here?"

"That's an inspiration, Hattersley. I believe we have. With new cottages we shan't need the old ones. Well, I'll leave you to it."

Hattersley had borrowed a two-foot rule from Stout, and as he began to measure up the building and to become absorbed in his old craft, a sudden happiness came to him. Even the

faint, musty odours of the old house smelt of reality. He poked his head into the cool, dark dairy and loved it, though the dairy would have to be incorporated into the new scheme. Yes, this was reality, craftsmanship, a product of the soil. He sat on the oak well-head in the back yard, and drew rough plans of the place as it was, and as it should be. He began to whistle, though it was an almost soundless whistling. Yes, the back yard would have to be incorporated in the new building, and the well buried under a big flagstone. He was aware of voices, Jekyll's voice and another voice echoing vaguely in the empty house. Messrs. Lancaster's representative had arrived from Poldermouth on a motor-bike, and was being interviewed by Richard Jekyll.

Hattersley sucked his pencil. Why, of course! Take down the back of the old house and re-erect it, and use old bricks to link up with. New bricks could be used for the partition walls. He would like to leave that old chimney stack. Yes, and the roof looked sound. He would have to go up into the roof, and see that the rafters and purlins were good. Probably they were of oak and tougher than when they had come from the tree.

Someone else was whistling, Skelton running a tape across the stable yard, and Hattersley heard a voice.

"Jack!"

"Hallo. That you, David?"

"The Skipper anywhere about?"

"Yes, in the house, I think, interviewing the boiler-man."

Garton came swinging into the yard to surprise Hattersley lighting a pipe. They were strangers to each other.

"Mr. Jekyll inside?"

"I think so."

"Are you from Lancasters?"

Paul threw the match away.

"Not exactly. I'm what is called an architect."

Garton grinned at him.

"Sorry."

"No need. It's a democratic age. Things come out better when I smoke."

"Same here. I'm the agricultural expert! So, now we know. Do you think you can make something of the old place?"

"Yes, and keep it from looking Bluewater."

"Splendid."

Garton went in, to find Jekyll occupying a solitary deck-chair in the panelled parlour. Messrs. Lancaster's man had gone upstairs to measure up.

"Have you a minute, sir?"

"Plenty, David."

Garton explained that he had been inspecting the stock and outfit of Gate Farm, for the outgoing man was wishing to sell all the gear to them at a valuation.

"But it's no good, sir. There's not a decent beast on the place, and the machines are so much scrap-iron. There is one sound wagon, and a pair of horses that are not so bad. It's a good thing to keep one team on the place. I told the fellow that I was sorry, but that he had better have a sale, subject, of course, to your approval, sir."

"It seems rather hard, David."

"I know, but I'm here to protect you. I'd agree to take the horses, and we shall allow him for dung and any cultivation that is in hand. That's a valuer's job, of course. But there is something else."

"A snag?"

"Far from it. If you are really keen, sir, on fruit."

"Rather a passion of mine."

"Well, I've found the place. Care to come and look, sir?"

"Of course."

They took the Rolls, Garton driving it, and about half a mile from Fernfield Garton parked the car on the broad grass verge. The road dipped here between two rows of Scotch firs,

and on either side of the road the land spread out in a large flat saucer, sheltered by rising ground and hedges. Part of it had been a hop-garden that had been grubbed, and was a weedy fallow. They left the car, and Garton opened a field gate.

"Seems to me just the place, sir. Sheltered. And though it's a hollow, it lies too high to be a frost hole."

"How many acres?"

"About twenty, sir. Yes, that field on the other side is ours too."

"How many trees does one plant to the acre?"

"Seventy-five, on an average, sir."

"Fifteen hundred trees. What about birds and boys?"

Garton laughed.

"We could wire the road frontage. We shan't be bothered much with rabbits, so far as I can see. I think one can ignore the birds. One does, in bulk. If you want blackbirds shot——"

"No, I don't think I do."

"I'd have a couple of cottages here, and the storing and packing and grading sheds, and the spraying outfit. The road is just right for transport. Our tractor, of course, could do the spraying."

"And plant this autumn?"

"Why not, sir? Why lose a year?"

"Go ahead, David, go ahead."

"I shall want my plough and cultivators over the land before we plant."

"Item, one ploughman, at once."

"O, I could do that myself, sir, directly we get our tractor. I rather fancy myself in the seat of a tractor."

"You'll have to teach me, David. Not a sleeping partner, but a sitting one!"

They sauntered up to one of the high hedges which had protected the hop-garden from the south-west wind, and in looking down and across the shallow valley Jekyll had a

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sudden vision of it in full blossom like a great bowl of flowers. Yes, why shoot the blackbirds because in dry weather they might peck at some of your apples? Profit was indeed a dreadful thing when all beauty and song had to be subordinated to it. And happening to look at Garton's face he seemed to see the same thought in the eyes behind the spectacles.

"It is going to be rather lovely, David. I should like a few cherries and plums. What brand of apple——?"

"O, Cox's, sir; nothing has taken its place, and Bramleys, and Lane's Prince Albert. We shall have to get a good man on the job. Our ideal has to be three hundred bushels an acre of National Mark fruit."

"Can you prune?"

"As an amateur. But I do know what not to do. The trouble is to get the ordinary man not to prune a Cox just as he would prune a Bramley. It's like cutting hair. The English barber isn't an artist."

Jekyll chuckled.

"Just hacks off so much hair and calls it a job! I don't see why I shouldn't learn to prune. By the way, what aged men shall we take on?"

"I suggest between thirty and forty, sir. Young enough to have the new idea; old enough to have learnt sense."

Skelton and Garton were installed at White Ways, Miss Lester managing to accommodate them, although it was the height of her season. She did it to please Richard Jekyll, for she was proposing to add another wing to the house, and a more than friendly Jekyll might be sympathetic in the provision of capital. If she was feeling peeved about this agricultural adventure, she showed no petulance to a man who might be persuaded to sponsor other enterprises, perhaps intimately so.

But why was she so casual to poor John? Was it because

he was a mere secretary that she gave him the worst room she had, in the annexe over the garage? It was not a question of considering his pocket, for Jekyll was paying. Mysterious, emotional petulances! And why? because she felt that she had lost all mystery for him, and that he no longer thought of her poetically as a woman whose dignity was to be honoured? Dignity! All the old, sentimental stuff! She did not want that sort of thing. But did she? She would not tell herself that she loved herself so dearly, that no homage could be too exquisite, even though it was tainted with romanticism. Men were such idiots. They blew hot and cold in a night. If you were blonde, they would soon want you black. If you were too efficient, the fickle fools took offence, and asked for a doll that squawked ecstatically when you squeezed it. No, she rather preferred the mischievous, mordant maturity of a Jekyll. If you could boss a man, you despised him; if you couldn't boss him, he might become a nuisance, the sort of fellow who became throaty and autocratic on hearthrugs.

Mr. Jekyll and David had gone off for the day in the Rolls to inspect a famous herd of Shorthorns in East Essex, and a notable fruit nursery in West Kent. Garton was asking for West Melling trees, because Messrs. Banyards were experts with a conscience, and would provide you with root-stocks suitable to your particular soil. Also, in windy Sussex David did not fancy a stock that would grow too big a tree; and spraying and picking were to be remembered.

Skelton was working in R.J.'s sitting-room and office on Jekyll's correspondence and on a number of orders that Garton wanted to place. There was a tractor demonstration to be arranged, and tenders sent in for lime and "artificial" in bulk. He had managed to pick up a good second-hand typewriter at Poldermouth, and he was rattling away at it when Rachel brought him his tea.

"I thought you might like it here, Mr. Skelton."

"Thanks, Rachel."

He pushed some papers aside and she placed the tray at the end of the desk, and as she did so he secretly and shyly studied her face.

"Buttered toast, Rachel, out of season!"

"We always have it in the season, sir."

He said softly: "I wish you wouldn't call me sir," and saw her face go serious. He was wondering how she had contrived so quickly to rid herself of Mr. Siegfried Mallison at the tower, for being human he had turned about in time to observe Mallison's rather abrupt exit.

"It's a habit, sir."

"A convention, what? Funny things conventions. I suppose you have heard all about our experiment?"

She stood hesitant, her face infinitely grave under the coronet of her cap.

"Everybody has."

"The day's sensation. I suppose they think Mr. Jekyll a damned fool?"

"Some, sir."

"There you go again. And you?"

There was an armchair behind her facing the window, and she leaned against it, her hands on its back. It was not part of the convention that she should loiter here, but perhaps the woman in her wished to forget it for the moment.

"I think it's splendid, Mr. Skelton."

"Just why?"

"Well, for all sorts of reasons. It's giving work and growing food, and——"

"Not a cocktail party! Have you ever drunk a cocktail, Rachel?"

She smiled at him with her eyes.

"No, Mr. Skelton."

"Not necessary?"

She countered with a question.

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"Why do people, rich people, who have everything, need little drinks?"

"Because they are bored. Having everything, you desire nothing, and so get a kick out of gin. But virtue is bad for hotels, Rachel. So few extras. A sot is a good customer. Don't you think so?"

She laughed.

"No. You see, we girls aren't quite the fools——"

"The sophisticated think you are. But do you mean to say, you rather despise the people who eat and drink too much?"

"Yes, Mr. Skelton, or some of us do."

"What a healthy outlook! Honours to you, Rachel."

Someone was listening in the corridor, and both disliking herself for listening, and the rather intimate things she was hearing. Her head-waitress getting fresh with a client, and with this particular young man! Miss Lester's nose looked pinched. It was unseemly to be annoyed by vulgar suspicions, and to lose your temper with someone who served you well, but Miss Lester was in a mood to feel prejudiced against sex. She gave the door a push, and let her temper drape itself in sarcasm.

"Rachel."

Rachel straightened where she stood.

"Yes, Miss Lester."

"The lounge bell has been ringing. I shall be much obliged if you will attend to business."

Skelton saw Rachel colour up, but she did not lose her dignity. She walked quietly out of the room, Miss Lester making way for her. And these two women did not look at each other.

Miss Lester stepped in and half closed the door.

"I shall be much obliged if you will not flirt with my staff."

Skelton stood up.

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"I beg your pardon! That's a rather vulgar suggestion. If anybody is to be blamed, I am that person."

"So I infer."

She knew that she was behaving like a tawdry fool, but his angry and half contemptuous face exasperated her.

"Rachel is not the kind of girl——"

He flashed a look at her and sat down again to his tea.

"I know that, perhaps better than you do. Supposing we leave it at that? Because a woman doesn't use lipstick she need not be credited with no intelligence."

"Dignity, I presume!"

He said: "O, shut up, Ann. Don't be so primeval."

She went out, closing the door with extreme care, as though her guarded grip upon the handle helped her to suppress the slut in herself. Yes, she had in fact behaved like a slut, one of those Victorian women whom she so despised, good women who spied upon sex round corners, and became morally outraged if sex manifested itself in the person of the baker or the postman. She got as far as the lounge before her own self scorn drove her back. She returned to the sitting-room door and stood there, hesitant.

No, she could not apologize to Skelton, or say that she was sorry. Why should she be sorry? For days he had shown no desire to talk to her; in fact, he avoided her; and yet he was ready to talk intimately to her waitress. But towards Rachel her reactions were different. As woman to woman Rachel had given her of her best, loyalty, good service, a reassuring smile when she herself had been nervy and irritable, and in acquitting Rachel she placed more blame upon the man. It is pleasant to blame, and feel that your own virtue is infallible.

She apologized to Rachel. She may have realized that she had hurt the girl.

"Sorry I was rather terse with you, Rachel."

"O, that's all right, Miss Lester. Mr. Skelton did not mean anything."

Which was not quite true, but sometimes it is wise not to look truth too closely in the face.

Hattersley was at work in his studio, and as he worked a strange phrase came into his head: "My room may be the shape of the universe." And what did that mean, anyway? That he and his workshop were moving in a time-space pattern, and that life was still mysterious, and that the assumption that things mattered was not a mere illusion? Well, things mattered to a man like Eddington. And why should your craft demand with fierceness the very best that was in you unless, in some mysterious way, things did matter?

He whistled and slapped up a mass of clay, and Stout found him, intent as a child upon the building of a sand-castle.

"Hallo, Paul. What's the job?"

On the bench stood a clay model of Forge Farm as Hattersley proposed to reconstruct it. The thing was like a doll's house. It had floors of plywood which lifted out, and a cardboard roof which could be removed like a lid, so that the whole interior was visible.

"A toyhouse for Jekyll."

Another and only half completed model stood beside it, that of a workman's bungalow, which was to be coloured cream and roofed with brown Sussex tiles. Stout sat down on a stool, and filled a pipe.

"Don't stop, old man."

He watched Hattersley's face and hands as the clever fingers got to work, adding squdges of clay to the toy bungalow and patting it and moulding it into shape.

"You have got hands, Paul."

Hattersley's face looked all smoothed out.

"O, well, it's my job. I always like the old idea of God taking clay and making man. There's a damned lot in it, Archie."

Stout put a match to his pipe.

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“Finding Jekyll all right?”

Hattersley was silent for a moment. Then he said: “Yes, he’s got God’s idea, making things, just for the love of making ’em. And that, old man, is about the only idea that is worth while.”

XVII

MR. JEKYLL'S secretary and his architect returned in a state of heat from Dewhurst, though, of the two Skelton was the more angry, for Hattersley's impatience had faded into a depressed cynicism. They were all alike, these little, provincial Mandarins, petty pagods; and the funny thing was that the official's name was Paygood. Also, the snag that authority had presented to them was sufficiently serious, in that it had scared them both into wondering whether Jekyll might not erupt and change his purpose.

"You seem a bit heated, John."

Skelton admitted it.

"The fellow's a complete obstructionist, sir."

"Tut-tut. And why?"

"It's about the water supply, sir. He said both the existing sources had been condemned, and that it was useless for us to submit plans until we had satisfied the council that we had a proper supply."

"Well, that's not unreasonable. Didn't you tell him that we did not propose to use——"

"I did. He wasn't interested. Said he was busy, and that you had better apply to him in person. Damned cheek!"

Jekyll was amused. He could picture the impulsive and creative John in conflict with Negation in Trousers.

"Rather on the high horse, John?"

"Damned parasites!"

"Tut-tut, unfortunately these parasitic persons are necessary. The State has to have its suckers, John, especially those who have to suck the blood of the taxpayer. I'll go and see the gentleman. What sort of age is he?"

"Youngish, sir."

"That's bad. They take themselves so much more seriously when they are young."

Jekyll drove up next day to Dewhurst to interview the U.D.C. Surveyor. He found himself in a dusty, Georgian building, which housed the council offices. A very casual clerk behind a door marked "Inquiries" attended casually to his business. Had Mr. Jekyll an appointment? No, he had not. The clerk condescended to go and see whether the Surveyor would grant him an interview.

Mr. Jekyll believed in initiating such affairs gently. He found himself in the presence of a pale young man who exhibited to him two unpleasantly light blue eyes in a perfectly expressionless face. Mr. Jekyll would have described it as a cake of cream-coloured soap with two blue beads adhering to it. And the cake was smooth with complacency, if a cake of soap can be said to possess that quality.

The young man neither asked Mr. Jekyll his business, nor suggested that he should sit down. He just stared at him and was unaccommodatingly dumb. Mr. Jekyll sat down.

"My name is Jekyll. Perhaps you would like me to explain. I am the new owner of two farms. My secretary called on you yesterday."

The young man continued to stare at him.

"I understand that you are not satisfied with the water supply."

"We have condemned it."

"So I gather. May I suggest that I have no intention of poisoning myself—"

Neither humour or irony were understood in this office.

"Until we are satisfied, Mr. Jackson—"

"Jekyll," said the applicant, gently.

"Until we are satisfied that a proper water supply has been installed—"

"Quite so. May I ask who is we?"

"My committee, and the medical officer."

"Can you suggest a source of supply?"

"The Water Company."

"I see. Meanwhile time is pressing. If I submit plans for the alterations that are contemplated, and for new cottages—"

"I can put nothing before my committee until you have satisfied us as to water and sanitation."

"I see. Not very helpful, is it? May I observe that I am going to farm the land, employ labour——"

Mr. Paygood was not interested in production.

"Just a moment. Do you contemplate developing the estate, or any part of it? I don't think we could allow that."

"And why?"

"My council is preparing a Regional Planning scheme for the district. We might, of course, allow you a provisional order, if you satisfied us."

Mr. Jekyll rose. He was growing rather tired of the imperial "We."

"So that is the position. Even if I assure you that I propose to acquire a suitable water supply, you will not help me by allowing me to submit plans, and have them passed provisionally, in order to save time?"

"That is the position."

Jekyll gave one look at the soapy and expressionless face of the official and turned to the door, but he paused there to reconfront the surveyor.

"I cannot say that you have treated me very sympathetically. By the way, Mr.——"

"Paygood."

"Do you happen to know Sir Sylvester Harland?"

The soapy face became a little more attentive, for Sir Sylvester Harland was a power in the ministry that had some control over provincial affairs.

"I have heard of him, of course."

"Indeed! Sir Sylvester happens to be a personal friend of

mine. I think I might consult him as a friend, don't you? We could have an inspector sent down and an inquiry held. It might be helpful to both of us."

Mr. Paygood squirmed slightly in his chair.

"Is that a threat, sir?"

"O, no. I happen to be a rather rich man, and I am quite ready to fight when I am obstructed unsympathetically. You see, I regard my enterprise as being for the public good. I rather think Sir Sylvester would agree with me. Good morning, Mr. Paygood."

Actually, the young man got out of his chair, and made an attempt to open the door for Mr. Jekyll, but Jekyll smiled at him and opened the door for himself.

"Good morning, Mr. Surveyor."

That may have been one of the reasons why Mr. Siegfried Mallison was chuckling, for chuckling he was. This good idiot had purchased a property without troubling to satisfy himself as to some of the disabilities, and Mallison had been waiting for some indignant explosion. It did not come. When Mr. Purchase was tackled on the subject, his innocence was obvious. That the water supply at the two farms had been condemned was news to him, and he said so.

"I am extremely sorry, sir. All I can say is that when a property changes hands certain persons seem to seize the opportunity to make trouble. Shall I take up the matter with Mr. Mallison?"

"No. I think we will leave Mr. Mallison out of it."

The Dewhurst & District Water Co. had its office in the town, and Jekyll went on to interview the secretary. He found him a very different man from Mr. Paygood, and as ready to be helpful as his position allowed. He pointed out to Jekyll that the Company could not regard the laying of half a mile of main from Fernfield to a point above the farms as a commercial proposition. Was Mr. Jekyll developing? No. Then

the main would serve only two farm houses, and perhaps a dozen cottages. Yes, that was the position. Mr. Mallison had been faced with the same problem and had burked it.

"He didn't tell you, sir?"

"No. And I can't say that I found the surveyor very helpful."

The secretary shrugged.

"No, he wouldn't be. Such fellows aren't."

"I quite see your point. What would it cost, roughly, to lay a pipe from Fernfield?"

The secretary scribbled figures on a pad, and then named a figure that might have frightened most men. Jekyll smiled at him.

"Supposing I were to write you a cheque for that amount, would your company agree to do the work at once?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I think we could, sir. It is a generous offer."

"Supposing we regard it as employing labour and providing service?"

"And I think we might meet you, sir. When the water rates on your property total a certain sum, the company would consider returning you a proportion of the capital outlay."

"That would satisfy me, provided it is agreed that the work is put in hand at once."

"I will see my directors and raise it with them. You see, sir, we are not a big company, and Bluewater made a heavy call on our supply. We had to sink a new well and instal a second pumping station. As a matter of fact the Fernfield main is adequate."

"Very well. Supposing I put my proposal in writing?"

"It would help, sir. And I think I can get my board to meet you. In a case like this when a customer behaves generously, we can charge you the cost price, plus five per cent. And I think we can meet you in the matter of a partial refund when your houses and cottages are paying water rates."

Mr. Jekyll thanked him.

"May I say that I have found you more helpful than our friend round the corner?"

"O, I have to do things, sir."

"Yes, that's the difference."

"An official may be supposed to do things, but mostly he relies on his foreman, and pushes chits about."

"Like the war."

"Yes, just like the war, sir. Passed to you for information and necessary action. I can remember a staff officer in my Div. who had never seen the inside of a trench, and he was a marvel at sending out snotty chits."

Jekyll laughed.

"Yes, that's the trouble with most administrators. They come to think of nothing but administration until there is nothing left to administer, or they have fussed you into a strike. Good morning, Mr.—"

"Laycock, sir."

"And thank you very much."

Meanwhile, two young men with very solemn faces were cursing official interference, and wondering whether their chief would be so irritated and discouraged that the face of adventure might lose its glamour. Rich men can do as they please, and had not Richard Jekyll said that when Somerset House fussed him, he saw to it that they were the poorer for interference. You could refuse a contract and reduce your profits, or sell out stock and leave the proceeds on current account. A Government department can be so utterly without grace and understanding, that in scrounging twopence-halfpenny, it loses a hundred pounds by getting the producer cussed.

Garton had taken John down to consider the possibilities of the old hammer-pond and the spring. There was a supply of sorts here, but it would necessitate filter beds, a storage tank and a pumping-plant, and even then authority might condemn

it. As for the sinking of a well, it was a gamble, especially in Sussex.

Said David: "I'm all for intelligent planning, provided you get the right sort of men to work the plan. But mere bum-polishers make me see red. If that fellow gets R.J. badly riled——"

Skelton was more hopeful.

"I don't think he'll crumple, brother. When a rich man has a sense of humour, he may just swat the fly and smile."

"You know I warned him, and so did my late chief. Start to do something positive, and you will be rewarded with nothing but fuss and obstruction."

"I think he rather likes a fight."

They were returning up the hill when they saw Jekyll himself standing in the Forge Farm garden. He waved to them. He had the air of a man who had been piqued and amused by a morning's adventure.

"Taps, John; it will have to be taps!"

Had he settled Mr. Paygood? Well, in a sense, he rather thought he had. He told them that he had eliminated the problem by offering the Water Co. a cheque.

"You mean, sir, you are going to pay?"

"Yes, David. After all, it's worth while."

"For a new main?"

"Yes. We can't be held up, can we? You can't float a big show in a pint-pot. I think they'll give us water within a month."

"Priceless, sir."

Said David to John as they washed their hands in the farmhouse kitchen before a picnic lunch:

"What a prince to serve under! If I ever let him down——"

John purloined the soap.

"You won't. Such men don't get let down. And how damned wise of them!"

Hot, dry weather, with a late August and an early September that were rainless. Jekyll's luck. His young men began to believe in his blessedness.

Along the main road from Fernfield a score of sweating men were opening a trench along the grass verge and laying long black pipes as they went, and a queer jumping-jack of a machine rammed back the soil. Mr. Mallison, driving his car Dewhurst way, saw them and was not pleased. He pulled up, got out, and questioned a foreman.

"What's happening here?"

"New main, sir."

Had Mr. Jekyll succeeded in persuading a problem to solve itself when he had shirked it? Mr. Mallison was not pleased.

Lorries appeared on the skyline and creaking down the dry turf track, and leaving trails of bruised grass behind them, deposited piles of brick and loads of ballast in the Forge Farm yard. Bags of cement were stacked by the score in the granary. The old outhouses were down, and their bricks cleaned and piled for re-use in the new walls. A Dewhurst builder, a little round man with a placid, honest face, had put in a tender which Hattersley had accepted. The old well was supplying water for concrete and mortar before disappearing under a stone slab. Foundation trenches were out.

The Dewhurst U.D.C. had passed Mr. Jekyll's plans, after receiving an assurance that company water was to be supplied. Mr. Paygood himself came down to inspect and pass the foundations, a somewhat chastened and accommodating official. Rumour would soon have it that Mr. Jekyll was an awkward person to quarrel with and that if you got on the wrong side of him the wind blew rather fiercely. Hattersley spent nearly all his time about the place, a Hattersley who had received one of those sympathetic cheques which Jekyll knew how to draw, and whose neck felt so free of a noose that he had returned to his bungalow.

The new fifteen drawbar horsepower tractor had arrived, and was housed in the Forge Farm wagon-shed, David's new toy-chariot, gay with red and green paint. Garton spent half a day tinkering at it like a racing motorist over his car. Skelton would not admit that it was a lovely beast, though he knew that it would prove itself a useful one, but it amused him to see David with a small brush and a pot of black enamel, inscribing a name on the machine's bonnet.

"Goliath."

Skelton laughed. Goliath was not to be slain, but to be put to labour by David.

"You'll have to teach Jonathan."

"You'll make a hell of a mess, my lad, of the first furrows."

"Don't be so depressing."

"I'll let you have a shot later in the old hop-garden. It won't matter so much if you wander about."

"Many thanks!"

"Goliath" was going forth to battle. Jekyll and Skelton watched him thundering and bumping out of the yard, with David in the driving-seat. Goliath was bound for the twenty acre field on the west of the orchard, where, until a week or two ago, ragwort had made of it a Field of the Cloth of Gold. The old turf and that beautiful but baleful weed were doomed. Jekyll, Skelton and Carter, a first-class man whom David had brought down from Northamptonshire, followed the thunderous beast.

A plough attachment had been carted out into the field. Goliath was halted inside the field-gate while Carter linked up the double plough. The engine roared, and David was off. Mr. Jekyll sat on the field gate, but John was so fascinated by the machine's progress and David's handling of it that he followed in its wake. The shares peeled the ground. Green turf became brown streaks. Goliath seemed to thunder exultantly.

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David had explained how he meant to deal with this starved, weed-ridden old pasture. The first plough cut a shallowish ribbon of turf and turned it over, the second plough put a four-inch furrow on top of the first slice. In spring if any turf was left unkilld, it would be cut up with a disc harrow. Wireworm promised to be the danger, so, when the tilth was fed and dressed, David proposed to put in a crop of peas or kale, or perhaps Mustard. Next autumn the field would be ripe for wheat.

Goliath thundered on, and something in Skelton exulted. He was like a boy whose ambition it was to drive a railway train. He had read up ploughing in text-books, but David's attack upon this field was not orthodox. There was no crown furrow, no working to and fro with turns upon the headlands. There were no headlands. David drove his land-tank round and round, following the lines of the hedges.

Jekyll remained on his gate, and Skelton joined him there.

"Didn't someone write a book called *Somehow Good*, Jack?"

"I don't remember it, sir."

"Not a bad title for our job. I want to get into that seat and snort along with Goliath."

"Not yet, sir. Might bump you about too much. David's going to let me have a go in the old hop-garden."

"A dog-fight all on your own. Good luck to you."

Jekyll felt in his pocket and produced a letter.

"Here's rather a good joke. I haven't shown it to David yet. We'll try it on him at lunch."

"Something to make his hair get up?"

"Read it, and see!"

For David's hot temper and its explosions added to the joy of life, but in five minutes he would be laughing and joining in the joke. This particular letter came from a person of whose very existence Jekyll had been ignorant, or rather it emanated from that person's office, and had been drafted by an assistant. It said:

"Dear Sir,

The fields marked on the enclosed plan are badly infected with thistles and ragwort. These weeds have been allowed to seed. You will take immediate steps to clean the ground, and report on completion to this office."

They watched David's face as he read the letter, and saw the expected reaction gathering under his mop of hair.

"Well, I'm damned! Ragwort! I should say so. The stuff must have been here for years. And how many weeks have we been on the ground?"

"Forbidden weeds, David."

"I know, sir. Dock, sundry thistles, ragwort. But why didn't the blighter do something about it earlier? Of course, one knows what has happened. Someone has sneaked."

"Someone with a grudge against the new firm?"

"I guess so."

"Don't you think we could have a little joke with the gentleman, David?"

Garton's spectacles glimmered.

"I'd love to. Let's ask him to come and inspect and point out just where the nuisance existed, and doesn't exist, or won't, by the time he comes."

"Better than that, David. Do you think you can find any other unclean fields, that are not ours?"

"I bet I can. Why the hell didn't he go for Mallison?"

"We'll try."

By the evening David had discovered and listed land that was foul with forbidden weeds. He trespassed. And one of the worst patches of ragwort was to be found in Rustling Park. He came back gloating, and Jekyll wrote his letter.

"Dear Sir,

I have been in occupation of this farm for a little over five weeks.

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I shall be glad if you will come down and inspect our fields.

May I ask you certain questions?

These weeds have been in occupation of this land for a considerable time. Much longer than I have.

Why did you not approach the guilty person, the previous owner?

Have notices been issued to other owners of property in this neighbourhood, whose fields are infested with this weed?"

Garton chuckled as he posted this letter. He was hoping for a particular kind of response to it, and when it arrived his chuckle became audible.

"Dear Sir,

I shall be glad to be informed whether the matter mentioned in my previous letter has been dealt with. Please report immediately."

"Stinker!" said Garton and laughed. "You'd think they never read a letter, but just push back the official threat at you. O, yes, I've had this happen before."

"Let's have our joke, David."

"I think we've got him, sir."

So Jekyll wrote again.

"Dear Sir,

I enclose a list of certain lands in this neighbourhood, not mine, which are badly fouled by the weeds you mention. I gather from my agricultural expert that this nuisance must have existed for a considerable time.

A portion of Mr. Mallison's park at Rustling is one of the most seriously infected areas.

Mr. Mallison owned this land till a few weeks ago.

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Why threaten a more or less innocent person, when it is obvious that a number of guilty persons have not been dealt with?

An explanation would interest me."

An even more hortatory official note was returned in answer.

"Dear Sir,

Please report immediately what steps are being taken to clean your land."

"Got him," said Garton. "Can we call his bluff? He hasn't been doing his job, and is trying to bluff us. Can't we appeal to the Ministry?"

Jekyll was smiling down his long nose.

"I rather think we can. I know one of the Mandarins."

He indited a final reply.

"Dear Sir,

This correspondence has been forwarded to higher authority for their information and possible action.

I have been able to report to them that our land has been cleaned."

They had him. About a week later a large and lusty young man who wanted to be insolent and did not dare, arrived in a small car at Forge Farm. It was David who met him, a David who knew now that he could say things, and that the provincial office had been asked unpleasant questions. It was David who, metaphorically, took the young man by the ear and demonstrated to him certain realities.

"No, you can't see my chief. He's much too busy for this sort of rot. If you had done your job properly, it would have been a different matter."

“Look here, damn it, I’m not going to——”

“Get down to brass tacks. Why didn’t you go for all these other people, Mallison in particular. You let them get away with it, and descend on us, when we are out to do the real job, and farm. You office-wallahs make me sick.”

“Look here, I’m not a tame clerk. I’ll bet you my qualifications are as good as yours.”

“Possibly. Then how did you get into a rotten job like this playing the schoolmaster to the people who really do things? Why? Because you funked the real job. Daren’t get on the soil yourself and farm it. It is so much easier to be a fusspot on an assured income. And you didn’t even fuss conscientiously. Why did you let these other people off?”

The young man gulped; he was large but flabby.

“I didn’t know.”

“Exactly. And you did nothing till someone sneaked.”

“That’s not true. How can we get over half a county? We’re responsible for all sorts of things. Damn it, be fair.”

Garton eyed him whimsically.

“Poor Fanny, poor little Pothook! Did they kick you very hard? Well, next time remember to go out and look, and not to sit on your bum in an office, and get let down by village gossip. Better come in now and have a drink. No, my chief won’t bite you. He’s chuckling.”

So ended for Forge Farm what Jekyll christened “The Ragwort Rhapsody”, following upon the “Sanitation Serenade,” and their new world was left more or less at peace to collect about it a whole armoury of agricultural implements, including a light lorry, and small mountains of lime and masses of artificial manure. Not so, their neighbours. Orders to deal with forbidden weeds were broadcast over that part of the county, and Mallison, receiving a decretal instructing him to clean his park of the noble Senecio, even if it had to be hand-weeded, waxed wroth. Some enemy had done this thing. He was a man who liked to plan, but not to be played with by the

planners. Also, his little drop-shots played over the net at Richard Jekyll's expense, came back with interest. He was not pleased.

David had taken on two local men, young fellows recommended by Mr. Killick, and was importing other men from the derelict Northamptonshire estate. He was able to pick and choose, for Jekyll's ideas upon wages and terms of service were causing some stir, if they were not wholly welcome to other farmers. Attacked on one occasion he had defended his position.

"No, the last thing I want to do is to queer anybody's pitch. Aren't we all agreed that the young men won't stay on the land unless we make the life richer for them? And what is the alternative? I am a rich man who is trying out a social experiment. If a thousand rich men were to join in the crusade, we might be seeing our way to big results. Supposing I lose five thousand a year out of an income of twenty thousand, what does it matter to me? The money has not been lost. It will have gone in wages, merchandise, value in other lives. A form of redistribution, yes, and the best of all forms, a voluntary one spiced with good-will. Yes, I know I might spend the money on pretty ladies and doctors and Chinese art and gadding about the world, and in giving guzzle-parties to people I don't care a damn about. I've got an idea, and I'm going to try it out. It's reality, not Bluewater."

He could smile upon David when David came racketing back from Poldermouth in the small estate car, looking like a young man who had shot his first lion.

"I say, sir, there's a mill still working at Poldermouth."

"Is it of interest to us?"

"Good lord, sir, yes. That's one of the snags in modern wheat growing. With all this foreign stuff coming in, more and more milling is being done at the ports. No use to us. The old country miller has been strangled."

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"If the mill is so important we might buy it, should the business get shaky."

Said David: "Sir, what a prince you are!"

Skelton was neither reading poetry nor writing it. He had his head in manuals upon Book-keeping, and Company Law, and having mastered the technique of double entry, he had installed in a neat glass case a whole row of ledgers. At present nothing could be entered on the credit side, and the items in the Capital Expenditure ledger were mounting up. Jekyll was proposing to turn the enterprise into a limited company, with John and David as minor shareholders, and at meals they would search for titles.

"Sussex Services."

No, not quite the thing. "Sussex Industries." Better, but rather too utilitarian. Something Kiplingesque seemed needed. Sussex by the Sea.

"Why not Sons of Sussex, sir?"

"Which we none of us are, Jack."

"But by adoption."

"Nicely alliterative and catching. But what about the limited? Should one suggest birth control to Sussex squires?"

"I like it," said David. "Just enough sentiment to be English. Good old South Saxon."

"Well, Sons of Sussex arise."

"And put your armour on."

"Strong in the strength that dung supplies."

"And the blessings of the sun."

Skelton would rush out when his office work was done, and get some tool in his hands and soak himself in the soil. He had driven Goliath and made a terrible mess of things to begin with. He struggled with a scythe and wastes of tough bracken, and got a back, and cut his knuckles trying to hone the blade. He attacked the derelict garden, and found himself less urban with a spade. There were wild hedges to be attacked with a

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slasher, and John made a poor business of that until David came along and taught him to strike upwards instead of downwards. But indubitably he was happy, and somehow feeling the sap in him, though autumn was in the air, and winter near. He was not dreading the winter, or the ordeal of mud and rain and gloom. If you had much to do, you were not for ever feeling the pulse of a too sophisticated soul.

But he did put in a plea to Jekyll.

"I hope you'll always let me use my hands. I don't want to be just a pen-pusher."

Jekyll looked at him with affection.

"God forbid! I've got a feeling, Jacko, that a man who can't use his hands isn't quite educated. We don't want to add to the world's waste-paper basket."

"Yes, oceans of bumph. I was looking at a railway bookstall the other day, and it made me sick. Funny thing, our civilization. Reading stuff written by men who don't really know what they are writing about, but write as though they know everything. It's when you begin to do real things yourself that you realize what pulp-machines most of the scribbling people are."

XVIII

IN spite of the somewhat dishevelled state of Forge Farm, bricklayers, plasterers, carpenters, painters and plumbers being all active together, Jekyll & Co. managed to give tea to those who strolled up from Bluewater to visit the new Jerusalem. The Jettisons came, and Archie Stout, and Gilda and Maisie, Gwen being still too shy to face David's spectacles. Even Miss Nuttal teetered up and twittered like a bird. Forge Farm was so homespun. The weather was kind, and tables made of unplanned boards would be set up in the terrace garden, and everybody would sit upon boxes, while Parsons poured tea out of a huge brown teapot. Hattersley would be there, wearing a new dark blue pullover, and the air of a benign wolf who had been blessed by St. Francis. Jekyll wore brown drill over a shirt of pale yellow, and socks to match. John and David, brown as young bulls, sported coloured singlets and Austrian breeches. Jettison wanted to paint them all, just as they sat, a free picture, and for the joy of the thing. He would have called it "Gentlemen of the New Age." Even "Goliath" might have been worked into the picture as a symbol of service, the Machine Beast Tamed.

Ann Lester did not come, at least, not yet. Forge Farm was not her world, and somehow she was hostile to it. The rich man had failed her at the crossroads, and gone wandering down a lane which tended—whither? She was losing her most profitable client, a man who was going rustic and renouncing cocktails for potatoes. Rather silly and gaga, for how could a really intelligent person be interested in the grubby business of farming? You expected whiskers and a hard hat and an

atmosphere of stupid heartiness, and a semi-derelict old Ford scratched and muddled to the eyebrows. But, probably, the obsession would not last. One English winter might sober the Sons of Sussex.

Yet, there were times when her unmated self suffered little pangs. She belonged to a Freudian generation, and was all for self-analysis, and catching complexes as our grandmothers caught fleas. Yes, she supposed she was suppressing herself, and that sometimes the elemental woman in her whimpered. But what were you to do with the thing; take it out like a dog and disown it, leaving it to come home chastened? Yes, but when you were fastidious? Certainly, a woman who was wedded to her job should not marry, and Jekyll was just the sort of person who could combine liberty with licence, and do it delicately, not like Mallison who wanted to swagger over the conquest. Besides, she rather liked Richard Jekyll's mordant, naughty leanness.

She got out her car that September afternoon, and drove through Dewhurst and Fernfield. She had put on a little added colour; special lipstick and a new frock. She did not expect to find her man of the world playing the part of Balbus.

Mr. Jekyll, like Mr. Winston Churchill, had become fascinated by the bricklayer's craft. For days he had been watching a stout old man slapping mortar from a trowel, clapping on a brick, giving it a tap, and with one or two deft sweeps removing the superfluous mortar. The child and man in Jekyll were piqued. He too wanted to lay bricks, but he could not be numbered among the prophets and be permitted to produce bulges on a most professional wall. That would have upset Paul Hattersley. But why not experiment on his own? It was Skelton who had suggested a little garden-house at the west end of the terrace where you could lie protected and enjoy the view.

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Mr. Jekyll fell. He purloined a labourer to dig the foundation trench and to mix and lay concrete. He bought himself a trowel, commandeered a mortar-board, and helped himself to the official mortar and a supply of old bricks which Hattersley had managed to scrounge. The thing looked so easy, and wasn't. He tried the professional gestures, but found the mortar slipping off the trowel, or slapping itself in the wrong place. Carefully he tried coating the frogged bottom of each brick and planting the thing deliberately in its proper place. There was too much mortar or too little. Either it oozed out in ugly blobs, or left a hollow place. Bricks cockled. He found his wall working itself into gentle curves and shy bulges. He pulled it down and started again with infinite care and heavy breathing. The old bricklayer came and watched him.

"You ought to slap it on a bit more free, sir. Don't be feared of spillin' mortar."

"Show me again."

The professor showed him, and the thing looked as easy as spreading soft butter.

"Slap it on like that, with just a bit here, and then clamp your brick on and tap it, and just run the trowel along it, so."

Jekyll persevered, pausing frequently to squint at his wall to see that it did not bulge or waggle. He bought one of the new "levels" that would show you with its bubbles whether the work was both perpendicular and horizontal, and at the end of a week he was finding himself less diffident and clumsy. The bricks were pretty level, if the interstices between them were somewhat patchy.

Ann parked her car on the grass, and finding the male very active everywhere, someone was filing iron piping and making a hideous noise of it, she walked round to what was the house's obvious and official front. She paused by the garden gate. Yes, the fineness of the view was incontestable. She turned to look over the wall and was presented with another view, that of somebody's posterior tightly stretching

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a pair of rather dirty old flannel trousers as the owner of them bent to trowel up some mortar. The British workmen appeared to be endemic! And then she recognized Jekyll in the labourer as he turned towards his growing wall.

Well, really! This would have been completely Ruskin to her, only Ruskin was archaic and unread.

"I see you are busy."

How obvious of her! He faced about, a brick in one hand, his trowel in the other. He was minus tie and collar, and looking, she thought, dreadfully hikerish.

"Caught in the act! Come in, Nan. Do you mind if I just finish this mix of mortar? There's a deck-chair. Afraid my hands are a bit mucky. Yes, better fetch it yourself. Bring it over here."

She carried the chair across and sat down, rather like New Bond Street calling on Lewisham.

Again, she was obvious.

"I did not know you were a bricklayer."

He slapped a splodge of mortar on the wall.

"I'm not. Only an enthusiastic botcher. We're all so very laborious here. Guess what the product's to be."

"Not a pigsty, surely?"

He thought that she was being facetious, and she wasn't.

"O, no, Nan, not so close to the parlour window! It's to be what is called a garden-house."

"O, a garden-house."

"For afternoon snoozes, if we find time for them. Got any idea of the time?"

She examined her wrist-watch.

"Seven minutes past four."

"Good lord, I thought it was about three. You wouldn't believe how absorbing the Romulus game is. Yes, we give teas. I'll go in and wash in five minutes. Mind waiting?"

"Not a bit."

She sat and watched him working. He was becoming more

confident in his movements, and he talked to her over his shoulder, a man who, obviously, was more interested in his bricklaying than in her beauty culture. She was conscious of feeling piqued, *Vogue* discarded for the *Builders' Journal*. Had John Skelton gone native like his chief?

"Well, that's that," and he rubbed a hand naïvely on a portion of his trousers. "I'll go in and get clean. Shan't be five minutes. Go and have a look at our orchard. It's rather a tangle, but old English."

She was not interested in orchards, but she went.

These old fruit trees, shaggy and unpruned, had made of the orchard a series of green alleyways that were almost tunnels. She saw fruit lying in the grass, and here and there a ray of light touched a fallen apple and made it glow. A brittle, crackling sound came from somewhere in the deeps of this secret place, and as she moved across the grass she saw at the end of one aisle a leaping fire. A man was piling brambles and hedge-trimmings upon it, and as the flames leaped through the live fuel, the sap in the scorched leaves cried out.

Skelton! He had not seen her, and she turned towards him. He was in brown shorts and a yellow singlet, and his legs and arms looked as brown as dead bracken. Brambles had grown out from the unkempt hedge and had rooted suckers that had become new tangles of thorned branches, and Skelton had been hacking them down, and digging up the roots. The light of the fire played over him as he pinned the rubbish with his fork and tossed it on to the flames. She paused, looked, walked on. She was feeling the hot breath of the fire before he turned his head and saw her.

"Hallo, Nan!"

She saw him smile, his teeth very white in his brown face, but somehow his very smile gave her a feeling of unfriendliness. Almost, his eyes were watchful, guarding something. He planted his fork, and leaned upon it. She could see the muscles

in his arms and legs. And suddenly he was man. The strong youth of him seemed to leap at her, and kindle in her cold self a tremor of desire. She seemed to see him as she had seen him in those Swiss spruce-woods, yet differently so.

"You all seem very active up here."

He was looking at her intently as though analysing some qualities in himself and in her. He did not smile now.

"Yes, seen Jekyll?"

"I found him laying bricks."

"Rather surprising, what?"

He withdrew his fork, impaled a pile of brambles, and shot them on the fire.

"Better than dropping bricks! Any idea of the time?"

"A little after four. I'm invited to tea. R.J. is cleaning up, and sent me to see the orchard."

"Yes, we do manage picnic teas. Right you are. Tell the chief I'll be along in five minutes. I want to pile the rest of this stuff on before I knock off."

She drew back a couple of steps, for the heat of the fire was scorching her face. Something blazed in her and grew cold. She had been dismissed. She saw him striding off towards another pile of brambles. His back was turned to her. He picked up the green bundle on his fork and carried it to the fire. Her face seemed set in a kind of bleak, porcelain smile.

"Don't be late, my lad. I dislike stewed tea."

He answered her over a broad shoulder.

"Don't worry. The guest will be served."

She gave his back a stabbing glance, faced about, and sauntered off. It was not that she had been snubbed. He just did not want her there.

At tea she was more than ever her controlled self. The improvised table had been laid on the terrace, but when an empty sugarbox was to be her seat, Jekyll sent Parsons for a motor-rug. Her frock deserved something more sympathetic than a box. O, damn her frock! Her dear self had been

rebuffed at a moment when it had lapsed into silly tenderness, and when a young man's muscles and his vivid face had made her mere red earth. She had been hurt, and she wanted to hurt, like a child whose self-love must not be questioned.

"We can't rise to White Ways teas, Nan. Grocer's cake, I'm afraid."

She was waiting for Skelton. She wanted to look at him calmly and coldly, and to efface any suspicion of tenderness in his mind. But perhaps he had been quite blind to the sudden flare of things primitive in her? She had no meaning for him now in the world of sense enchantment. It would not thrill him to think of touching her.

A shadow fell across the table, and she looked up, to see David Garton's spectacled face observing her. A very dull young man this, an owl of a man who was laconic and aloof and technical, and somehow tersely hostile. David did not like her. He looked at her as though he would have labelled her "Feminine Exhibit No. 3," and put her away behind glass.

She nodded at him coolly.

"Afternoon, David. How are tegs?"

He sat down opposite her, folding his legs with their big knees round his box.

"Know what a teg is?"

"Some sort of sheep."

He pulled the bread and butter dish towards him.

"Four lumps of sugar, Parsons, and don't forget it. A teg is a youngster, Miss Lester, that has not been sheared like me."

She cocked her chin at him.

"Is that so? All nice and hairy and innocent."

"You can pin it on me if you like, but tegs don't shave. Where's Jack? Still slaughtering brambles?"

Mr Jekyll had the air of a man who was listening to inward music, and discovering vague discords there.

"Believe so. Parsons, you've slobbered Miss Lester's tea."

"Sorry, sir. I'll provide Miss Lester with a clean saucer."

"Yes, the honour of the house, Parsons. Hallo, here's Jack. Any brambles left, my lad?"

Skelton had his coat over his shoulder. He slipped it on and sat down beside David. He did not look at their guest, and yet it was plain to her that his lack of interest was not wilful.

"I say, David, not two at a time."

"Two of what?"

"Slices. Got one of the big cups, Parsons?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Jekyll was feeling a chill in the air. This celibate show of theirs was not quite doing its duty to Miss Lester. The Sons of Sussex did not properly appreciate her really exquisite modernity. And why? Was the product too perfect, the confection too cold and well iced? Or would David and Jonathan, as rustics, be moved by something with breasts and a milk-maid's face? Yes, really, sex was beyond him, and in its more modern manifestations it could be rather terrifying. He would confess that he did not know what to say to a woman whose mouth and fingers suggested that she had been rending a victim and sucking its blood.

She drove her car back at speed, and between Dewhurst and Fernfield was confronted with a tradesman's van parked at the blindest of blind corners and the choice of taking her hazard or using her brakes. Being in the mood she was, she took the risk, and missed an oncoming car by inches. It happened to be Mallison, and she drew in on to the verge, pulled up, and walked back.

Mallison had pulled up also, but so as to clear the curve. His distant protest was ironical.

"My dear, you were almost death in a chariot."

She had stopped by the van. It was a baker's van, and in the driving seat sat a lout scribbling in a penny note-book.

"You damned nitwit, what do you mean by parking in a place like this?"

The lout gaped at her angry face, and became saucy.

"Got to stop somewhere, haven't I? Ought to teach you to be careful."

She looked as though she could pull him out of the seat and box his ears, and Mallison stood admiring her. She was much more handsome when her face was alive with anger.

"A congenital idiot like you shouldn't be in charge of a car. From Stantons, aren't you?"

"You can read?"

"I can. I'll call and see Mr. Stanton on the way home, and get you sacked. Now move your van."

The threat sufficed, as did the fierceness of her language and her face. Coo, if it wasn't Miss Lester of White Ways, his boss's best customer! He became meek and ingratiating.

"Sorry, miss. I'd just been to them two cottages. Yes, I didn't think."

He pressed the self-starter, revved up his engine, and fled, thinking that he would get in before her and make a tale of it to the boss. "Coo, you should 'ave 'eard 'er language! Well, I'd only stopped for two tics to drop a couple in at Fern Cot."

Mallison was left to sing a duet with her.

"The part of Bellona suits you."

His tawny eyes were liking her, and again she flared.

"O, shut up. I'm not feeling pussy-pussy."

"Claws out."

Was she to row with everybody on this September day? And suddenly her mood changed. Her self-love asked to be flattered and caressed.

"I've been bored stiff. Thought it my duty to show some interest in Jekyll's back-to-the-land business."

"And the interest wasn't there?"

"Hardly. Gone badly rustic, all of them."

He was pleased. He even laid his hand against her arm.

"Quite monastic, what, with Jekyll as the Abbot. But I

gather that even in the good old days Abbots were human, if pervertedly so."

She gave him a sharp glance.

"What on earth are you driving at?"

"Nothing, my dear, even though you nearly drove into me. Why not turn your car round and follow me home for a little drink?"

She hesitated, felt his tawny eyes somehow warming her petulant pride. Well, why not? Had he not burnt her letters, and taken things less for granted of late? Besides, he was man, very much man, and she was in a mood to listen to male music.

"I might, Mr. Tiger."

That had been her nickname for him when she had suffered him to prowl under her window.

"It's a good tiger."

"Tame?"

"Quite caged. Come into the cage and try. No whip needed."

She laughed. He saw that she was a little flushed and challenged, and that for some reason her mood was ripe to mate with his. Well, why not? If anyone could provoke a woman into feeling primitive, was not he that man? The right, temperamental occasion was the thing, when, for some reason, the wind of a desire blew and the leaves consented to the caress, and was not desire like the wind, incalculable and so confusing to the weather prophets? They assured you it would be north east, and lo, it came from the west, soft and douce and amorous.

Mr. Santer, Mallison's man, returning from giving his dog a run in the park, saw in the autumn dusk, a car standing in the drive. Santer went to peer at its radiator, and wrinkling up his cynical rubber nose, blew softly through his lips. Miss Lester's car! Well, well, Miss Lester had been off the menu for some time, but Santer knew that if you waited long enough pretty ladies might recur like *crème caramel* in an hotel chef's

weekly programme. Mr. Santer had in his more prosperous days fed upon crème caramel at Nice and Monte Carlo, but he was secretive as to his past, now that he had retired from crookdom to be the somewhat sinister servant of a sinister master.

The one creature he loved was his dog. He put up with many things because Nap did love the park, and chasing rabbits there. The terrier was sniffing at the car as though he could be just as discreet as his master.

Santer fondled his head.

“Ladies about, old lad. Have to put on felt slippers, what, and go easy.”

Mr. Santer left the dog in his bedroom, curled up on his bed, and changing his shoes for slippers, went prowling. No lights were on, and it was not yet time to think of laying the dinner table, and the women in the staff-room would be listening to Mr. Lovibond’s jazz band. Santer explored, going softly on surreptitious feet. The library? Yes. There was no light under the door, and he listened. Sounds, yes, rather significant sounds, and Santer smirked and licked his lips. Things were going on in there.

Later, when the opportunity was ripe, and the lady had gone, and his master was taking a bath, Santer went in and explored. H’m, yes, the sofa was revealing. No one had tidied it up, and the cushions, yes, were in a bit of a tangle. Mr. Mallison and the lady had had their romp.

He did not tidy the sofa. Such intimate evidences were best left untouched, at least by him. Mr. Mallison was not the sort of man to relish obvious nettoyage when exercised by his tame shadow. But Mr. Santer knew a thing or two, and had sampled certain occasions when the knowing of a thing or two had been profitable.

He slipped away to give Nap his evening meal of dog biscuits.

FANTASIA

White Ways had dined, and Jekyll and David were waiting in a corner of the lounge for their coffee. Their stay at the Country Club was coming to an end, and David was to leave before the others and camp out as a bachelor at Gate Farm.

Rachel came with their coffee.

"O, Rachel, is Miss Lester in?"

"Miss Lester has a headache, sir."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to ask her about something. To-morrow will do."

"Is Mr. Skelton taking coffee here, sir?"

"No, he is doing some letters in our sitting-room. Better take him a cup, Rachel."

As she entered the room carrying a cup on a tray she saw his dark head bent over the desk, and for a moment she let her eyes look at it as they wished to look.

"Your coffee, Mr. Skelton."

He glanced up sharply, and she saw his face by the light of the desk lamp, and for an instant he saw hers, somehow unveiled, yet mysterious and revealing.

"Thanks, Rachel. My coffee days here are numbered."

He seemed to look at her intently, yet like a man a little dazzled by something.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Yes, the furniture's going in next week. You haven't seen our place, have you?"

"No, sir."

"Like to? By the way, isn't to-morrow your afternoon?"

She hesitated. Her eyes were dark and steady and very grave. Her face seemed to have taken to itself an added and secret comeliness.

"I'd like to, Mr. Skelton."

"Come and have tea with us. We owe you one, after all the times you've——" He broke off and then added quickly: "I'll tell Mr. Jekyll. Will you come?"

She looked at the lamp.

FANTASIA

"I might."

"I know it is rather a tramp. I could run down in our small car and fetch you."

"No, I'd rather walk, Mr. Skelton. It's nothing to me."

"You mean, the distance?"

Their eyes met for a moment as though each of them questioned the inner meaning of those words.

"Yes, only three miles, isn't it?"

"About that, if you take that path up by Rustling Park. Know it?"

"I think so."

"It brings you out close to Fernfield. Our gate is about half a mile from Fernfield, on the right, just beyond the old toll house. The name's on it."

She smiled down at his upturned face. So many faces were lifted to her comely one, but so differently, and she had grown wise as to faces. This was one to which she could give the uttermost that was in her, were he to ask it, but that, somehow, was not in the world of reality. Most men wished you to be easy, being what you were, a waitress. Probably, they expected nothing else of you. And she was difficult. She would be difficult to the death, where she cared, and especially when the right man was so utterly misplaced for her.

She was aware of him looking at her strangely.

"We shall all be glad, Rachel. You might be able to put us wise as to some things. It's just a man's show."

"Who's going to cook for you?"

"Poor Parsons. And I believe he is hating it. Quite a monastic family. I'm glad you'll come."

She turned to go, and suddenly he rose, pushed his chair back, and went to open the door for her.

"Good night, Rachel."

She went out with her head up, dream faced.

"Good night, Mr. Skelton."

XIX

“I HAVE asked Rachel to come up and see the place this afternoon, sir. May we give her tea?”

He saw Jekyll's eyes narrow for an instant and throw at him one of those quick, searching glances that probe for motives.

“Of course, Jack. I ought to have thought of it.”

Skelton was typing a letter, and these few words, spoken between the clatter of the keys, sounded casual.

“Thank you. I think she is interested. And, after all, just tipping people doesn't always——”

“Pay for service. No, I agree. Good service is one of the most valuable commodities on the market, my lad, and it isn't always to be bought. The dear Victorians didn't always understand that. Thrusting Bibles and breeches on the heathen, and putting their menials to live in dark holes. Menial! What a word!”

Skelton pressed a lever, and the cylinder shot back.

“A beastly word.”

“A blackguardly word. Besides, Rachel is a rather unusual person. I've watched her for months. She's rather good to watch.”

Richard Jekyll had turned to the window, and was lighting a cigarette, and Skelton glanced at him, paused, and then rattled off a line of type.

“Yes, unusual.”

“In this sort of world, Jack. Do you know what she reminds me of?”

“What, sir?”

“One of those peasant women one sometimes sees in Italy,

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coming down a mountain path with a basket on her head. Straight, and sure-footed, and rather splendid. No, I am not being sentimental. One isn't sentimental about that sort of woman."

"You mean, she just is?"

"Yes, she just is, John, like a woman in the Bible."

Skelton's fingers went on hammering at the keys, and Jekyll took his cigarette and his reflections into the garden, and there he met Miss Lester coming down from her cottage and looking somehow as though her hair had been tiresome and contumacious. He wanted to speak to Miss Lester on a certain matter, but one glance at her revealed to him a woman whose temper was on edge. He smiled, gave her a "Good morning," and let her pass, and in passing he had a feeling that she did not wish to be spoken to. Yes, difficult young women, these sophisticated moderns, perpetually getting out of bed on the wrong side to titivate an ego that was somewhat like a dyspeptic stomach, queezy and petulant and resenting normal food. Was it lack of philosophy or lack of children and the organic reactions, or lack of God? Picking threads off a soul that had ceased to be silk? Dressing yourself in scratchy sackcloth and feeling the itch of not knowing what you wanted. Different from Rachel with her peasant's head and shoulders. One woman was real, the other a subject for psycho-analysis, that mumbo-jumbo of the moderns. Rachel! Good lord, was Jack——? And didn't quite realize it? Well, well! And the educated world would call him a crass sentimentalist. Mating with a handsome animal! That was the usual gibe of the too sophisticated. Babies and boredom. But, good God, where would the world be without babies, and were napkins quite as septic as some of the new and enlightened literature? Rachel was woman, Biblical woman. She would stand up better in a desert. She would come carrying her water pot on her head to quench your thirst, when some of her modern sisters would be registering temperament and calling for gin.

FANTASIA

About three o'clock that afternoon John Skelton began to feel restless. He was still at work on the orchard hedge, cutting it in and clearing the ground of brambles, but concentration was lacking, and he would stand and idly stare at the old trees and the fruit on some of them, and the sky between the branches. No one saw him lay his tools against a tree, put on his coat and vanish, but Jekyll, sauntering into the orchard, saw fork and slasher and fagging hook piled like a soldier's arms against a tree, and smiled and wondered. Well, well, youth must go as it listed, and not, please God, as it lusted.

Skelton was climbing gates or pushing through gaps in neglected hedges. On the last two fields he was a trespasser, but no one challenged him. He knew that by cutting across country he could strike the field-path by the boundary of Rustling Park, and save the detour by Fernfield. Action itself was sufficient, the urge unanalysed and real.

He came to a turning where a great beech tree overhung the park palings, throwing a wedge of shadow, and there he saw her. They came upon each other quite suddenly where the path curved, hugging the oak fence. He saw her hesitate, stand still. He saw more than that, that she was startled, afraid, and in that instant something in him knew that she was to him as no other woman had ever been. He was conscious of a pang of tenderness, a swift and sensitive shrinking from the thought of hurting her.

"Sorry, Rachel. Thought I'd meet you. I wasn't sure whether you knew the path."

She was in black, and wearing a little black hat, and her eyes looked as dark as her dress. He could not remember seeing her eyes so dark as this, or her face so set with pallor. And then he saw her smile, and her bosom rise as she drew her breath.

"I wasn't just thinking——"

"Of me?" and he laughed. "No, one's not quite so vain as that!"

She moved on towards him, and as he stood aside he noticed that she glanced at the fence.

"No, just for a second—— No, not quite that. Like being startled out of one's sleep."

He put himself beside her, keeping a little distance. What was it that had frightened her? A clash with Mallison, their dear neighbour? Or had she for a moment been afraid of him? He was conscious of a kind of silence within himself. If that was her fear he would see to it that she could trust herself with him.

The Rustling beeches were turning colour above an oak fence that was a greenish grey, and Skelton followed the fence; he was not going to take Rachel across country, but walk through Fernfield with her. Yes, and be proud of it, too. She looked so right in that simple black frock and hat, tall and straight, and as Jekyll had said like a woman with a basket of grapes on her head. Dignity. And why? Because she was unconscious of any pose, or as unconscious as a woman could be.

He began to tell her about the house and their plans.

"Yes, Hattersley has produced a regular *tour de force*. I mean, he and the builder have managed to get the new rooms up."

"But are they dry?"

"We've been lucky with the weather. We are putting the staff out at Fernfield for a month until the new radiators have done their job."

"And you and Mr. Jekyll are going in?"

"Well, we feel like it. We're in the old rooms. I've got a lovely window that looks down the valley to the sea."

Her face had become serene.

"So you are going to be a farmer?"

"Why not? I think it's in my blood. Besides, it's to be a new kind of farming. Also, Rachel, people who write poetry are, or should be, near to the soil."

She met his self-teasing smile, and answered it.

"And the winter?"

"Think you'll catch me out? I lived in the country, real country, until I was eighteen. One gets the feel of it. I'm not Bluewater."

"Nor I."

They came to Fernfield, a Fernfield whose elms were flecked with yellow, and Skelton walking beside her on the outside of the village path, felt somehow glad to be seen with her in this English street.

"Another idea of Mr. Jekyll. To build a village hall here. Concerts, you know, and dances."

"Yes, that would be good."

"Do you dance, Rachel?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps some day you'll dance with me?"

October was behaving kindly and they were able to use the table in the garden. Jekyll was there, not in his bricklayer's clothes, but wearing a lounge suit and a grey felt hat, and sitting almost demurely in a chair with a book. He drew in his long legs when Rachel and Skelton appeared at the gate, rose, took off his hat.

"Here you are. Very glad to see you, Rachel."

Her colour came for a moment.

"Thank you, sir."

"Sit down, my dear. Shall we have tea first, Jack, or show Rachel over the house?"

"Tea first, sir, I think. Is Parsons in?"

"He ought to be."

"I'll tell him. I say, Rachel, come and see the new kitchen. We're rather proud of it, much prouder than poor Parsons is."

Jekyll chuckled.

"Parsons is a creature of self-pity. Got to be educated out of it. Yes, show Rachel the kitchen."

Hattersley had evolved a super-kitchen complete with electric stove, refrigerator, labour-saving cabinets and gadgets, so that everything was to hand. There was also an Aga cooker that was used to supplement the electric one. The walls were tiled and enamelled cream. Had anyone asked Paul how he, a mere man, had created so efficient a domestic lab. he would have said that five years experience in the matter of cooking your own food and washing your own crockery had educated him to the job. An aluminium kettle was purring on the stove, and Parsons, cutting bread and butter, turned his little, tame, terrier face to the visitors, and for the moment seemed non-plussed.

“Afternoon, Rache.”

She smiled at Mr. Parsons, whereas Skelton could have kicked him. Rache, indeed! Parsons needed educating out of other crudities besides self-pity, but perhaps his inept naturalness was preferable to smug gentility.

“Not bad, is it?”

She surveyed the kitchen with interest. She addressed Parsons as Mr. Parsons, and asked him if he found the electric oven satisfactory. Parsons eyed her with puzzled suspicion. Had he been honest he would have replied that he had not yet tried the ruddy thing, and did not wish to try it. In his opinion Jekyll & Co. had gone completely potty.

“Come and look at our parlour, Rachel. Yes, we call it the parlour. Good old word.”

He retrieved her from the embarrassed sulkiness of Mr. Parsons, and led her back into the panelled room. It was unfurnished as yet, but on the stained floor old Persian rugs had been spread, their soft blurred colours somehow suggesting beds of flowers. He watched her face, and saw its dark eyes brighten as though she was quick to feel the tranquil beauty of this English room.

“Looks good, even without furniture?”

She smiled at him, and going to one of the windows, stood

there for a moment, looking at the green valley and the autumn woods with the sun shining upon them.

David had arrived, and was sitting on a box with his big knees thrust forward, and wearing what Skelton described as the bread and butter look upon his face. He had a healthy appetite, had David. But when Rachel came out of the white porch, he gathered his large self together, stood up, and smiled at her.

"Good business. I'm hungry."

"I never knew you anything else," said Skelton.

Parsons appeared with the brown tea-pot.

"Parsons, bring Miss Rachel our one chair. She's going to preside. Will you, Rachel?"

"If you want me to."

Parsons said: "Yes, sir," to Jekyll, and took his little snob's face back into the house. He considered this a case of rank trespass. Spoiling the girl, too! As if she wasn't too much the madam as it was. Parsons, the hunter of petticoats, had found no walls of Jericho falling when he had blown his amorous little trumpet. Yes, gentlemen ought to keep to their own preserves, and not go asking a girl like Rachel to tea with them. Bad for her, and somehow irritating to Mr. Parsons.

"We all take sugar, Rachel, and David takes four."

She said that she had noticed the fact and remembered it, and David saluted her with a raised fore-finger.

"Your servant, m'am. I'm flattered."

If the three of them made play to put her at her ease, this tacit conspiracy of courtesy was not needed. To Jekyll she appeared much more at her ease than Miss Lester had been, a girl sitting at a table in a cottage garden and pouring out tea for these countrymen whose simplicity was a product of the soil. And yet their courtesy was a complex virtue compounded out of sensitiveness and quick perceptions, no cut-throat, slapdash attack upon somebody's essential shyness.

If she was a little shy of them, which she was, she did not overdress her manners in order to appear at ease. Skelton, who was watching her with a kind of incredulous and protective wonder, was somehow both humbled and exalted within himself. He was beginning to love her in a way that he had not loved before, and being what he was, modern man and ready to be shocked by any splurge into sentimentality, he yet could sit and stare and find his beloved dignity in woman.

Said Jekyll, when they had smoked their pipes, and a subdued Parsons was clearing the tea table: "Better show Rachel the rest of the house, and let her criticize. In no hurry, are you, Rachel? We can all go down to White Ways in the Rolls."

It was growing dark amid the sand dunes when the big car pulled up outside the Country Club. Miss Lester happened to come out into the loggia as Sandys opened the nearside door. She saw Skelton and David emerge, and then Mr. Richard Jekyll who stood to give his hand to someone, a nice but supremely superfluous gesture. Rachel! Her head-waitress descending from Mr. Richard Jekyll's Rolls! Miss Lester turned sharply and walked back into the lounge like a woman closing a door upon some disturbing incident.

Parlour, dining-room, office, the office being a little, flat-roofed annexe attached to the east end of the farmhouse. Paul had pulled down a stone wall in one of the byres and used it for this extension so that the new should tone with the old. Skelton had been organizing his office, carting up ledgers and files and typewriter from White Ways in the second-hand to h.p. Morris. A shopping excursion into Poldermouth had provided him with shelves, a knee-hole desk, a cupboard, two office chairs, and a plain deal table.

On this table was spread the estate map upon which he and Hattersley had been at work, pinned at the corners with drawing-pins, and showing nice contrasts in colour, the grass

green, arable brown, houses and cottages pink, woods a darker green, orchards and gardens blue. The Sons of Sussex were showing a nice fancy in the renaming of the various fields, and from notes on a slip of paper John was marking the various fields and their acreage with a mapping pen. "The Gore"; "Pond Field"; "Orchard Wood"; "Sunny Acres"; "The Quad"; "Bosky Wood"; "Polder Meadows"; "The Osiers"; "Valley Forge". The new staff cottages were shown on the map, two by Orchard Close, and a group of eight on the Gate Farm road just below the sky line. Skelton's pen worked lovingly, and then paused at a point below Bosky Wood where a sheltered slip of grassland lay to the west of the farm track. His fancy played with that parcel of ground, imagining a small homestead standing there with an orchard behind it, and a garden going up to the door. Yes, he would like the place to have a low brick wall and box hedges, and a clipped yew on either side of the porch. There would be oak seats in the porch. The house would be rather long and low, sitting down like a brown bird on its nest. It would have green shutters, and a vine and honeysuckle and glycine up the walls. And who was going to live in it? John Skelton? Of course. But with a particular comrade, a countrywoman with dark eyes and a serene face that was innocent of art. No urban, sports-model young person, thank you, with a bright metallic voice, and a bald forehead and a vermilion mouth, whose manicured hands were fit only for a steering wheel or a tennis racket. He wanted a woman with breasts, and a fleece of good black hair, and strong arms and human wisdom, the sort of woman who would not sulk when you had a headache, and who, if you were feeling silent, would not throw sand at your soul's window.

He supposed that there were such women, a particular woman, Rachel!

So absorbed was he in this map business and in domestic dreaming that he did not notice a figure passing the office

window. A moment later he heard the porch bell ring, one of Forge Farm's new electric bells. He was alone in the house; for Mr. Jekyll had gone to London taking Parsons with him, to close up the St. John's Wood house and arrange for the removal of most of the furniture to Forge Farm. David was out with "Goliath," and Hattersley busy marking out the sites of the new cottages.

Skelton went to answer the bell, and found Mr. Siegfried Mallison standing on the doorstep.

"Ha, Mr. Skelton, I think? Good morning."

John stared at him. "Mr. Skelton, I think," indeed! Succulent ass! And John filled the doorway with a young man's unfriendly silence.

"Mr. Jekyll in?"

"No, he's away for a day or two."

"I'm sorry. I meant to have looked you up before. We're to be neighbours, I gather."

He smiled upon Skelton. He produced a cigarette-case, flicked it open, and held it out to John, but Skelton excused himself on the grounds that he smoked a pipe. Mallison lit one himself, and showed no inclination to remove himself from the porch. He was what John would have described as divinely affable. Well, what did his lordship want? Skelton maintained an air of alert reticence.

"Perfect contours, this valley. So comfortably English."

He pointed his cigarette at the landscape.

"Any more ragwort to eliminate, Mr. Skelton?"

"Ragwort, sir?"

"One of the five noxious weeds. That was rather a jest, wasn't it? You had me on it."

"Well, you sold it to us, sir."

"And made me use three men and a boy pulling up the stuff in my own park. No malice, Skelton. The joke was on me, I think."

John had to smile. After all, Mr. Mallison appeared to be

completely jocund and friendly, almost too friendly, and a surly dog in the doorway attitude did not seem quite adequate.

"Care to look round, sir? We have made a number of alterations."

The tawny eyes shone upon him.

"I should. Interesting experiment, apparently. I must say I am rather relieved that it is to remain Sussex."

His manner became intimate as though he was speaking to someone who understood.

"Yes, I sometimes feel rather guilty about Bluewater. Another experiment, but it has turned out rather like one of those little Riviera townlets, dope and decadence and no decalogue."

Skelton smiled a slow smile. His reticence was still alert, but putting a gentle face upon it. Did Mallison really regret Bluewater? It might be so, and that like other mortals he had been poisoning the air with his own and other people's prejudices. Anyhow, it would be churlish of him not to be civil to a man who was nearly twenty years his senior, and a considerable celebrity.

"Care to see over the house, sir? We are still waiting for the furniture."

"I should. Jekyll going to live here?"

"Yes. It will be our headquarters, and we call this the 'Orderly Room.'"

Mallison put his honey-coloured head into the office.

"Ha, the brain-centre, I see. Are you——?"

"I'm Mr. Jekyll's secretary."

They proceeded over the house, and in the kitchen Mallison asked what appeared to be the most innocent of questions.

"What about staff? I hope you won't have trouble. One has to bribe the beggars to stay in Arcady."

"We are having a male staff."

"Quite monastic!"

He smiled upon Skelton and behind the smile he was making significant observations. Yes, this was a pretty lad, with his white teeth and brown young skin and a sensitiveness that was almost feminine, Jove's lovely boy, quite up to the standard of Imperial Rome! Did he render unto Cæsar? They were climbing the stairs, and Mallison was interested in discovering that Forge Farm appeared to be class conscious, in that the sleeping quarters of master and secretary were secluded from the apartments of the staff. Very nice and aloof, and preserving a pleasant privacy. But Jekyll and Ganymede would share the same bath!

They were back in the garden, and Mallison observed and commented on Mr. Jekyll's half-built garden-house.

"Is that for the siesta?"

"O, possibly. When the weather——"

"Emphasize the when, Skelton. Our climate is feminine."

"I should have said it was rather male, sir."

"I'd query that. Sex is rather relative."

He strolled round the orchard, looked at the old farm buildings which had not yet been modernized, and drew Skelton's attention to what he called their nice, fingered and faded maturity. He said that he would like to grow old in that way, a statement which was vaguely insincere. And then he remembered that Skelton had much to occupy him in that mignon little office, and pulled a Mallisonian grimace, and took his leave.

"Please remember me to Mr. Jekyll. I hope we shall see something of each other."

Skelton hoped nothing of the kind, but he had reverted to his mood of polite aloofness. He stood and watched Mr. Siegfried Mallison's colourful figure take to the road and float towards the sky-line. Now what, exactly, had inspired this visit? He was not inclined to credit Siegfried Mallison with impulses towards friendliness.

Mallison had reached the white field-gate. He opened it,

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closed it, and turned to look at the view. Yes, on the whole, the excursion had been very profitable. He had discovered several facts that were of significance. Woman was not included in this celibate show.

DAVID had persuaded and paid the outgoing tenant of Gate Farm to cart and spread what dung there was on the best of the arable fields, and he and "Goliath" were mightily active. Carter was the only other man as yet who could handle a tractor, and Skelton, eager though he might be, did not feel himself capable of keeping a straight furrow, but there was work and enough to hand. Fifteen hundred fruit trees were to be delivered in November, and while David ploughed for his winter wheat and hoped that the seed-bed would not be too spongy, John marked out the planting pits in Orchard Close, and having put in his pegs, proceeded to dig the planting pits. It was no light job turning out the top spit and breaking up the subsoil in each three-foot hole, and after two days at it Skelton had to take to gloves. He would come in at sundown with his back feeling like the back of an old gentleman with incipient lumbago.

But, somehow, this labour in the land enthralled him. It was real and evidential and strangely consoling to his spirit. He would straighten his back now and again, and look down the valley and up at the sky, and at the woods in their autumn temper, and at the rows of pits with the brown soil lying beside them. A robin had joined him, a robin who gorged himself disgracefully, and yet whose black beads of eyes were always bright for more plunder. The high hedges were turning yellow against a gentle sky. Each morning his countryman's boots were wet with dew. He could feel his skin toughening and his muscles hardening. He would ask himself those pregnant questions. Did man become bored with labour, and why?

Was the modern scorn of physical effort, save in games, rational? Was the machine an actual emancipator of slaves? More leisure, a cultivation of contrasts? Yes, the machine might give one that, more time to use eyes and brain, to question and to explore. Would he endure? Well, yes, he hoped so. His activities were mixed, as an intelligent man's should be. Also, he was doing what the urge in him had chosen to do. "Follow your urge." It was inconceivable that big David should become bored with the life he loved, because in his case brain and guts were functioning together. It was a live job, fascinating, absorbing, challenging the pioneer in you, getting you short and cussed at times with pests and provocations and the whimsies of the weather. No, he was not going to fall down at it, or become plaintive like some little, urban squirt who, when his back ached, or his boots got wet, would twitter that such a life was an insult to an educated man. Education! What rot much of it was! A process that persuaded you to wear a white collar, and enabled you to read the Daily This or That and consume it like so much pap, but which, if Nature turned on you, might leave you as helpless as a motherless pup.

Moreover, he had the future before him. His ambition was to direct, and how could you justify authority unless you were a master of method and a man of your hands? He had David's example to follow, for David was not only an expert in theory, but he had soil-sense, and could handle a tractor with a plough or reaper attached, doctor a sick beast, and swing a felling-axe. The need was to know with both head and hands, and then your men would follow you, and not call you a pup behind your back. He had a part to play, not only as Jekyll's secretary and accountant, but as the future manager of a part of the estates. If the Sons of Sussex multiplied, and already they were casting possessive eyes over neighbouring farms, the enterprise might grow too extensive for one man's supervision, and he and Garton would share it. For, not only had you to produce your product, but to find your market and provide

transport to that market. A fleet of lorries would become necessary. Administration would grow more complex. Jekyll was considering a co-operative scheme, which would be put into action when the new community had justified itself. All the workers would be shareholders, with a personal stake and a pride in the show.

How important was a man's pride, his feeling that he mattered, that he was more than a mere card to be covered with insurance stamps!

Yes, and if this was to be his life, poetry in action, would he not wish to share it with someone? and that someone would need to be a comrade capable of living such a life. Working man and working woman, not a luxury product, a potential or actual snob, but a woman who had the wisdom of the worker. Neither too complex nor too simple. Strong and steadfast, of a serene and generous temper, and with an understanding heart. Was he a sentimentalist in dreaming of this? Was he the fool of an illusion? What was illusion? That which you wished, but which in willing transformed into reality. Not mere sense enchantment, a week-end urge, but something gradual and profound and steadfast, which grew like a tree out of the soil. You had to choose wisely and rightly for that. Health and strength and a comely face that betokened a comely nature, a woman who kept the fire of life alight, and could be tender to you and honest and so much flesh of your flesh and spirit of your spirit, that her passing would mean the end of things.

Poet and peasant. Yes, such was his desire.

It was little Jettison who, just before the fall of the leaf, was the victim of a fantastic incident.

The season had been a good one for the artist, and in September Jimmie had bought a thing which he and his wife had long coveted in secret, a car. It was a very small car, and second-hand at that, and James was neither an expert driver

nor anything of a mechanic, but he and June were like two children with a much desired toy. The thing gave them mobility, contrasts. June could go shopping in Poldermouth.

It happened in this way, as Jettison described it to sundry men in The Poop of Ye Golden Hinde. He had been out painting in the Polder Valley, and packing up at dusk had taken the lane that ran from the main road to the top of Stony Hill, and in the middle of a wood half-way up a sharp rise, "Polly's" engine had stalled. James had got out and fiddled; meanwhile darkness had descended, and when at last he had the engine going, the lights had failed. Battery run down, so thought Jettison, so he had sat in the car and let the engine run to charge up the battery, and then switched on once more. The side lights, but not the headlights, had responded. He had got out of the car again to have a look at the lights, and suddenly the headlights had flared out at him. It was then, he swore, that he had a most queer feeling that he was not alone in the blackness of that woody lane. Something or somebody was watching him. He had faced about and seen, not ten yards from him, a figure that seemed to be gliding along the grass and brushing close to the hedge. He had seen it for an instant quite clearly in the light of the lamps, and then it had melted into the hedge and vanished.

"I'll swear it was Mallison, all in black. He had something in his hand."

"Go on, Jimmie. Don't be macabre."

But Jettison had stuck to his story.

"I tell you I'd swear to it."

"Mallison in black tights, doing what?"

"Well, God knows what he was up to. I saw the light on his beard. Anyhow, I tell you I was scared."

"What of, Jimmie?"

"Something sinister. Like a kid in the dark, I suppose. Anyhow, I bundled in and drove off and got out of that wood as fast as Polly would take me."

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“What was in the mysterious creature’s hand, a dagger?”

“The thing looked rather like a mallet.”

“O, James dear, what was in your thermos?”

But though no one had believed him Jettison had stuck to his story until one or two people in Bluewater had begun to wonder whether the fantastic incident had not been more than fancy masquerading in the macabre.

Bluewater’s season was drawing to an end. A few of its inhabitants remained during the winter, but most of them were migrants. Mr. Montague Dax went to Monte Carlo, Douglas Tew to Taormina, Miss Mewburn to any place where life and your clothes were not too constricted. But Mrs. Latham remained at her shop, and Miss Nuttal among her jumpers, because they could not afford to go elsewhere. It was the same with the Jettisons and Hattersley. Archie Stout managed to maintain a mild winter season, and he and Ann Lester were considering the laying out of a nine hole golf course for the benefit of a few elderly gentlemen who liked mild exercise and good food and comfortable beds.

But, before Bluewater migrated, it celebrated. Miss Lester was asked to give a gala dinner and a dance in the lounge. Miss Mewburn and sundry other ladies would make whoopee. Two or three bright young men would be asked down for the week-end. Much drink would be consumed.

The affair took place on the last Saturday before Mr. Jekyll and Skelton moved into Forge Farm, and it was to be the cause of a chivalrous fracas in which John and Mr. Gerald Fuchs were concerned. David, who had come down from Gate Farm for the evening, was also involved in the scrimmage, but repressively so.

It was a very noisy dinner. Crackers were provided, and pompons, and paper things that shot out when you blew them. Dancing was to begin at nine, but before the dancing, several excited young men headed by Gerald Fuchs, insisted on playing kiss-in-the-ring. And their first victim was Rachel; Rachel,

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who, for secret reasons of her own, had been serene and icy and refusing to respond to quips and glad-eyes and provocations. From their corner table Skelton was watching her and the crowd, and she was so very much aware of it and of his rather fierce face. She did not want to be cheapened before him. She cherished her dignity, a dignity which these half-intoxicated young men did not fancy.

It was Fuchs who seized her from behind by the shoulders, and tried to force her from the staff doorway into the lounge. There was a struggle between them. She escaped for a moment, only to be seized and rather roughly so, a second time.

"Come on, my lass."

"Please leave me alone, sir."

"Come on. You know you'll like it. No kidding."

She was angry. Her apron was torn in the scuffle, while several bright lads stood round and applauded.

"Attaboy!"

"Ain't she coy!"

"Man-handle her, Gerald."

It was then that the intervention occurred, and David was too late to prevent it. Skelton was across the lounge with a face that was very white and dangerous. He got Mr. Fuchs by the collar, swung him, and sent him sprawling spread eagled across the polished floor. Nothing was said. Mr. Fuchs got up, made a dash at Skelton, and was floored. Two of the bright lads showed signs of laying hands upon Skelton, but David barged in, and with spread arms, swept them aside.

"No rough house. Kennel up."

Rachel had vanished, and Mr. Fuchs had picked himself up, looking pale and sobered.

"What the hell are you playing at? Can't we rag?"

Skelton walked across to him, and Mr. Fuchs backed away.

"Not that sort of ragging."

It was Jekyll who poured oil and a delicate sarcasm on the troubled waters. He said that certain propensities did not mix,

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like certain drinks, and that Miss Lester had asked him to suggest that the orchestra had better play. "Bluewater or the Blue Danube, gentlemen, not Blackwall or Bermondsey. Personally, I prefer to dance," and dance he did, his first partner being Miss Lester. Skelton and David got hold of the Wilmer girls, and the froth departed from the surface of things, though Gerald Fuchs disappeared with a split lip and the sulks. Nor was Mr. Montague Dax long a member of the party. Meeting the glimmer of David's spectacles and the ironic eyes behind them in the circuit of the lounge, his male insolence was somehow cramped and challenged. He faded away into the autumn night with Miss Mewburn on his arm. The bright young men behaved themselves, and the orchestra played "Cheek to Cheek."

But Miss Lester was in a very difficult mood, even during Jekyll's second dance with her, distraught and yet alert, like a woman watching and listening for the return of a prodigal husband. She danced on wires, with rigid back and shoulders. As to her conversation, it was disconnected and not quite rational. Mr. Jekyll, feeling somehow sorry for her, tried sympathy and was snubbed.

She said: "I don't like young men who go native."

Mr. Jekyll let the condemnation pass, but he did suggest that Mr. Fuchs was rather a noisome rat, and better in a hole of his own, than performing in public.

"O, there's no harm in Gerald. He's just a play-boy."

Mr. Jekyll could not help saying that it was unfair to force play upon the wrong person, and felt her stiffen. She said "Excuse me," and detached herself. She had seen Rachel pass round the lounge on her way to the dining-room where the tables had to be cleared and the floor swept. A moment later, Skelton, who was not dancing this dance, followed her. Two other girls were at work in the room, and Rachel paused just beyond the screen that kept the draught from the swing doors.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. Will you forgive me?"

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She did not look at him, but began to gather up the coloured remnants of crackers. Her silence challenged and hurt him.

"I know I shouldn't have lost my temper. I——"

She gave him one quick glance.

"It shouldn't have mattered."

"My dear, I can't agree to that. What I mean is—— Well, I simply couldn't stand seeing that cad——"

And then he became aware of Miss Lester standing just inside the glass doors, watching them with such an air of refrigerating and cut-lipped disapproval that he could not even smile the thing off or think of what to say.

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Skelton——"

He found his voice.

"I was just apologizing for having made a scene. I'm afraid one can't do more than that."

"Have you quite finished?"

Her voice whipped him back to sanity.

"Yes. Come and dance."

"Thanks, I have other things to see to. One of the Wilmer girls is sitting out. The one you rather fancy."

He could have smacked her face. His eyes gleamed at her: "You cat."

"Thanks, if you don't feel like dancing. I'm the same. Bed's not a bad place. Good night, Rachel," and he went off, head in air, to bed.

Forge Farm was furnished. That is to say the furniture had been placed in the house, but the ultimate grouping and placing of the various pieces was a delicate matter. If Richard Jekyll was fussy upon one particular subject, it was in the arranging of furniture, especially when it consisted of very exquisite period pieces. The William and Mary black and gold lacquer cabinet had to stand just where the light fell slantingly upon it, and not too near the fire. Parsons and Sandys moved it five times before Mr. Jekyll was satisfied. And

then a Persian rug had to be so placed that it provided a kind of flowery praying-mat before this particular shrine. Two china-cabinets occupied two corners, and Jekyll spent most of one day arranging the pieces until the colour-pattern pleased him. A Queen Anne bureau stood with its back to the wall between the two windows. There was a Spanish leather screen, four red and gold brocaded chairs, and as a compromise to comfort a Chesterfield sofa and two armchairs. Persian and Spanish plates lit up the panelling, and a round Georgian mirror over the mantelpiece concentrated in its profundities all the colour and the charm of this perfect parlour.

If Jekyll was satisfied, Mr. Parsons was not. He confided to Sandys that all this posing and reposing of furniture was like a ruddy game of tig. Yes, he was fed up. He had no domestic ties, and with no petticoats nearer than Bluewater, life was not adequate. Yes, he would give notice. He had heard that Robert was retiring from White Ways, and that Rachel had got the sack, and the post of head waiter at the Country Club would suit him better than this monastic job.

"Please yourself," said Sandys, who was married and had two children, and for whom Jekyll was putting up a cottage, "if you think you can find a better boss, find him. But if you ask me I think you're a fool."

"I'm not asking you."

"Righto. Then keep your grouching to yourself. I'm satisfied."

"You would be."

Sandys left it at that, for he had ideas of his own upon service, and had a married brother and his wife whom he was thinking of inserting into this most comfortable billet. Moreover, Sandys knew that Jekyll did not believe in leaving those who served him long and loyally, in the lurch. Sandys was down in Mr. Jekyll's will for four thousand pounds, and he knew it.

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The dining-room was dressed with Jacobean oak. It contained a large and massive oak cupboard which changed its position four times before Mr. Jekyll was satisfied. Parsons sweated and swore secretly over their struggles with that ponderous press. The gate-legged table was less exacting in its choice of a position. The Welsh dresser stood opposite the window. Oak wheel-backed Windsor chairs were padded with Venetian-red cushions. Parsons was given to understand that he would be responsible for polishing all this furniture. The suggestion caused him to polish yet more sedulously his self-pity. He had been provided with a pantry-boy, who, according to Parsons, was the world's worst nitwit, and another lad was expected.

Parsons overthrew all these domestic arrangements by giving notice.

Mr. Jekyll accepted it with pleasant serenity.

"Any alternative in prospect, Parsons?"

"Yes, sir, I have. I think Miss Lester will engage me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, you see, sir, Robert is retiring, and the head-waitress has been given the sack."

"Rachel?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is a rather crude way of putting it. Very well, Parsons, I think we shall survive the crisis."

That same evening Sandys wired to his brother.

"Come at once. Best job in England on the market.
BOB."

Richard Jekyll sat for five minutes contemplating his lacquer cabinet and its almost symbolic figures before deciding to pass on a particular piece of news to John. Had that fracas been the cause of Rachel's expulsion, and if so how responsible was hot-hearted youth for this denouement? Yes, in spite of

sentiment, or because of it, John ought to know. Romance can be like a dangerous drug or doped wine, if it is drunk together by the wrong people; and yet, without the romantic element, was anything in life full flowered? To blaze with an intelligently planned and coldly calculated comradeship! That which could appear perilous and preposterous to the benign cynic of fifty, might be blood and beauty and a revelation to the young.

But—Rachel! A mate for a sensitive, cultured creature like Skelton! Poet and peasant! But, if there was anything maternal in Rachel, those simple yet profound qualities that are rooted in human tenderness——? Yes, it was all damned difficult. Love did not always bring understanding, but when it did, paradise was not lost, but regained.

He said to himself: "You sentimental old idiot," and went out in search of Skelton.

He found him in the old hop-garden, digging planting pits with two local men whom David had taken on temporarily. He called John aside, and strolled away with him down one of the hedges.

"Parsons has given notice."

"I rather thought he would, sir."

"He tells me he thinks Miss Lester will take him on."

"Oh!"

"Robert is retiring, and——"

Skelton's head came round with a jerk.

"Then——?"

"I understand from Parsons that Rachel has left."

There was silence, and Jekyll did not offer to break it, or to lay obvious emphasis on this significant piece of news. Its significance was John's affair, and his authority did not pretend to cover his staff's private emotions.

"Sandys has a married brother who might suit us. Sandys has asked me to interview him. The wife is a good cook. I believe he is coming down from London to see me."

Skelton's thoughts were elsewhere.

"It sounds a good proposition, sir."

"We'll countermand our second pup. I can't say I am attracted to Bannister," Bannister being the pantry-boy who had been supplied by a charitable institution.

"No, rather snotty," said Skelton absently.

"We will give him a chance to train on the farm. I think he is rather too strong, John, in more senses than one, for domestic service."

"I quite agree, sir."

Jekyll turned away from the hedge and strolled across the future orchard, ostensibly to look at the planting pits.

"How many dug, John?"

"About a thousand."

"I'm glad you agree about the staff. I'm just going across to Gate Farm. David wants to see me about the lorry."

Skelton dug three more planting pits, and then he left his spade standing, and going across to the hedge took his pullover and jacket from a thorn bough. A word or two shouted to the men, and he was across the road, and breaking away across country at a trot. It took him about twenty minutes to reach Bluewater, and at the end of Love Lane he turned aside to Hattersley's bungalow, for he had an idea that Paul was at home working out specifications. It was so. He found Hattersley, sitting on a box in his workshop, smoking a pipe, with a mass of papers spread upon his bench.

"I say, Paul."

"Hallo, Jack!"

"Have you heard the news about Rachel?"

Hattersley had. He gave John a paternal look, for the face of youth can be an open book.

"Yes, she's gone to Archic's."

"As a——?"

"Florrie is getting married, and she, Rachel, I mean, is just the person——"

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He did not look too closely at Skelton's face.

"Ann's a bit difficult, these days. I think you'll——"

"Thanks, old man," and Skelton was gone.

He found Archie Stout at the Golden Hinde slipway, helping to haul up a sailing dinghy that was going into winter quarters. Skelton helped to heave on the rope, and to manhandle the boat across the little quay into Stout's boathouse.

"Come and have one, Jack."

They found The Poop empty, save for the very person whom John had come to see, Rachel, polishing the oak settle with a blue and white duster. Whether Stout was wise as to the situation Skelton never knew, but he found an excuse for taking himself off and leaving the two together.

Skelton glanced at the closed door and then at Rachel bending to her work, sleeves rolled up, her white forearms showing.

"I've only just heard. I'm sorry, Rachel. It must have been my fault."

She did not turn her head.

"It was nobody's fault, sir."

"For God's sake don't call me sir. If people lost their tempers, I believe you are the only one who didn't."

"Well, it just happened, Mr. Skelton."

"I wish you'd tell me how."

"I'd rather not."

"Did a certain person lose her temper?"

Rachel was silent, her duster sweeping to and fro over the back of a settle.

"I see. Loyalty. You don't want to tell tales. I'm rather glad. But I had to come down and——"

"Well, it's all over, Mr. Skelton. Florrie is leaving, and Mr. Stout wants me to carry on."

"I'm glad. He's the best of good sorts. But, Rachel, you're going to be friends with me, aren't you?"

The hand with the duster came to rest for a moment.

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“What do you mean by friends, sir?”

He took three strides towards her, laid a hand on her shoulder gently but meaningly.

“You’re not to call me sir. Look at me for a moment, my dear. There’s nothing in me you need fear.”

But she would not look at him. She stood with head half averted, her hands hanging.

“There might be——”

“My dear, you don’t quite understand me yet, but please God you will. I——”

And then they heard carefully emphasized footsteps in the passage and the door opened, or rather it was bumped open by Archie Stout’s knee. He had two bottles of beer with him, one in his left hand, the other tucked under his left arm.

“Nice and cold from the cellar, my lad. Rachel, my dear, you might find us two glasses.”

XXI

DAVID, as behoved a farmer, made it his business to attend the weekly market at Poldermouth, and being in search of a few young beasts for fattening, he was strolling between the cattle pens, occasionally prodding an animal with the point of an ash stick, when someone accosted him. The someone had a full and pleasant voice, and a face to match, but when David met the stranger's blue eyes he got the impression that they were not friendly.

"Mr. Garton, I understand?"

The man had the air of being that rather rare creature, the genuine gentleman farmer, and as a matter of fact he was more than that. In age about fifty, full faced, ruddy, he suggested the Georgian squire, but he had more culture, more brightness of eye than a man of the eighteenth century, and when he introduced himself, David knew that he was in the presence of a somewhat formidable person. Sir Roger Ticehurst! Yes, a very considerable landowner who was also a professional farmer. And the Ticehursts had been Ticehursts since the days of King Hal.

"Buying beasts?"

"Looking, sir."

"Rather a thin day, I'm afraid. I gather you are Mr. Richard Jekyll's agent."

"Yes, agent and manager, sir."

"Do you mind my asking you a question?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Rumour has it that you are proposing to pay your men at more than the Wages Board rate. Is that true?"

"Quite true, sir."

Sir Roger rubbed a dominant chin, which, fifty years or so ago would have carried a blunt black beard.

"That raises a very serious question, Mr. Garton. Do you quite realize its implications?"

"Just how, sir?"

"Well, disturbing local conditions, perhaps making things rather awkward for your neighbours, and upsetting their men."

"I see, sir, paying what one calls an uncommercial wage?"

"Exactly. It is a rather serious business."

He was polite, and not in the least pompous, and he spoke to David as to an equal, and Garton knew that he was dealing with no bully, but with a potent person who had very definite views upon agriculture and its economics.

"May I ask you a question, sir, in return?"

"Certainly, Mr. Garton."

"Are your young men staying on the land?"

Ticehurst took the question as he would have taken a straight, clean blow. He showed no annoyance, and his eyes did not waver.

"Some are."

"Not many."

"Not as many as I should like."

"And they are going into the police, or into garages, or on buses, or they are working on the roads or on the new aerodromes?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's true, in part."

"And what is the alternative, sir? To make it worth their while to stay? Better pay, better housing, a chance to see something of life, even to play."

"That's the urban idea, Mr. Garton."

"No, sir. If you'll excuse me saying so, it's the twentieth-century idea. I'm young enough myself to understand what the younger men want. And we have got to meet them, somehow. That's at the back of our experiment."

Sir Roger smiled at him with grim tolerance.

"Experiment! Exactly. That may be interesting to a man who can afford to crash, but it might be damned embarrassing to your neighbours. I'd rather like to talk this over with Mr. Jekyll."

"You'll find him open minded, sir."

The other gave a shake of the head, rather like a bull when he clashes a horn against a gate.

"Open mindedness is sometimes damned dangerous, Mr. Garton, the doctrinaire's dream. Well, good morning. You might find yourself boycotted, you know. That's not a threat, but a friendly warning."

David carried this piece of news with him back to Forge Farm, and after a dinner cooked by the new Mrs. Sandys and served by her husband, Jekyll and his two young men sat down in the parlour to take council together. Sir Roger Ticehurst's attitude was, to a point, rational and comprehensible. He was stressing the economic side of the problem at the expense of its psychological elements, though, as Jekyll remarked, the socialists themselves held economics to be the dominant factor. Once again they were confronted with the eternal problem of profits. Ticehurst would argue, and reasonably so, that without profits no enterprise can endure, and that a bankrupt agriculture world necessitates no wages of any sort for the men. With an empty exchequer, sentiment itself would run dry, so that in the hard logic of the purely capitalist world sentiment was a mere pleasant perfume emanating from profits.

"For the sake of argument, David, if they decided to boycott us, what could they do?"

"Not very much, sir. Freeze us out of the local markets, perhaps. Try and persuade the N.F.U. to bring pressure to bear."

"We should have the men on our side."

"Obviously. Who is going to quarrel with an extra pound a week?"

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"I suppose the merchants would not cut off our supplies, or refuse to sell us implements?"

"Hardly, sir."

"And the official world?"

"They could go for us for underpaying, but not for raising wages."

"So, it would be largely a question of markets?"

"I think so."

"We might have to make our own markets. That would be feasible?"

"O, yes. I think we should find a ring against us only in the local markets, and we could ignore them."

"What about the local millers?"

"There is only that Poldermouth mill, sir. I don't see how they could refuse to do business. Besides, at the worst we could send to the port mills."

"Or buy our own mill."

"Or switch over to something that would side-track them."

It was Skelton, who had been listening and biting hard on the stem of his pipe, who threw in a remark that lifted the whole problem from the particular to the universal.

"Hasn't reform always come from outside, and hardly ever from inside an industry? I mean, that a new idea or method, or a new spirit has had to be injected by someone whom a privileged class regarded as an outsider?"

Jekyll chuckled.

"So, I am the outsider, John! Besides, there is nothing very original in my idea."

"It means subsidizing wages."

"By a private individual, but not by the state. One might call it a redistribution of capital."

"But your capital decreases year by year."

"As my capital, but it reappears in our co-operative community as land, and its fertility, buildings, equipment, pro-

duce, and, one hopes, in the lives and good will of the producers."

"You lose that others may gain, sir."

"O, no, John. I gain a good deal, too, but for heaven's sake don't let me be smug about it. It's the smugness of our Left Wing friends that makes one stand aside and hold one's nose. Rank virtue has a nasty odour. But your point leads one to ask the pregnant question. Are we justified in putting our experiment to the proof, even though it may alienate and injure some of our neighbours?"

David was hugging his knees.

"They haven't a solution. We are trying to find one. Isn't that our justification?"

Skelton gave a quick toss of the head.

"I'm with you, David. I suppose we are young, sir."

"I'm not exactly senile! It's the experience of history, isn't it, that new methods must hurt a section of the community? Paraffin killed colza, oil is cutting in on coal. The petrol engine is making the breeding of horses an archaic industry. Even the medical profession finds itself in competition with osteopaths and masseurs. The lawyers may be still somewhat secure in the jungle-world of their jargon. You'd try a stride forward, John, even though you had to leave some stick-in-the-muds in the village pond?"

"Isn't it inevitable, sir? Life's always a curve, and it has to go up or down."

"And we shall either go up or down! And if we can manage to make our curve rise, even a little?"

"Or in several interwoven spirals?"

"Not merely the profit curve. Yes, that modern riddle of the Sphinx! To be free men, individuals, not ciphers in an ideology. Freedom to hold what you have, within reason, and to possess what you have made. A just, kindly, compromising world recognizing the realities of differing social values. I often think that the Totalitarians are the cynics. They so despair of

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individual man, that they would coerce him brutally and cram him into a mass-production mould. What a prospect! I would rather be air, fire or water than slavish clay."

He looked at them whimsically, the wrinkles showing at the corners of his eyes.

"There's a nice bit of rhetoric for you."

"It isn't rhetoric, sir," said David, "it's what some of we young men would spill blood for, we who don't believe in big drums and flag-wagging and one universal robot gesture, and patriotic parrot squawk. We want to be free to do."

"Yes, David, yes, without having to fill in a form or bribe somebody, before you are allowed to do anything. So, I take it, we go forward?"

David's spectacles twinkled.

"Heil, Jeykll, sir!"

Trees, trees, and yet more trees, lorry loads of trees. David had put every available man on to the job of planting, and on the day before the trees were expected, a long laying-in trench had been dug. It was perfect weather. There had been no frost to speak of during the autumn, and the soil had not been chilled. The day was windless and gently grey, with occasional sunlight breaking through. The trees, four year olds, were laid in the trench, and the roots covered with soil, each breed stacked together, and to save confusion and loss of time David marked each section of the laying-in trench with wooden pegs bearing the name of each variety. White Hart, Early Frogmore, Biggareau, Czar, Giant Prune, River's Early, Victoria, Lanes' Prince Albert, Bramley, Cox's Orange. Each planting party consisted of two men, one to fill in soil, the other to hold and tread. David himself lifted the trees from the laying-in trench, examined them, and with a pair of scateurs, trimmed off any torn and jagged roots. The rows of planting pits also had been marked in sections so that the planting-parties worked to plan.

Jekyll had come down to help, and he and Skelton worked together, John with the spade, Jekyll steadying the tree and treading in the soil about the roots after the tree had been shaken to sift the earth in about the root-system. Every now and again David would come striding between the pits, to stand and watch the work, and to assure himself that the men knew their job and were not scamping it. Staking was not necessary, for the trees were well rooted and nicely shaped, and with the soil well firmed there would be no wind-rock.

"Good stuff, sir. People like Banyard's never send out rubbish."

Jekyll, looking along the rows of planted trees, saw them as they would be in the coming springs, aisles of floweriness. He smiled, and forgot to give the tree he was holding its soil-settling shake.

"Shake, sir, please."

"Sorry, John. Dreaming."

He smiled down at Skelton's flushed and gently sweating face.

"I ought to take a turn with the spade, John."

"If you like, sir."

"Your turn to stand and stare."

Mallison, passing that way in his car, pulled up and got out to satisfy a curiosity that was not idle. He had a passenger with him, and he made a sign to young Fuchs to come and join him on the grass verge. There was a gap in the hedge here where a tree had died and been felled, and the space closed with chestnut paling. The men were working some fifty yards from the gap, and none of them noticed the two figures standing in a frame of yellow hazel leaves which were beginning to fall.

Skelton was feeling in his pocket.

"Gosh, I've forgotten my handkerchief!"

The simple urge was as simply remedied.

"Can't use fingers, my lad, though they say it is the most efficient method. Try mine."

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"Won't you want it, sir?"

"No. Clean this morning. I believe the young elegants in Queen Bess's time blew upon their fingers."

"Not good for the spade, sir, when it's shared."

Mallison had a smirk on his face, but Gerald Fuchs was scowling.

"Even in labour, Gerald, they are not divided."

"Most touching," drawled Fuchs.

"And observe, they share handkerchiefs. How does that strike you?"

"Rather sick-making."

Mallison swung round.

"There's some advantage in that sort of relationship. Well, well, Jove and Ganymede planting apples! Up with the May-pole, Gerald!"

And they returned to the car.

David now had engaged six men, a number more than adequate to deal with two hundred acres, helped by a mechanized equipment, but Jekyll wished to employ as much labour as the land could carry. Moreover, the men had been picked from a number of applicants or had been known personally to David, and even though the unit might be above strength, a good man when once engaged, was worth treasuring. Carter was to be in charge of the tractor and all the operations connected with it, ploughing, cultivating, reaping. Vines was the stockman, a little, wiry fellow with shrewd eyes and the face of a gipsy. Albert Spray, a Sussex lad, who had worked for five years on a fruit farm, and was familiar with pruning, spraying, grading and packing, was to be responsible for the orchard. The three labourers, Thomas, Allwork and Hoad, all youngish men and married, were steady fellows.

Early in November Jekyll gave a staff supper at Forge Farm, and when the meal was over, and pipes were lit and glasses filled, Jekyll, sitting at the head of the table, explained his

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scheme to the men. He was completely frank with them, having been warned by David that the countryman's mind is apt to be slow in accepting any innovation, and to be suspicious of slop. A thing might sound too good to be true, or it might be just a rich man's hobby which he would tire of in a couple of years. David had said to him: "What these chaps value more than anything is security, and security isn't wholly a question of cash, sir. It means goodwill, mutual respect, a feeling that the ship's a happy one. Don't think I'm being cheeky. You know this as well as I do. But when a man says: 'This is a good place' he means all sorts of things, that he's not going to be shouted at or messed about, that his boss is what he calls a sport, and that the management knows its job. They resent little meannesses, being put off for bad weather. Give them human consideration, and you'll never regret it, with the right men. They are as wise as to rotters as we are, and love 'em even less. A firm hand, yes. They'll respect you for it, if you are just and kind. A good man likes to know where he is, and what is expected of him. He doesn't want slop one day, and abuse the next. I have no use at all for the cynics who say that a man will always take advantage of you if you treat him as a human being. He won't. I've always found that one gets what one gives."

Jekyll sketched out his scheme to these working men. He was terse and frank; he enumerated simply the salient points, almost as though he were enumerating a new agricultural creed.

This was to be an experiment in life on the land, in which they would attempt to prove that farming could pay its way, and show a profit.

It was and yet was not a commercial enterprise.

No interest would be paid on the capital involved. That is to say he, as chairman and the provider of the capital, did not ask for any return.

He was ready to trade at a loss, so far as he was concerned,

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for a number of years, until a profit, however small, was shown.

He hoped to work the scheme co-operatively.

If any profits accrued they would be shared by the staff in proportion to their wage-rate.

The new cottages would be let at an agricultural rent.

Every man could feel secure provided he did his job, and satisfied himself, the management and his fellows.

But, in such a scheme, goodwill was necessary. Also, it would be up to every man to pull his weight.

Three pounds a week would be the minimum wage rate, with a higher rate for experts. There would be no laying off for bad weather.

Mr. Garton had suggested that other industries such as rug and broom and hurdle making might be developed for work in bad weather. The company was to be known as "Sons of Sussex," and would trade as such, and every man should try to regard himself as a son.

What he wanted to emphasize was that the show was a community affair in which all should take a pride and an interest.

Any man who let down the company was letting down his fellows.

Suggestions that would assist the scheme in practical matters would be welcomed from any member.

There would be a committee meeting once a month, and all workers could attend.

Accounts could be inspected. Profit and loss would be shown in a way that any man could understand.

It was hoped that the enterprise would be expanded in the future, but this expansion would depend upon the co-operation of them all.

No man need suspect that this was an ingenious project to push them to give of their best while some other person pocketed secret profits.

It was not a charity.

He, Richard Jekyll, wanted it to be regarded as a kind of brotherhood.

Everybody seemed to be agreed that something had to be done to try and keep the workers on the land.

This was an attempt to solve that problem.

Wages were too low, yet the experts said that a state subsidy in aid of wages was impossible.

The only solution seemed to be to pay those higher wages, and to try by expert methods and hard work to make the product of the soil justify the higher rate of pay.

While giving them this simple explanation of the scheme, he watched the men's faces, and their faces told him nothing, and he was moved to reflect that this little audience of six landworkers was the most difficult audience he ever had handled. He had addressed boards of directors and meetings of shareholders and had dealt with suspicious gentlemen who had got up to heckle him, and he had been able to sense the friendliness or the hostility of an audience, but these countrymen were different. He had no feeling of having made contact with them. It was impossible to tell what they were thinking, if they were thinking of anything. Their stolid faces might be concealing suspicion and doubt, but they did not express it. He felt rather like a literary gent who had invaded the taproom of a country pub, and who was trying to be matey with a party of rustics who had become mute and uneasy and mistrustful in his presence. They smoked their pipes, and drank their beer, and were completely and dumbly baffling.

The humour of the thing piqued him. Did these plain men think him a fool? Were they unconvinced of his sincerity? He was aware of David restlessly coiling and uncoiling his long legs.

"I suppose you men are wondering why I am doing this?"

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He looked at Carter's very English face with its straight and cool blue eyes.

"Well, I'll tell you for why, as they say in Sussex. It's because I think this English land of ours is worth while, because the growing of food is worth while. Because, if our agriculture goes to blazes, we may be starved into surrender, should another war come."

Someone spoke. It was little Vines.

"That's true, sir."

"Good. And there's another reason. You all know Blue-water. Well, it doesn't seem to me good that this country of ours should be all Bluewater."

Someone's feet shuffled. Carter took his pipe out of his mouth, and rubbed his hand across his lips.

"That's what lots of us have been saying, sir. A place like that's just a belly."

There was a gurgle from David Garton. He had spoken to these men individually, and he knew what Jekyll did not know, that their seeming stolidity was positive and not negative. Nothing but a human quip was needed to explode this sticky atmosphere, and the plain man had supplied it.

"Good for you, Carter. Not even good tripe!"

"And there isn't a kid in the whole place."

Said another voice: "They don't drink beer down in them places. But do 'ee think we can make a job of it, sir?"

"We are going to have a damned good try," said Jekyll.

"You won't be popular, sir, in some places. Let me tell 'ee that."

"I think we know that, Albert. Has anybody here any objection to drawing three pounds a week?"

There was laughter. Carter, his blue eyes suddenly fierce, smacked the table with the flat of a hard hand.

"I say it's a good job. There's sense in it. What I've always said is, give the old country a chance."

But here his eloquence dried up, and in a moment of emotion

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he spat upon Mr. Jekyll's polished floor, and then, with a face of shocked contrition, effaced the blot with a surreptitious boot.

Sir Roger Ticehurst called on Jekyll about the middle of November. Characteristically he came upon horseback, for he belonged to the age of cavalry, and in deploring the advent of machinery upon the land he had his justifications. It was those damned Yanks who had been responsible with their machines and their cheap wheat for cutting the throat of the White Horse of Hengist. Had he had his choice he would have smashed every tractor and reverted to oxen. He could quote Samuel Butler to you, and if you reminded him that man's destiny seemed to be involved in the fact that he was a tool-making animal, and that the scythe and the flail were obsolete, he would retort by asking you whether industrial England was so vastly superior to the England of the Tudors.

Before riding up to the Forge Farm gate he had taken the liberty of looking over hedges. Old grassland ploughed up! Yes, that was the new superstition. He did not dismount, but catching sight of a face at a window, he waved his crop at it, and the crop might have been a sword.

Sandys Secundus came out to him.

"Mr. Jekyll in?"

"I think so, sir."

"Tell him I'm here, Sir Roger Ticehurst."

"Won't you come in, sir?"

"No. Tell your master that I will take it as a favour if he will come out to me here."

Jekyll was with Skelton in the office. He put on a rain-coat, and went out bareheaded to speak with Sir Roger at the gate.

"Good morning. Mr. Jekyll?"

"Yes."

"I met your manager in Poldermouth a week or two ago.

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We had a little conversation. Perhaps he passed the sense of it on to you."

"He did."

They were supremely polite to each other. In fact they took a liking to each other, though their differences were red and white.

"I'm not here to quarrel, Mr. Jekyll. But may I ask you whether you intend to subsidize your men?"

"I do."

"I'm sorry. I think you are making a very grave mistake, a mistake that may embarrass us all. I gather you have what the moderns call a cause."

"A very simple one, to try and confound the sceptics."

"I'm afraid you won't. I gather that you are a very rich man. And when you have lost many thousands of pounds and sown a whole crop of discontent, what then?"

Jekyll smiled at him.

"Lose more thousands of pounds, and try to convert you."

Sir Roger patted his horse's head.

"Well, well, not the War of the Roses, but of wages. Don't think I don't realize how vital the thing is. I'd do it tomorrow if I thought it could be done. But I don't."

"Our fate is to be the children of an experiment."

Sir Roger gave him smile for smile.

"I hope they won't be still-born."

WINTER. The winter of our discontent, not the mere testing of soils, but of men. Grey days, the sea and sky merging, trees and hedgerows leafless, frosts at night, a darkness that came early and stayed late. It was a different world with different distances, and vistas that were strange. No footlights, no *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but a bare stage, draughty and cold, upon which the players rehearsed their parts.

In Forge Farm it was admitted that taps might have their uses, and radiators be symbols of progress. You had not to fare forth coldly into a cold wet world, and like the ancient rustic, blow upon your nails. There were advantages, undoubtedly, in the triumphs of domestic science and in the productions of the plumber's art. A fire of logs in a huge brick cavern might be picturesque, but it scorched your shins, and left your back chilly.

Richard Jekyll may have remembered winters in Egypt and Algiers, or Cap Martin like the prow of a green ship thrusting into a summer sea, but such temptations were not to be truckled to during this first winter. Was he to be a mere child of fortune, a luxury man running away from frost and fog to fancy himself happy and blessed because the sun shone? How bored he had been upon some of those holidays! England might seem a dead and damned world to the idle during three months of the year, but if you loved her in April and June and October, why be faithless to her when she was under the weather? After all, you were not justified in seeking alien warmth until you ceased from being able to warm yourself

with work. These swallow-flights were for the sick and the incipiently senile. What price Cock Robin?

On the land there was much to do, work that had been shirked in the cause of economy. David had sown his winter wheat, and was concentrating upon cleaning ditches which had not been touched for years, and cutting and laying neglected hedges. Many of the land-drains had become clogged, especially so in the Polder Valley, and after locating the main arteries, they were uncovered and cleared. This ditch cleaning was wet and sodden work, but with Mr. Jekyll's blessing, David provided every man with wading clogs. Skelton, passionately concerned with thoroughness, and determined to share any hardship that offered, joined the ditch-clearing gang, and for four or five hours every day persuaded a spade to divest itself of squdges of mud.

Jekyll observed him. If the poet and the peasant were to quarrel with each other, he might lose a good secretary and a lad for whom he had a deepening affection, but he would lose more than that. Was it not being said that when hardihood and staying power were required the young men of England could not stick it? And John seemed to be sticking it with a serenity that was not assumed. As a new son of the soil he was very much in the thick of it, up to the ankles in ooze.

"All work and no play, John!"

"I'm not feeling a dull boy."

"I think we ought to lay down a hard-court. By the way, what about holidays?"

"What about them, sir?"

"Well, a month a year. You and David can take turns. I suggest you split the time into a couple of fortnights. South of France or Morocco, by sea, in the winter. Austria or Dalmatia in the summer."

Skelton laughed.

"A bit expensive. I'm quite comfortably stuck here at present."

"Taking root?"

"I think so. After all, the job's the thing."

Jekyll was amused. Here was sophisticated youth talking plain English, a language that would have sounded blah to Bloomsbury.

"Well, we'll have a tennis court. And I think we ought to possess a herbaceous border. When you have had enough mud-slinging, you and I might make it. My bricklaying job is finished."

The garden-house was being timbered and tiled by local workmen. Hattersley loaned his chief two men from the party that was at work on the two new cottages in Orchard Close. Paul was purring over these cottages. They were old Sussex adapted to new needs, and proving to the world that a cottage can have brains inside it without looking like some bald foreheaded, hairless and expressionless young face. The landscape accepted them. So did the wives of the men who were to live in them.

John, depositing a sudge of wet soil in the bottom of the hedge above the ditch he was helping to clean, wondered whether there were primroses here, and fixing a dreamy glance on the backside of the man in front of him, he asked a question.

"Any primroses here, Tom?"

"Primroses, sir?"

"Yes, primroses."

A spadeful of soil emerged with a sucking sound.

"I should say so. And varlets. The sort that don't smell."

"Not like this nice mud."

"Do it smell?"

"Well, it isn't exactly lavender."

"Can't say as I notice it, sir."

"Perhaps the violets smell, and you don't notice it, Tom."

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"Maybe that's so, sir. But if there's one smell I do fancy it's onion."

"Onion?"

"Yes, the young-uns, when they be the size of a kid's finger."

John did not find these men boring to work with, for the country mind, though it may appear dull and static, has a philosophy and an insight of its own. Their wit might be primitive, and smell of the soil, but in a foul ditch it was adequate, like the terse quips of Thomas in the war. Moreover, these men knew things, and what they knew was real, not stuff mugged up out of a book, or evolved from their inner consciousness. They could say that there wasn't sense in this or that, and being creatures of their eyes and hands they were the right men to work or fight with. And was not much of our so-called culture a scented bath in contrast to a scrub-down with plain soap? John might have agreed that to live all the hours of the day intimately with these fellows might have proved too hearty an experience for a sensitive creature, but for giving you contrasts and reality they were admirable.

Did he tell himself that he was becoming a child of nature even in those primitive urges that subtilize themselves in the mind of civilized man? He had never completed that significant sentence to Rachel, and when he attempted to repeat it, he became aware of unexpected frustrations. A girl in Rachel's position was not easy to come by, and when the lover in him sought the happy occasion, he found himself thwarted.

It was not that he discovered it impossible to shed the good Archie. Stout gave him his chances, for Stout may have known that locked gates are a challenge. When Skelton happened to drop in at Ye Golden Hinde for an evening sherry or a gin and It before taking pot-luck with Hattersley, Stout left him to try his luck.

"Doing anything on Thursday, Rachel?"

"Thursday, Mr. Skelton?"

"It's still your day, isn't it?"

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He put the question with shyness as she handed him his sherry on a tray. He was not at all the bright and breezy young lad, but man, fiercely involved in this business of mating, and wholesomely unsure of his fortune.

"Yes."

"Won't you let me take you somewhere? Poldermouth? Ronald Colman's there in *The Prisoner of Zenda*."

Her eyes were downcast and fixed upon the empty tray.

"No, Mr. Skelton."

"Why not?"

She was silent for some seconds.

"Because I can't."

"What, not go with me?"

"No."

"But, my dear, you don't understand. I——"

She gave him a sudden quick look.

"It's because I do understand some things. That's why I can't go with you, Mr. Skelton. But thank you."

And she turned and left him, sitting there mute, the glass of wine in his hand. Good lord, was it that she didn't trust him, that she thought he was proposing a lout's intimacies in a car parked in some dark lane? Or, was it——? Yes, by the gods, that would be much more serious. Perhaps she saw that which he was refusing to see, or in seeing was determined to ignore, that she was not of his world, and that as to the complexities of comradeship she was wiser than he knew.

He did not see her again that night, but drank his sherry, and leaving a shilling by the empty glass, he went out into the corridor and took his coat down from a peg. Stout reappeared as he was humping himself into it, but Stout refrained from remarking upon this sudden going.

"Good night, sir. Having supper with Paul."

"Good night, Jack."

Skelton went out into the night, a very sober young man with more to digest than a glass of sherry.

Surely, this rebuff meant that she did not care?

And her not caring, or her not caring as he did, made him care more fiercely.

Rumour had it that Mr. Siegfried Mallison had gone to Fez for the winter, and that Rustling Manor was in the charge of Santer and a reduced staff.

White Ways was enjoying a winter sleep after a season of considerable commercial success, though two old male dormice were hibernating there. And before Christmas, Miss Lester, moved by some temperamental unrest, left Mr. Parsons in charge, and went southwards in search of the sun. She was seen on the Dover-Calais boat by one of her clients, a restless young woman, striding up and down, with a cigarette stuck in a hard vermilion mouth. At Calais she had words with her French porter, who, after depositing her hand luggage in a pullman car of the "Fleche d'Or," was not satisfied with the tip she gave him.

"*Allez*. I've given you enough."

He understood her sufficiently well to realize that no amount of jabber would make her give him more, and going forth to spit upon the platform, he named her the sister of his wife.

A young pedigree bull had arrived, and six young women of noble birth who were to form his harem. A luxurious new house had been put up for them at Gate Farm. The bull's name was Shropshire Emblem, a fantastic title, which Jekyll in a mischievous moment suggested should be changed to Phallic.

S.E. and David soon became cronies, for David was fearless in the presence of any beast. And Vines the stockman was said to wash the young bull like a baby and comb his poll. Skelton nicknamed Vines Taurus' Father Confessor. Also, what did the sign of Taurus signify? Both Jekyll and David guessed that John was in the House of Venus.

They ordered a Kelway border, and in the mild weather before Christmas they cleared away the remnants of a shrubbery to the west of the old house, and leaving the orchard trees and hedge to break the south-west wind, dug a noble border in the shape of a half moon. A plan had been supplied with the plants, and Jekyll stood with the plan, and chanted names while Skelton arranged the border.

"Red Rover."

"Red Rover here, sir."

"Delphinium, Welsh Boy."

"Got him."

"Helenium something or other."

"Yes."

"A clump of phloxes comes just in front there. Eclaircur, William Ramsey. Wait a bit, there's a thing called Thor at the back."

"Yes, I've got my hand on Thor. I wonder when the nurserymen will run short of names?"

"When the socialists cease to be smug, my lad."

"Yes, something in the Love Lies Bleeding line. I always remember that name because it sounds so delightfully pagan and improper. Not a plant to be allowed in a prude's garden."

"Well, she could call it Maiden's Prayer, or something like that."

"That's most subtly indecent of you, John."

The office was giving Skelton three or four hours work a day, and to save the winter daylight for outdoor labour, he spent half an hour after breakfast going through the day's correspondence with his chief and making notes upon it, and then put it aside to be dealt with after tea. As a matter of fact the greater part of Mr. Jekyll's correspondence came in the guise of charitable appeals. Skelton quickly grew wise as to

these letters. The paper was of fine quality, and very frequently the envelope bore a coronet, and the handwriting of the address had a conventional likeness. He would extract from the envelope a typed letter with Mr. Jekyll's name filled in after the "My dear." The appeal would be signed by some aristocratic person. These letters had a flavour of lordly matiness, and assumed that the recipient would be quite unable to refuse the favour conferred upon him by being addressed by the eminent person signing the appeal. Usually an invitation card would be enclosed, and if you were not asked to pay so many guineas to dine or dance, the implication was much more serious. It would prove to be a function at which little cheques and presentation fountain pens would be provided.

"How many B.Ls to-day, John?"

"Three two guinea feeds, sir, one cheque book and pen show, and six begging letters."

"Refuse C.B. and P. show. Put the others in a hat and draw a winner. Send a two-guinea cheque and my regrets. Anything interesting in the B.Ls?"

"One from a young gentleman in Fife who lives in a cottage with a lovely view, and tries to write short stories to keep a bed-ridden mother. He has got off quite a good phrase. 'My landscape is superb, but one can't eat the landscape.' "

"How's that strike you, John?"

"Much too clever, sir."

"It almost sounds worth a guinea."

"I dare say quite a number of people will think so."

"All right. W.P.B."

Those letters stood for the waste-paper basket and heartless refusal.

"Anything else?"

"No, the normal sort. There is one from a woman who keeps a boarding-house and says that she inadvertently put thirty pound notes on the fire in an envelope. Saved it for the rent. Sounds too silly to be true."

"Probably true, because it sounds so silly. Ask her to send us a reference from the local padre or her doctor, and if it is O.K. write her a cheque for ten quid."

Skelton marked the letter: "Inquiries. £10 0 0."

In addition to this correspondence he had the farm accounts, the domestic expenses, and Mr. Jekyll's private accounts to keep.

Also, he was having to inform all the companies in which Mr. Jekyll had an interest of his change of address, and to fill up the necessary forms. The list ran into three figures.

Dividend warrants had to be entered up, and prepared for signature, and their counterfoils filed. Mr. Jekyll had three banking-accounts, and each had to be checked. The petty cash-book was written up daily. Insurance cards had to be stamped. Out-going cheques were filled in for Jekyll to sign. Bills had to be scrutinized, and David consulted as to their accuracy, when they concerned the farms. For a man whose spirit had spent itself in lyrics and sonnets this routine work was no easy task, but the soil was teaching John other virtues. It could say to him: "I'm not made up of words. I'm made up of weeds unless you till me. I give only when I am given to. I'm not to be hurried. Slapstick does not count with me. Platitudes, my dear, but I'm the greatest of platitudes, and yet the most mysterious. Everything that is grows out of me."

Incidentally, Skelton came to know that even after paying income-tax and surtax Mr. Richard Jekyll's income amounted to about twenty-five thousand pounds a year.

They began to make contact with the village of Fernfield. Jekyll had given instructions that when possible all supplies should be purchased locally. Mr. John Ditch who kept the village general shop had every reason to approve of the new people at Forge Farm. The butcher and the baker agreed with him. Mr. Jekyll was the kind of person to be popular in Fernfield, for not only was he spending money in it, but the Sons of Sussex were following his example. That had been one of

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Fernfield's chief grievances against Bluewater and Mr. Siegfried Mallison. Such sophisticated people were of little use to a decaying village.

Mr. Jekyll received salutes in Fernfield.

He was asked to subscribe to the local cricket and football clubs, and he did so. He was a predestined vice-president.

The vicar called, a tired and mouse-coloured little man, respectably shabby, who was so concerned in striving to render this earthly life solvent that he had little energy and enthusiasm left over for the heavenly one. He had a wife and an invalid daughter, and he bore the historical name of Cranmer. Other martyrdoms consumed him. He took tea with Jekyll and John, and was far too timid and discouraged even to assume that they would come and listen to his sermons, but he reacted to courtesy and buttered toast.

"I hope you will excuse me saying so, Mr. Jekyll, but what we need is new life in some of our villages."

"More blood to circulate."

"H'm, yes, things have been very depressed. I wish you well, sir, you and your enterprise."

"We want to exercise the blood-flow. Perhaps help you to brighten things up."

Mr. Cranmer, even though his lips glistened with butter, did not look very capable of brightening anything. His function might have been to serve at a perpetual funeral.

"Yes, people have to live, sir. Work and wages. A place like Bluewater——"

Jekyll wanted to cry "Sodom and Gomorrah," but was afraid of shocking the little man. He asked if there was anything he could do.

"Our village hall, sir."

"You have a hall?"

"We call it that, but the dilapidations—— I tried to run a free library, and a choral society. You see, the roof leaks."

"Perennially?"

"Almost so. I'm afraid the rafters are rotten."

"I think that ought to be looked to. Do you ever have dances, Mr. Cranmer?"

"We did, but I regret to say that on the last occasion the bad man of the village came in, the worse for liquor. There was a scene, a really most disreputable scene."

"Couldn't you put him out?"

"My verger attempted it, without great success."

"I think we could remedy that sort of thing. The Sons of Sussex would see to it. Stout fellows."

Mr. Jekyll and John paid a visit to the Fernfield village hall. It once had been a Nonconformist chapel, and it looked it, a prim, grey cement-covered building with mean windows and a slated roof. Both sect and chapel having fallen into decay, a previous vicar had acquired the building for the parish, and had regarded the acquisition as a triumph for orthodoxy. The interior was as dreary as its face. The walls were colour-washed a bilious green, and decorated with olcographs. A hundred or so moth-eaten-looking books leaned up against each other wearily in a deal book-case. There was a bagatelle table with torn cloth. A rough stage had been erected at one end of the long room, and it was here that the roof wept tears upon the boards.

"Good Saints, John, what a sepulchre! Not even darts!"

"I expect the local pub has them badly whacked."

"Any heating?"

"There are pipes, sir, so there must be a stove."

"What about the floor?"

Skelton rubbed a boot over it.

"Pretty sticky, but I suppose we could do something with it. And if one brightened the place up a little—"

"What it wants is a new complexion and a little lipstick, and some attention to the roof. I think we ought to be

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bold, John. Is there such a thing as an orchestra to be had?"

Skelton had made inquiries and had discovered that a semi-amateur jazz band was procurable from Poldermouth.

"A good rosy wash on the walls, Jack, and a few draperies, and some work upon the floor. And a buffet and some claret-cup and shandy gaff. I don't suppose the lads and the lasses of the village are too particular. With Bishop Cranmer's blessing we will advertise a New Year's dance."

"Free, sir?"

"No, let people pay. Too much is gratis these days. Tickets at a shilling a-piece, and the proceeds to go to the leaky roof. Which won't mean much. I'll pay for the repairs, for the orchestra, and the supper. More work for you, my lad."

"I suppose we can invite guests?"

"Of course. We'll get Gilda and the girls, and Archie, and the Jettisons. And if the village tough blows in and makes trouble, David can throw him out."

"I had better make sure of the band, sir, first."

"Quite so. Is there a builder and decorator in the village?"

"I believe so."

"Turn him on to the job, provided he can get the work done in ten days. The roof can be patched up temporarily, so as not to damp the orchestra if it should rain."

"I had better see Mr. Cranmer."

"Yes, see Mr. Cranmer, and then get a few posters printed, and ask the butcher and the baker and the candlestick maker to display them in their shops."

Skelton was not wholly disinterested when he suggested that some support might be obtainable from Bluewater. He rang up Archie Stout and invited himself to dinner. There was a tinge of frost in the air and a huge moon shining when he set out to walk to Ye Golden Hinde. It was characteristic of Skelton that he did not use the estate's small car on every personal occasion, and this restraint was not lost upon Jekyll.

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If John had been the son of so rich a man he would have expected to be the possessor of a Bentley, with all running expenses paid. But there were other subtleties in his self-restraint, and he was somehow wise in knowing that the part of the prince did not dazzle and impress a particular person, and that to mount the golden calf on your car may be the foolishness of rich cads and amorous old men. Soil to the soil, simple to the simple. He went by way of Fernfield and the path skirting Rustling Park, for on this brilliant winter night the trackway was outlined in silver and fretted with tree shadows. It was a night to be remembered, not only because of the sharp tang of its beauty, but because in passing by and under great trees with the moon shining through them he seemed to see life clearly and to see it whole, both as mystic and realist. Nor is life even understandable to the lover unless it is seen through other eyes, not blindly, but with tenderness and compassion.

Coming down to the sea he knocked up Paul.

"Say, we are giving a dance on New Year's night at the village hall. Coming?"

Paul demurred.

"Not with my hoofs."

"O, rot, it's for the lads of the village. Besides, as estate architect, you——"

"Don't say I have a duty."

"All right, I won't. If you want a dance-free job you can look after the buffet."

Passing on down Love Lane, most of whose bungalows were sleeping their winter sleep, he called at the Jettisons. They drew him in, but refusing to sit down, he explained the dance and its inspiration. Yes, both of them would come. Cars could be parked on the village green. And then, Jimmie made a suggestion.

"You say you want to brighten the place up?"

"Very much so."

"Well, with a few tins of distemper I could do some cheery

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frescoes, with the vicar's consent. I'd even ask him to censor them."

"Great idea. I'll see him about it. Afraid I must be going now. I'm dining with Stout."

XXIII

IN the Poop of Ye Golden Hinde a log fire was burning in the open brick fireplace, and Stout, pushing two of the armchairs to face the flames, asked Skelton what he would drink.

“O, just sherry, if I may.”

“What is a just sherry? I’ve heard of the wickedness of wine.”

He was crossing to ring the bell when Skelton stopped him.

“Just a moment. I told you on the phone about our village dance. It’s a gesture of the chief’s, goodwill and all that. I thought you might give us some tips on catering.”

“No invitation forthcoming?”

“Of course we expect you to come. The Jettisons and Paul, and Mrs. Wilmer and the girls——”

“Invitation accepted.”

“What I wanted to say was, do you mind if I ask Rachel?”

Stout stood turned to the fire, his hands in his pockets, and he took a moment to answer that question.

“Just how, Jack?”

“As my guest.”

The large figure revolved until its eyes were looking down at Skelton.

“Jack, what’s the idea, exactly? I’m not butting in, but Rachel is a rather——”

“I know. I’m serious.”

“How serious?”

“I want her to marry me.”

Stout drew a deep breath.

“My dear lad!”

"I'm not a fool."

"Did I say you were?"

"Look at it this way. If I am to live on the land, who would make the right sort of comrade for such a life, a woman like Rachel, or some sophisticated bit of spoilt refinement? Aren't we getting away from the old snobbery? Call me sentimental, if you like."

"I don't. The man will be damned lucky who gets Rachel. Said anything to her?"

"I have tried suggestions."

"And how did she react?"

"Turned me down."

"Did she, by Jove! And why?"

"I believe she thinks it wouldn't work. Or that it may be a cad's fancy."

"I shouldn't say it was the latter, John. There's wisdom in Rachel. She may be right, you know. There's a damned lot of snobbery in the world still, my lad. And she would want to be so very sure that you were——"

"Serious?"

"Yes."

"And that I shall go on being serious. I shall. Well, may I ask her?"

"Of course."

"I want to ask her before you."

Stout rang the bell, and when Rachel appeared, he asked her to bring two sherries. Skelton was standing with his back to the fire when she returned with the two glasses on a tray. She did not look at Skelton, but at the hand that was stretched out to take the glass.

"Thank you, Rachel."

She turned to Stout.

"Dinner will be ready in five minutes, sir."

"Thanks, Rachel. I think Mr. Skelton wants to ask you something."

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"Yes, we're giving a village dance on New Year's Eve. Will you come as my guest?"

She stood very still, holding the tray against her body, and looking at the fire.

"We are all going, Rachel," and Stout raised his glass.

She was conscious of being watched by these two men, and perhaps she understood why the stage had been so set. Her face was infinitely serious, as serious as her lover's.

"Thank you, Mr. Skelton. I——"

She raised her eyes to his, as though she was still unsure, and then a little colour seemed to spread over her face.

"I want you to come, Rachel. I could fetch you."

"Or she can drive up with us, Jack."

"That's a good idea. Thanks, sir. Will you come, Rachel?"

She looked at him steadfastly, unsmilingly.

"Yes, I might."

She saw his eyes light up. He raised his glass.

"That's great of you. Here's to the New Year."

Her eyes answered his, and then she turned and left them, closing the door very gently. Stout bent down, picked up a log from the log-box and very carefully placed it on the fire. They could hear the sea washing softly against the sea-wall. Skelton was standing head in air, like a man listening to some voice within himself.

"I shall be taking Gilda and the girls. My car holds five."

"Thanks, sir," said Skelton, "thanks, most awfully."

Stout was called away for twenty minutes after dinner, and Skelton, having lit his pipe, picked up a copy of a monthly magazine that was lying on the table. It was little more than the desultory act of a man whose inner self was lost in the sex-dream, but as he glanced at the list of articles tabulated on the cover his consciousness was caught and held by three challenging words.

"Is England Doomed?"

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He sat down, turned up the article and began to read it with the rather tolerant scepticism of man expecting propaganda or a journalistic stunt. The name of the writer was unknown to him, but as he read on, his own youth was challenged by the curt sincerity of the thing, its mordant and earnest realism. This was not penny press stuff, but the product of a profound unrest that had for its inspiration an intimate knowledge of world affairs.

It asked unpleasant questions.

Was democracy the dream of a culture that was decadent, so decadent that it mistook liberty for licence, and lolled, with cigarette in mouth, making a mock of things it did not wish to understand?

Why call Germany a land of louts with rubber truncheons led by a megalomaniac?

How would young England stand in a fight to the death with a young race that combined those terrible qualities, blind faith and discipline?

Was it wise to sneer at a country that could accept self-sacrifice, when your own fool crowd would not forego one football match?

Did young England know what other countries said of it? That it was soft. That its government might build tanks and aeroplanes, but that young England had not the guts to use them.

Let it be granted, merely for the sake of argument, that the Totalitarians had created a Culture in which power politics and violence were the forces that counted, what was young England going to do about it?

Stand and sneer?

When Germany had swallowed Austria and Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland, and Hungary and the Balkans, and stood with one foot on the Baltic and the other on the Mediterranean Sea, what then?

Might not this England be but a lamb to be struck down and devoured?

If not, what was the alternative?

More patter about the League of Nations and Collective Security?

What was the alternative? National Service? No, thank you. We are free men. Could little, smug selfishness be more purblind? The truth was that if young England funk'd service in this world-clash of ideologies, it would be put to service by the youth of a stronger and fiercer nation.

What use was it prescribing a little pink medicine and pacifism for everybody?

The Teuton youth had not been bred upon such stuff.

Why stand and whimper that war is unthinkable?

It is there, in China and in Spain, very terrible war.

It will be with us, inevitably, if we shirk the issue.

Young England may go down like some unfit, cigarette-smoking weed under the punches of a trained heavyweight, futile, inco-ordinate and ridiculous.

Individualism, yes, but when the cult of one's little, sophisticated self does not include self-sacrifice and courage, and a passion to combine with its fellows against an idealism that is all the more potent and terrible because it accepts self-sacrifice, then the catastrophe surely must come to us.

What is young England going to do about it?

Archie Stout, having finished his business, came in to find Skelton hunched up over the fire, his pipe stuck in his mouth, the magazine still held in one hand. So profoundly had he been affected by this almost brutal challenge, so acutely had it touched him personally, that he was unaware for a moment of Stout's presence, and the big man, observing him with a little human smile, imagined that he saw the young lover brooding before the fire.

"Sorry to be away so long."

Skelton straightened, looked up, and held out the magazine.

"Have you read that thing in this, about England?"

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"You mean: 'Is England Doomed'?"

"Yes."

Stout sat down in the other chair.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have."

"Terrible stuff."

The big man frowned.

"Do you mean it is just Bogey-Bogey?"

"No, it rings true, somehow. Did it move you?"

"I must say it did."

"I should like to meet the man who wrote it. Do you believe that we are living in such a fool's paradise?"

Stout was silent for a moment, and both of them could hear the plashing of the sea.

"Twenty years ago, Jack, that strip of water made us somewhat safe. Now, it doesn't. But you know that as well as I do. I can't help feeling the future is pretty problematical."

"Are we such a lot of rotters, we young ones? Just—Blue-water? I don't believe it."

"There is a terrible lot of Bluewater in our modern make-up, Jack."

"Yes, I know. Perhaps the truth is that war has seemed such a silly, beastly business to us that we have refused to face up to it. Have you any evidence of your own?"

"Of what sort?"

"That we are soft?"

"Only that we seem to be beaten all over the world at all sorts of things."

Skelton looked all hunched up.

"I say, do you mind if I take this thing back and show it to Jekyll?"

"Take it, by all means."

Then, two of Stout's winter-patrons came into the room, and chairs were shifted, and the conversation changed, but Skelton had the face of a young man who was profoundly bothered and unhappy, and he could discover no interest in

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the prospects of a nine hole golf course, which appeared to interest Stout's old gentlemen, even to the exclusion of politics and fluctuations on the Stock Exchange.

Jekyll, having accepted the magazine from Skelton's hands, took it to bed with him, and having read the article and reflected upon the casualness with which John had suggested that he might read it, was wise as to possible developments. He believed, that excluding the Film World and the Oxford Group, modern youth mistrusts emotion and loathes the striking of attitudes. It might grant you a flippant gesture, chuck you a little chit, and disappear upon adventure, but it put on no plumes. In England it still was very much "Stalky & Co."

Jekyll and John sat down to breakfast. They had arrived at the marmalade phase before Skelton unburdened himself.

"Would you have any objection to my joining the Territorials?"

Jekyll passed him the marmalade.

"Not in the least, Jack. As an officer?"

"Yes. It would mean, of course, that I should have to go away for my training. And camp each year."

"Of course. That could be easily arranged."

"Thanks, sir. You do help one."

No more was said until Skelton was lighting a pipe. He had gone to stand at one of the windows with its view of that Sussex valley and the sea.

"Gosh, I wonder what Bloomsbury's bright lads would say about my going Jingo? Yelp, I suppose. Somehow, Sussex seems to have made me silly English."

Jekyll looked at him with affection.

"I think I'd stay silly English, Jack. It's rather wholesome."

But David, who had spent many holidays in Germany, and could speak the language, gave Skelton the other side of the picture. He was splitting logs for the fire, a job that appealed to him, and between the swinging blows of the felling axe, he shot remarks at Skelton.

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"Know much of Germany?"

"No, I can't say I do."

"Well, I happen to have German friends. And what do they say? That Germany was treated like the world's bad boy for fifteen years. They're a proud people, and it wasn't likely that they were going to be stood in the corner and scolded at for ever. You know, Jack, we English can be awful prigs. Too preachy-preachy."

"Yes."

"Well, then, Hitler came along, and gave Germany what she wanted, pride, power, a future. But mark you, that sort of thing doesn't arrive through watching football matches. Germany has struggled, Germany has suffered, but she has had the guts to deny herself things, and to live small that Germany might be big. Have we done that? Could we do it? It seems to me so damned silly to nag and squeal at a great people just because they may be making us feel that they are growing faster than we are."

Skelton bent down and picked up a billet that had flown from David's axe. He threw it on the pile.

"So, you won't join up, old man?"

"O, yes, I shall."

"But why, if——?"

"Because I don't want war with Germany. Because I feel I ought to be able to do what a German does. They are a great people, Jack, and if they are feeling a bit fierce at present, I don't blame them. But I've got pride. When I meet my German friends I should like to say to them: 'Yes, Fritz and Adolph, I want to be friends with you, but I'm damned if I'm going to be your poor relation.'"

At Fernfield, Jimmie Jettison, mounted upon an improvised stage, was painting frescoes upon the walls of the village hall, Rosa Mundi, The Rod of Jesse, King Richard at Ascalon, St. Francis feeding the Birds, subjects that had been passed by

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Mr. Cranmer. Jekyll was paying for the artist's material, but time and labour were a gift, and other workers came to help. The village carpenter punched down nail-heads, and planed the floor's rough places. Miss Ditch and three girl friends managed to give the boards some polish. The roof had been patched, and the woodwork of the interior painted. The Poldermouth jazz-band had been engaged, and the catering undertaken by the lessee of The Green Man.

Said John to his chief: "What are we to wear, sir?"

"What will the lads of the village wear, John?"

"O, lounge suits, I suppose."

"As a matter of fact Sandys will wear a dinner jacket."

"Sandys?"

"Yes, one of my discards, and a very posh one. Sandys always appears as the perfect gentleman at social functions. Also, he tells me three other chauffeurs will be there."

"All dinner-jacketed?"

"I gather so. Have you ever been to a Police dance, John?"

"No."

"I have. You meet everything from tails and a white waistcoat to plus fours."

"Then, it will be D.J.'s for us?"

"I think so."

Mr. Jekyll asked how many tickets had been sold, and Skelton was able to tell him that the number was fifty-seven. And would the hall accept some twenty-eight couples? Well, it would have to, and after all the dance-floor would be no more crowded than the floor of a fashionable London hotel, though both the temperature and the *joie de vivre* might be more elevated.

"What about decorations?"

"Miss Ditch & Co. are putting up holly and laurel."

"Nothing that will kill the Jettison frescoes? That's a jolly little man, and he can splash on colour. One ought to make some return."

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"Let him paint your portrait, sir. We can hang it in the Board Room of The Sons of Sussex."

"When we get one, John. But the portrait is a good idea."

Someone else revealed a sudden interest in the Fernfield dance. He arrived in John's office, a fat young man in a very dirty mackintosh, an abrupt and rude young man.

"Here, what about this dance of yours?"

"Well, what about it?"

"You haven't notified us?"

"And who is us?"

The young man explained with truculence that he represented the Customs and Excise at Poldermouth, and that the instigators of this rustic revel would be responsible for Entertainment Tax. John laughed and pleaded innocence.

"All right. Can we accept this as a notification?"

"You'll have to fill up the proper forms."

"Well, send 'em along. What shall we owe you?"

"Threepence in the shilling."

"Fifty-seven threepences. That ought to help the country some. Why don't you grow potatoes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it strikes one as being a better job for a stout fellow."

"Think you are being funny?"

"No, only realist. Good morning. Yes, I'm rather busy."

Frost, a sky crepitant with stars, and the smell of a woman's hair.

He had stood waiting in the porch for her while the village flowed past him to deposit coats and cloaks and hats in the tiny cloakroom. Voices and laughter, and a sound of tentative pipings on a saxophone. Young women looked at him as they passed in, and he was unaware of being looked at by them.

The fatherly voice of Sandys addressed him. Sandys was standing to take tickets, and wearing over his dinner-jacket his chauffeur's great-coat.

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"Oughtn't you to have a coat, sir?"

He smiled suddenly at Sandys.

"O, I'm all right. I don't feel the cold."

A car pulled up outside the white palings, and he heard Stout's voice.

"Go in, people. I'll park on the green."

He saw Mrs. Wilmer's glowing head, and the two girls, and behind them and somehow more part of the mysterious night, Rachel. He smiled at Mrs. Wilmer and her nieces and let them by, but his smile died away as he stood to meet his guest. He seemed to forget everything but the reality of her, what she meant to him, and what he should mean to her.

"I'm so glad, Rachel. I've got your ticket."

It sounded strange and banal when he was looking at her and thinking— Yes, just what was he thinking? That he was somehow afraid of her, exquisitely afraid, and that she too feared him. How strange! She had no smile for him. Almost her face was like the face of a solemn child, but its eyes were not a child's eyes. He saw her eyelids flicker momentarily.

"Where do I put my coat?"

"Give it to me."

She had no hat, and her very dark head seemed to drift to him out of the stardust.

"Come in, my dear; it's cold there."

Her face seemed to grow sensitively hard. Yes, she was afraid of him, and the lover in him understood.

"Let me have the first. Is that selfish? Someone will snatch you up."

She gave him her coat, and he saw a black frock and her white throat and shoulders. She looked so utterly right in that black frock. God, was he still a snob? Had he dreaded some colour lapse, even more sensitively so, because—? And suddenly his eyes felt hot. He wanted to touch her, and knew that he could not.

"Be merciful to me, Rachel."

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She looked at him steadfastly for a moment, smiled, and seemed to hold her head a little more proudly.

"I will."

Yes, the pride of love in loving, the exultation that finds no flaw in the bloom of its rose. Had he feared for her and for himself? O, fool! Jekyll, talking to Mrs. Wilmer under the sign of Jettison's Rosa Mundi, saw them pass in the country crowd, and was moved to bless them as a comely pair, clean, and sweet and human. Skelton was looking in his love's face, for she was nearly as tall as he was, but her eyes were closed for the moment. Had he said something to her, something intimate and tender? He had.

"I feel a proud man, Rachel."

Gilda too was watching them with eyes of quizzical kindness. Well, well, it was a new age, and by Bluewater standards Jack Skelton was a sentimental fool. A man who was promiscuous did not look at a girl in that way.

"What a handsome creature."

Jekyll bent his head towards her.

"Rachel? Yes, a little more than that, I think."

"Almost—biblical."

"Dear lady, you are wise."

Then Stout carried her off, and Jekyll found himself looking down into the bright and intelligent little face of Miss Irene Ditch. His grocer's daughter! She was speaking to him and saying that the village really did appreciate the trouble he had taken. She had a pretty, tip-tilted nose and quick brown eyes, and an air of knowing her world as a modern girl should know it.

Jekyll asked her to dance.

"May I have the pleasure? Things seem to be going well."

"Everything's lovely," said Miss Ditch.

Everybody danced with everybody, with energy and zest. Skelton, partnering the baker's daughter, collided with Sandys who had taken out Mrs. Carter. "Sorry," said Skelton, and

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Sandys, the perfect gentleman replied: "Excuse me, my fault, sir." Even Hattersley was dancing, steering a fat girl through the crowd with an air of benign ferocity. The Jettisons were bobbing about together. Stout, like a large ship, ploughed through with Miss Wilmer. David was looking down through kind and tolerant spectacles at the chubby face of somebody's chauffeur's daughter. If there were contrasts, they did not clash. Life might be rather vigorous and crowded and hearty, and the room a little flavoured with *esprit de corps*, but the village was enjoying itself. And if most of the men wore ready-made lounge suits, the girls had turned out astonishingly well, neat legs and shoes, and heads that had contrived to be waved in Poldermouth or Dewhurst. The floor was a little sticky, but the Poldermouth orchestra, like many amateur bands, played and sang and bumped on its chairs with jocund zest.

Skelton did not count the number of his dances with Rachel, but if he exercised a sensitive self-restraint in limiting their number, he remembered some of them by the things they said to each other.

"I must be two years older than you are, Rachel."

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Well, I was right."

He did not confess to her that he was twenty-seven.

The band was playing a polka by request, a real ragtime polka, when he told her that he was becoming a soldier. Neither the time nor the rhythm were quite in keeping with the confession.

"A Territorial. Sense of duty, you know. You don't mind?"

He was aware of her pausing, with a face that was very grave. They were bumped by other couples. The mood of the polka was not their mood of the moment. Her right hand fell away from his, and her left dropped from his shoulder.

"Yes, let's sit."

FANTASIA

His right arm came away lingeringly from her waist. There were several benches ranged along the walls, and they happened to choose the one under Jettison's Rosa Mundi.

"I felt I ought to tell you."

The implication was obvious, and she did not challenge it, but her face was troubled.

"Arms and food, Rachel. This country might be a besieged city. It is up to the young to make their choice."

She was slow to answer him.

"Yes, it is right. Is Mr. Garton joining?"

"Yes. The gunners at Poldermouth, the local battery."

"And you?"

"The good old infantry. I have to do a month's training. My papers have gone in. I hope to get my training done before the soil begins to sprout."

"You feel you ought to?"

"I do. It's a strange country, this England. We have to be hit on the jaw before we wake up."

"Yes."

"The trouble is that under modern conditions the first blow might be a knock-out. Sorry, my dear, to be so solemn."

She did not look at him. Her strong hands were clasped in her lap.

"I'd like all men to feel as you do."

"It isn't only for one's self, Rachel. The people one cares about rather much."

Her reply was a slow and gentle movement of the head.

The village was waltzing when he asked her that last question. It was not easy to waltz in this crowded room, or as Skelton wished to waltz. Other couples clogged your ardour, and might be guilty of listening in.

"May I drive you home?"

She shook her head.

"I must go as I came."

"Why are you so hard to me?"

FANTASIA

He felt the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder.

"Am I? O, no."

"If I go and tell Stout I am driving you back, will you let me?"

He felt her strong young body go rigid for a moment, and then relax.

"Yes, this once."

"Thank you, Rachel."

"Please don't thank me."

Half-way down Stony Hill he stopped the car and the engine, and put on the brakes. The moon was up over the sea, painting a brilliant path across its blackness.

"Will you marry me, Rachel?"

She sat rigid beside him.

"No."

"My dear, don't you know how I care? I want you in my life."

She was silent.

"Of course, if you don't care, Rachel, that's the end of it. One has to take one's chance."

Still, silence.

"I see. Sorry, my dear, to have worried you. I hoped you might care."

His hands were resting on the steering-wheel, and suddenly her right hand was laid upon one of his.

"O, my dear, but I do. Only, it can't be. No, don't you see. It might hurt you."

"Hurt me?"

"Yes. It isn't snobbery, Jack, but I have a pride, no, not just my self. People would say——"

"Would they? Be damned to them! But would they? I'm doing about the best thing for myself——"

"I wonder? That's what makes me afraid. One may care too much, and then——"

"Then?"

"There might be things that would hurt you, hurt both of us."

"But, my dear, you do care?"

"Yes, I care."

A movement of his arm, a bending towards him of her head, and the thing was done. Her head was on his shoulder, her face upturned. He was kissing her, and saying the things that rush from a lover's lips.

"O, Rachel, oh, you most exquisite thing in all the world, oh, my darling."

She rested there with closed eyes, like a woman smiling in her sleep.

"You'll marry me now?"

She opened her eyes.

"I'll give you everything, if you want it."

"O, my dear one."

"But I'll not marry you."

He held her face in the hollow of a hand.

"Do you think I want you that way? That's the strangest part of loving like this. I don't, my dear, or not yet. It isn't the mere flesh of you, Rachel."

She put up her mouth and kissed him.

"Dear man. That's——"

"Then, you'll marry me?"

"No."

"But—you must."

"I won't."

She freed herself and sat straight and still in her corner.

"No, I will never marry you. There's something in me that won't. It might hurt. Things aren't always like this."

He did not try to touch her now.

"Then, I shall have to go on asking you, again and again, once every month, until——"

Suddenly, his hand went to the brake and released it, and

FANTASIA

he touched the self-starter button as the car rolled down the hill. A beam of light had shot over the edge of the hill behind them. Stout's car! And so, in strange deep silence they came down to the dark house and the sea.

XXIV

DURING the first winter at Forge Farm, Richard Jekyll, taking his early tea in bed and smoking his first cigarette, asked himself that pertinent question:

“When are you going to begin to be bored with this rustic business?”

The joke was that it did not bore him, and that he appeared to have lost modern man’s capacity for combining restlessness with ennui. He was quite absurdly interested in the things that were happening around him, in Paul’s new cottages, in the winter spraying of fruit-trees, in watching with David the winter wheat, in the flowering of the winter aconites and snowdrops and crocuses which he and John had planted in the farm garden. He was interested in his food. His medicine bottles had disappeared. Gentian and bismuth and soda, and glandular extracts were left untouched in his medicine cupboard. His London physician, missing the regular visits of a pet patient, began to wonder whether Mr. Richard Jekyll was disloyal or dead. Had he gone osteopathic? And being in town one day Jekyll called on the gentleman, and asked him to vet him.

“Is it the old trouble?”

“I just want you to look me over.”

The patient’s condition proved almost disappointingly eugenetic. Tongue clean, bowels regular, blood pressure normal.

“You seem to have responded very well to my treatment.”

Jekyll gave him a whimsical smile. He had not the heart to tell his friend that he had abandoned all treatment, for his doctor was a good little man.

FANTASIA

"I have been taking more exercise."

"Ah, it seems to suit you."

"I don't think I need any of your nice little helps, now. Do you agree?"

"Quite. What kind of exercise are you taking?"

"O, just doing things with my own hands. Not just turning taps or pressing buttons. Fact is, I'm finding life so damned interesting that my tummy has to get on with the job, and isn't like some spoilt female who gets peeved if she doesn't receive all the attention."

"Don't overdo it."

"I won't."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Farming."

Almost the doctor looked shocked.

"Farming! Well, of course, that's——"

"Most frightfully gaga, dear man, but it seems to suit me. You must come down and spend a week-end with us, and see the cows and the ducks, and the potatoes sprouting. I'm almost as hearty as Donald."

The doctor raised his eyebrows. Who was the particular Scotch person referred to?

"Donald Duck, my dear man."

Harley Street had not heard of the creature.

A few days before Skelton left to take his training course as an infantry officer Jekyll found himself playing the part of Father Confessor. As an intellectual anarchist and hating all interference, he was the predestined receiver of other men's confidences. Ask no questions and life will come and sit at your feet. He and John had drawn up their chairs before the parlour fire, Jekyll with the latest number of the C.G.A. Estate Magazine which had arrived by post that morning.

"Rather a nice thing on Sweet Cherry Growing, John."

"Is there, sir?"

FANTASIA

"I didn't know that no sweet cherry is self fertile."

"Neither did I."

White Hart or Black Hart or Frogmore Early! May Duke! Well, the linked suggestion was obvious! Rachel Duke! John, elbows on knees, confronted his confession and the fire.

"There is something I should like to tell you, sir."

Jekyll let the magazine lie folded across his knee.

"Not bored, John?"

"Good lord, no, sir. I've asked Rachel Duke to marry me."

Jekyll did not jump in his chair. To him also Rachel suggested fine, rich fruit, and he had watched the romance ripening.

"And will she?"

"No."

Jekyll took three pulls at his pipe.

"Any reason?"

"The worst reason of all, sir."

"No response? I should have thought——"

"No, it isn't that. She's not sentimental about things. I'm afraid she thinks I am. She says it wouldn't work."

Jekyll was silent for a moment.

"I see. And are you sentimental, John?"

"No, I'm not. If I'm going to live on the land, which, with your good will, I am, I believe that Rachel is the very woman I should marry. Would you object?"

"What right have I to object?"

"But would you?"

"No."

"Then you don't think I'm a sentimental fool?"

"That would depend upon your social urges."

"I haven't any social urges. I want a woman who is real."

"Just that? The eugenic theory?"

"God, no; I love her."

Jekyll waggled a foot.

"Forgive me, John, but there was a time when I rather thought that you and Ann Lester——"

"There was—in a way. It didn't last long. Just sense-impression. We should have quarrelled like cat and dog."

"Quite. Ann loves herself and her show."

"She's a snob. Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. You might have accused Rachel of being an inverted snob."

"Which she isn't."

"No. The damned part of it is that she has got it into her head that she might mess up my life."

"Unusual."

"It touches me right to the—— But, supposing I can make her realize—— What I mean is, could I—could you let me stay on here—in a little place of my own?"

Jekyll wanted to laugh, but very tenderly so.

"My dear lad, of course. I'm coming to look upon myself as somewhat the father of the clan. The company would build you a house."

John's face was troubled with emotion.

"You are a sport, sir. If I ever let you down——"

"I'm not contemplating it. Ask her again, John."

"I'm going to. Once a month. I've told her so. May I tell her that you are our friend?"

"Of course."

"Thanks, most awfully."

Jekyll, looking through a statement of accounts that Skelton had prepared for him, found that up to date he had spent about nine thousand pounds upon the property and in equipping the farms, and that in hard cash the land had not returned him a penny. But that is the law of the land, a lesson which the urban mortal does not learn. Quick returns, even in love, art and literature! Splash your paint about and shout! Prate about the abstract, and fancy yourself a little Cezanne without being prepared to lead a craftsman's life of labour. The land,

like John's Rachel, kept you waiting for a year before giving you a harvest. It tried you, tested you, winnowed out the weaklings.

Nine thousand pounds! But there had been other returns, credits that an accountant could not check. The land's goodwill, and the goodwill of those who worked upon it. He was amused at times by David's anxious face.

"I know it is all spending just now, sir, but in a little while we shall be beginning to trade."

"I'm not worrying, David."

"You see, so many backers don't understand that putting the land in heart isn't like putting on a play."

"I think I do."

"O, yes, you do. That's what makes it easier."

Jekyll was smiling.

"David, I once spent umpteen pounds on a winter holiday."

"Did you, sir?"

"Yes, a private yacht, Egypt, Assouan, Athens, back to Monte. Two months in Monaco harbour. Guess how much it cost me?"

"I haven't an idea, sir."

"O, about seven thousand quid."

"Seven thousand!"

"Yes, I had a party, and a pretty lady. She liked to gamble, and she cost me a nice sum at Monte. And what did I get out of it? Indigestion, and impotence—through boredom. She didn't actually scratch my face, but she got off with another fellow at Nice, yes, with my blessing. Seven thousand, David! We rich men have to pay heavily to learn."

"Do they?"

"O, sometimes. Well, I consider this a somewhat better show. The clean potato. By the way, how much are the Marketing Board allowing us?"

"Five acres."

FANTASIA

"Miserable devils!"

"But then, you see, sir——"

"I know. It's unsocial to force a glut. Could we grow more if we gave them away?"

"I suppose so, sir. If they didn't come on the market."

"Supposing war descended on us?"

"That would be rather different."

"And we should be caught with peace time production in a crisis when a double supply might be needed. A year would go by before we could fill the gap."

"Quite so, sir. That's the trouble with planning when you are dealing with growth, and not with machines or bricks and mortar. All these nice administrators mean well, but the trouble is they may be caught in their chairs."

"While the country starves. We were jolly near it last time, David, and the next time——? Well, well, crash goes the British Empire because we were short of potatoes! It sounds rather silly."

March, a marvellous month with the face of June. David was harrowing his wheat, and preparing a tilth for his root crop. As to the plain potatoes, they had decided to grow earlys, partly for quick returns, and partly to cheat the wire-worms in the ploughed-in turf. Skelton was back from his officer's course with a commission as second lieutenant in B Company of the 7th Sussex, whose company headquarters were at Dewhurst. Jekyll had been dealing with his own correspondence, which meant that most of it found an early grave in the wastepaper basket. Words, words, words, bump, bump, bump! England talking, when she should be doing. Eminent gentlemen writing letters to *The Times*, while the air defences of the country remained chaotic. Jekyll, spending a day in town and lunching at his club, fell in with a friend who was a man who knew.

"Well, how's A.R.P. and all that?"

His friend looked fierce.

"Our air defences are so futile that one daren't even criticize them."

"Good God, why doesn't someone say so?"

"And give our nakedness away?"

"So, it is bad as that?"

"I'm afraid so. What are you doing, Dick?"

"Growing food, farming."

"Good man! If, in the next show, we can only stave off air attacks and feed ourselves, we may pull through."

"You don't sound very jocund about it."

"I'm not."

Bluewater had begun to feel the spring. Miss Lester was back, and busy trying to waste useful labour upon the laying out of a nine hole golf course. She even called upon Jekyll and asked him whether he could loan her two or three men for a month, and his tractor and reaping machine for work on the fairway. Mr. Montague Dax, who was a scratch man at the game, had offered to lay out the course for her.

"My dear lady, I'm afraid it is quite impossible."

She looked peevish.

"After all, it would be an asset. Don't you agree?"

"I don't."

"And why?"

"Because it seems to me we are rather on the edge of a precipice. Knocking little balls about may be all very well. If the country is in its dotage, well and good, but I dare to hope it isn't."

"What are you worrying about?"

"Food, my dear, food, filling the larder before mooching around with a bag full of useless clubs."

People were bathing at Bluewater during that halcyon month. Mr. Dax displayed to the spring sun his abundant maleness. Mr. Gerald Fuchs had reappeared like some sweet migrant, but he was not in the best of humours.

FANTASIA

Mr. Siegfried Mallison, having wandered along the African coast as far as Tunis, crossed into Italy, and after a week in Rome, passed the Brenner into what was still Austria. It ceased to be Austria while he was in Vienna. Mr. Mallison, whose malicious mind was stimulated by other people's follies and misfortunes, enjoyed Herr Hitler's show, and was rather intrigued by the resulting chatter in the democratic capitals of Europe.

Poor Mr. Eden!

Was he murmuring: "I told you so."

And all the Labour orators! Mallison was supposed to be on the side of Labour, but in private he spoke of their leaders as impossible people. Muddled folk with the minds of grocers. Or, rather, they were like a lot of dogs who howled in chorus whenever the full moon shone, or Franco won a victory in Spain.

A young man may be allowed a little harmless vanity, more especially so when he is in love, and Skelton, marching at the rear of B Company on a Sunday route march, felt that life and this England were good. The 7th Sussex needed recruits, and each company had arranged for a recruiting-march through the countryside and its towns and villages, and Captain Rose of B Company, a Dewhurst lawyer, had with a certain malicious intent, cast his eyes upon Bluewater. B Company could boast a bugle band, an improvisation that consisted of three bugles and two kettledrums, but the five could make a lusty noise.

The company diverged to impress "The Squelch," and then turned down hill under the beech trees to Stony Hill. They were very beautiful, these trees, the golden buds splitting, and showing a powdering of green. The bugle band struck up as the brown column swung down into Bluewater, and Skelton, feeling full of swagger, told himself that there might be a chance of Rachel seeing him in uniform.

FANTASIA

There was. Archie Stout, pounding rather like a white elephant across the grass and sandhills, dared to be unconventional. He saluted the company and addressed himself to Captain Rose.

"Excuse me, sir, I know you are marching at attention, but if the company will halt at my place on their way back, I'd like to entertain them."

Captain Rose smiled and saluted Archie Stout.

"Very good of you, sir. We'll accept."

"You'll excuse my butting in?"

"I'm sure the men will, sir. And thank you."

B Company marched up Stane Street, bugles playing, drums rolling. Mr. Dax and a collection of young things, going down to bathe, stood on the sandhill and watched the column pass. They were joined there by Gerald Fuchs. Said one of the girls: "G, boy, chance for you to be a hero. Heil Hitler!" Mr. Fuchs looked sulky. He sneered. "I might click with the Boy Scouts. Much of a muchness. This old country's done."

So B Company marched past the bungalows and came to White Ways where half a dozen cars were ranged in the park. Miss Lester was entertaining a week-end party of bright young things who had crashed down from town to bathe and bask. They were enjoying little drinks in the loggia, and the passing of B Company appeared to add to the day's joy. One young man with honey-coloured hair picked up a red cushion, and standing on a chair, crammed the cushion on his head and gave the clenched fist salute. Skelton saw it, but most of the men did not, for they were marching to attention, eyes front.

Laughter from the loggia, though the bugles and drums drowned it. Miss Lester, coming out to see what all this childish noise signified, saw John Skelton going by with his head cocked, and his eyes scourging the young fools who laughed.

"Well, really! Toy soldiers!"

FANTASIA

She was annoyed. This was not the kind of advertisement that would do Bluewater any good. Supposing some patriotic idiot sent a recruiting-sergeant to appeal to her playboys? Well, there might be no result, but the interference would be tactless, and bad for trade. People did not come to Bluewater to have their consciences stimulated by shopmen and farm hands, louts in khaki.

She lit a cigarette, and appropriated somebody's drink.

"D'you mind? Don't let the army vex you."

"It doesn't," said the lad with the cushion, throwing it at someone's head, "we're all passy-passy here. Who's for a bathe?"

B Company had paraded in Dewhurst market-place eighty-three men strong, not a bad effort for a Sunday in spring, but had the company marched at full strength upon Ye Golden Hinde, Archie Stout might have been called upon to repeat the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The company fell out and piled arms on the stretch of grass east of the Golden Hinde, and the officers, going in, were met by their host.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen. I don't know how far two barrels of beer will go? I might manage bread and cheese."

Captain Rose laughed.

"The beer will more than do, sir. The chaps have a haver-sack meal with them."

"Well, I shall have to get you to give me a drawing-party. I think I can just manage tankards and glasses."

"It's very sporting of you, sir."

"Not a bit. Afraid you won't do much recruiting down here."

"No," said the Captain, "that's rather too much to expect. Still, here's hoping."

Mr. Stout cast a roving and jocund eye upon one of the three officers, for Skelton, who appeared to be troubled in spirit, was looking towards the lounge door.

"Excuse me a moment," said Stout, and taking John by the

elbow, pushed him gently in a definite direction; "I want a word with my friend John. I hope you won't find it too breezy out here in the loggia."

Skelton looked at his captain.

"Do you mind, sir? Mr. Stout and I——"

Captain Rose may have been a little puzzled, but he was no autocrat when the company had fallen out.

"That's all right, old man. I'll put the S.M. on the beer fatigue."

Stout shepherded Skelton into the lounge.

"The Poop is empty, John, I think. Not much doing this week-end."

Stout rang a bell, and when Rachel answered it, he was as innocent as milk. "O, Rachel, my dear, you might take three Lagers and three glasses into The Poop. No, I shan't want you to serve the troops. I and the S.M. will preside in the cellar."

She did not suspect Mr. Stout of winking at fortune, and she supposed that B Company's officers were to drink apart from their men. The door of The Poop was ajar, and when she pushed it open with a foot, and saw that solitary figure by the window, she paused and looked almost with reproach at her lover.

"Sorry, Rachel. I did not stage this."

She did not answer him, but moving into the room, she placed her tray upon a table. And Skelton, watching her, wondered whether it was good to be a sensitive fool. To the normal, self-pleased male such a situation might have presented no difficulties, but then, on the other hand, he might have ruined his chances.

"Just vanity, my dear."

His voice rallied her. He was smiling.

"Had to show myself off as a soldier."

She looked and looked again, beginning with his boots and puttees, breeches and tunic. His cap lay on a table. Her eyes came level with his. And suddenly, they were a woman's eyes.

FANTASIA

O, yes, she loved him, especially as he was, youth in harness, and somehow straight and proud of it. She too was proud, and a little afraid.

"I didn't stage this, dear. It was Stout. Don't be peeved with him. After all, you know, the men are on my side. I mean, the men who matter."

He moved deliberately across the room, and closing the door, came back to her.

"Why so afraid, Rachel?"

"I'm not."

"As a matter of fact I'm much more afraid than you are. If ever I have to face fire, my dear——"

"O, don't——"

"I'd like your picture in my pocket."

He looked at her, saw her eyes grow deep and tender, her hands rise to his.

"O, Rachel, would you marry me, if the real thing came?"

He had his arms about her. She looked at the badge on his lapel, and touched it with a finger.

"I might."

"Good lord, have I to pray for war? By the way, I told Mr. Jekyll about us, before I went on my course."

"You shouldn't have done."

"Why not? He said the company would build us a house. May I kiss you?"

"No."

"Then—I shall."

She put up her face quickly to his, her hands clasping his shoulders.

"It's all wrong, Mr. Jack. I——"

"That?"

He held her and was held.

"O, my dear——"

"Don't let me go—yet. I'm frightened."

"Rachel. There's nothing to——"

FANTASIA

"O, yes. Do you think there will be war?"

"God alone knows! Would you want me to funk it?"

"No."

He kissed her again.

"One can't rat. All sorts of simple things save one from that. And because I love you, my sweet—— Well, when are you going to marry me?"

She drew a deep breath.

"I'm not."

"But you said just now——"

"Yes, if war were to come, I might."

"What a woman you are! This is the second time. Next time——"

"Please, give me time to think."

Siegfried Mallison, walking down from Rustling Park, heard the bugles, and was moved to inward mockery, for, as a complacent prophet and seer, he had no illusions as to the ultimate fate of this nation of amateurs. England's great days had been the days of the Georges, and Mallison had one of those minds that experience a malicious pleasure in predicting disaster for the country that had bred him. The British Empire was lying like a string of sausages for the war-dogs to pull in pieces and devour. Hadn't it always been so, Mongol and Turkish hordes, the Goths, the Northmen, Spanish plunderers, English missionaries and merchants. The French were a dead people. Like England they had had their day. The Teuton had not yet enjoyed world-empire, but he was smashing his way towards it with the hammer of the new Thor. He and the little yellow men! Yes, the Slav was not quite adequate—somehow, and had never been a first-class fighting-man. The *anchluss* and his stay in Austria had caused Mallison to accept power-politics at their face value. He had seen those German tanks and planes, and the rumbling efficiency of the Totalitarian tide. M-yes, time to shift eggs from brittle baskets.

FANTASIA

Less than three days ago he had transferred a hundred thousand pounds to the U.S.A., depositing the cash in three separate banks.

Poor Nan and her little white cardboard country-club! He approached it by way of the furze hills in time to see Captain Rose's brown column crawling back through Bluewater towards Ye Golden Hinde. Another amateur show! He would go and have a chat with Nan, and amuse himself by putting the wind up her. But White Ways was not quite to his liking on that April morning. The loggia still was in the possession of irreverent youth that had decided that it was a bit too cold to bathe, and Mallison, having received impertinent glances, drank a cocktail in the lounge and went his way.

He had exchanged exactly ten words with Miss Lester, a Miss Lester who had the air of a woman whose hair had been in a fractious mood.

"I see you have had the army."

"No, not quite."

"Old Haldane's heroes!"

He departed, followed by ironic remarks from the loggia.

"Say, who's the bumboat woman with the beard?"

Nobody knew, and nobody cared.

"How many pairs of shorts, Rene, could you make out of those breeches?"

"Plush, my dear, plush!"

"No, corduroy, squeakers."

"No more White Horse Inn!"

"What a show! Perhaps good old Hengist will be landing in Kent again."

"Quite historic, aren't you, Diddles!"

"Good old Horsa in a bombing plane, dropping hot bricks."

"And where will you be, my dear?"

"In the first boat for God's Own Country."

"Yes, and get stuck in Ellis Island."

Mallison, strolling on towards the Golden Hinde, saw the

troops being served with beer, an archaic custom which smelt of Britain's more spacious days. The army was supposed to be a bun and coffee crowd, but these Territorials appeared ready for their liquor. It had been drawn into bedroom jugs, and was being poured into glasses and tankards by responsible N.C.O.'s. The troops themselves had, in their English way, become cheerfully and cheekily irresponsible. Mallison, passing behind the piled rifles, was subjected to friendly chaff.

"Hallo, Bushy, come and 'ave a shave with us."

"Down at the Old Bull and Bush, tra-la."

Mallison smiled forcedly upon them, waved a *non possumus* hand, and passed on. He had written as the patron of vulgar fellows, but he preferred to avoid close contact with them. One should always be on one's platform when dealing with the crowd. Someone commented upon his breeches. His beard could be forgiven him, but to vulgar men his breeches were a scandal and a provocation.

"What price the pants, Nobby?"

"What's he keep in 'em?"

The vulgar retort need not be chronicled.

Mallison strolled down to the quay where lewd fellows of the baser sort did not function. And where was that saucy wench, Rachel? Had Stout shut her up in the staff-room for fear she might provoke frank compliments, or was she waiting upon the officers? Mallison found himself outside the semi-circular window of The Poop. He sauntered to an open casement, and looking in, saw two people so obsessed with each other that they were quite unconscious of being observed.

Rachel, and that damned pup—young Skelton!

Mallison stuffed his fists into his breeches pockets, and retreated from the window. Immortal Zeus should never feel *de trop*!

XXV

JEKYLL could say to his young men—"Here we are on the edge of a first class precipice, and that fellow who hit me on the head transformed me into an Elijah or a Jonah. I am not quite sure which. Anyhow, I'm standing on the precipice wondering how often the sun will rise over a peaceful England."

They were holding a council of war in the office, and from discussing the problem of more food, had diverged to world affairs and national temperaments.

"Well, pigs, David, and chickens. Who is going to take on the poultry?"

"I could," said John, "with a little coaching."

"And more potatoes, sir, in spite of the Marketing Board. We can feed the surplus and the chats to the pigs. I wonder when the country is going to wake up?"

Jekyll jerked his lean shoulders.

"Pity someone doesn't give it a crack like the one that chap gave me. Make it see stars."

"Might be too late, sir."

"That's just it. It seems to me that democracies who squabble and argue won't stand much chance against the disciplined States. Here's poor old Chamberlain trying to pull us out of the bog, and the very people who should help stand smugly by and ask him silly questions."

Jekyll might suffer his tongue and his fancy to indulge in aerial acrobatics, but when, in the spring of the year, he saw this England coming into leaf and the brown soil growing green, he was profoundly moved and thankful for the inspiration that had come to him. Somehow, that unknown thug had

smitten vision into his rich man's noddle. And now, with a crisis darkening the horizon, he was conscious of that inward peace which comes to the man who is giving the best that is in him, and can give no more. He was growing food and employing labour in the old English way, and in a new way that set the interests of the community above personal profit. Profit! What a futile obsession, when, at any time, this England might be on the verge of starving! Pound notes in your pocket, and husks in the bellies of your brother men! Dear God, what a blind world it was!

Jekyll, walking in his garden, or across the fields where wheat was springing up, or watching the men at work in the new piggeries, felt paternal and gently proud. Filling the garner of this England, working to bring in the new and beneficent revolution when men should learn that seedtime and harvest are old sanctities, and that cities can smother the soul of a people. England one great garden, yet strong in arms, and secure, until such a day, if such a day should come, when the mere exercise of flagrant power might be regarded as sheer sottishness.

Yes, the hard and greedy old men, the passion for profits! In the City, life sometimes had exhibited to Jekyll the purblind silliness of such a spirit. He did not call himself a socialist. He wished to think of himself as a gentleman, at one with all those workers who were gentlemen. Perhaps that old-fashioned title would come into its own again and in a new way? Gentlemen would plan and lead, gentlemen in mechanics' overalls, or Harris Tweed suits. There need be no ranting text upon the flag. All that it should carry would be the words "I serve."

Though the trees were mere children in the new orchard, they wore their chaplets of flowers, and more than mere chaplets. Some of the young plum trees put on milk-white smocks. The pears were more shy, and in this warm spring white blossom was mingled with the green of the young leaves. Jekyll himself helped with the spraying of the apple trees in

their pink bud stage against codlin and winter moth caterpillars. He held the spraying lance while John sat in the seat of the light tractor that drew the spraying outfit from tree to tree. That was yet another lesson to be learnt, that apple trees do not clock in like factory hands, and some pointed pink lips at you, while others still slept their virgin sleep.

"David says we shall have to do a lot of thinning, unless the trees thin themselves."

"Yes, mustn't be greedy, John. How's recruiting?"

"Not too bad. We want a few more junior subs. in the battalion."

"Why not try Bluewater?"

"Not much good, sir."

"There's young Fuchs."

"Do you fancy him in a tight corner?"

"Not much."

"Or Mr. Siegfried Mallison?"

John laughed.

"Carter was telling me this morning that Mallison's place is up for sale."

"Sure?"

"No, I suppose it is just gossip."

"Perhaps Bluewater, as a social experiment, has become boring. Not bombs, but bathos. In our old show many nimble intellectuals like Mallison departed for Spain."

"Not much use now."

"No, I suppose it will be Arizona or Mexico. Though quiet corners are getting somewhat rare. Think I'd prefer to see it out in the old country."

They had come to the end of a tree-row, and Jekyll, leaning the lance gently against a tree, felt for his cigarette-case.

"Isn't it strange, John, that humanity can't be satisfied with some pleasant job like this?"

"Perhaps they would if they had the chance."

"I wonder? Kids in a nursery with a lot of pestilent tin toys,

guns and tanks and aeroplanes. Do the new toy soldiers wear gas masks? Fancy babies in gas masks!"

"Aren't men apt to be rather nasty louts until they become responsible for babies?"

"Good lord, John, aren't we becoming Victorian! Our dear young intellectuals accuse the old men of being responsible for the world mess. Seems to me that's not quite fair. Isn't Fascism itself the product of truculent, swaggering youth? I see it rather in that way. Yes, the present situation is something of a poser for the pacifists. They make me think of earnest, bespectacled young men trying to catch Mussolini and Sir John Diehard in the same butterfly-net. Butterfly-nets and bayonets don't seem to mix. That may sound awful clap-trap, but it seems to be unpleasantly true."

Miss Lester was sitting at her window, writing letters, and in a mood which was somewhat April and like the weather, grey skies and wind that promised a poor week-end. Possibly, she remembered that on just such a day as this she had fled from male importunities and a restless self, only to find other restlessnesses. Yes, the whole world seemed to have the jitters.

She addressed an envelope, licked the flap rather fiercely, and clamped the thing down under a letter weight so that the flap should stick. It really was disgusting how cheaply and inefficiently the providers of stationery applied their gum. And was Parsons' piece of gossip true? Could Siegfried Mallison seriously be proposing to sell and get out?

Well, if it was true, what particular significances had it for her? Did she contemplate marriage with Mallison? Great snakes, no! Nor did Mallison regard marriage as anything but a slave state imposed upon wretched males who had to impound a partner who would make the beds and cook the dinner and see the children off to school. No, described in musical terms, their duet had been a mere interlude.

Supposing she had married John Skelton? O, no, Skelton was too blah, and he had insulted her by being grossly sentimental.

And Mr. Jekyll? Yes, she was a little peeved about Richard Jekyll. He might have suited her in temperament and in prospects, but for that blow on the head which appeared to have rendered him rustic and gaga. She rather believed that she had attracted Richard Jekyll. It would have been a modern relationship, of course, the lightest of light silk bonds, and with considerable obligations on the part of his cheque book. She would have got him interested in Bluewater, and in further developments, as they interested her. They could have exploited the place together as a limited company.

Well, the chance might still be there. If S.M. sold out and vanished, and agriculture became expensive and boring, a man with Jekyll's sense of humour and appreciation of sexual technique and physical comfort, might yet appreciate the possibilities of Bluewater.

All this war business! What rot!

A shadow fell across her window, and interrupted her reflections upon life as it concerned her.

Mallison himself, and wearing his cat-face, as though he had been busy at somebody's cream.

"Hallo! I was just——"

"Paying bills or issuing 'em?"

"Neither."

She eyed him consideringly.

"I've heard the rumour."

"What's that?"

"That you are leaving us."

"Greatly exaggerated, dear lady. Who told you?"

"As a matter of fact, Parsons."

"Dear fellow. He could tell you all sorts of interesting things."

"As what?"

FANTASIA

Mallison leaned with crossed arms upon the window-sill.

"Well, about the interesting menage he abandoned."

"I don't quite get you."

"Jekyll and Co."

"I'm still in the dark."

He smiled at her.

"My sweet, how terribly innocent you are."

"O, shut up. What are you driving at?"

"Didn't you visit that quite monastic establishment?"

"I did."

"Hasn't the obvious rite occurred to you? When a rich and middle-aged bachelor sets up house with a pretty lad——"

She stared at him, nostrils expanding.

"Don't be so disgusting."

"It's nothing of the kind, but a state that may be normal in certain civilizations, but which the smug in England regard——"

She pushed her chair back angrily.

"You really are a septic person. O, get out. I'd prefer to finish my letters."

Mallison strolled down to the sea, and it being grey and turbulent, nobody was bathing. He stood for a while watching the waves, and listening to the shriek of the shingle, while the wind ballooned his breeches. Some sentimental lady had described him as "A Viking of a man," but Mallison's mind was hardly that of a sea-rover. It was more Alexandrine in its methods, witty and mischievous and insolent, and if murder was to be done you hired a cut-throat to do the unseemly job, unless the adventure piqued you.

Mallison found Gerald Fuchs alone in the Temple of Vesta, wearing a purple pullover and grey flannel trousers, and languidly polishing the dance floor. He was bored with Blue-water, especially so on a day like this when England was indulging in what he would have called middle-class weather.

He was out of funds, rather seriously so, and employment was paltry.

"Morning, Gerald."

"Morning, sir."

Mallison sat down on one of the gilded cane chairs, and wondered, if he sold the place, whether young Fuchs could be included as a fitment.

"Particularly nasty weather, Gerald."

Fuchs agreed. You always said yes to your patron, even when you felt moved to stick out your tongue.

"Heard the latest rumour?"

"What's that, sir?"

"That I'm selling the estate."

Fuchs became a sudden study in still life.

"Is it true, sir?"

"Not quite. But I have something better than that. The real juice."

"Oh?"

"I think the wise should be warned. This townlet may be a playbox, but we keep it musical. I hear the police are likely to put up a first class scandal."

"On who?"

"Can't you guess?"

Fuchs lit a cigarette.

"Not quite, sir."

"The dear farmers, our monastic friends Jekyll and Co."

Fuchs' chin jerked round.

"What!"

"Yes, S and G, my lad. I think it has been pretty obvious for a long time. I may be full of mischief, but I don't want any of our people mixed up in it. I'm giving some of them a hint. Better do the same."

A curious and half surreptitious smile seemed to trickle down Fuchs' chin.

"Quite so. I must say I had been a bit suspicious. What a

wooze! But that's rather funny, sir. The Pansy is supposed to be courting the Rachel wench."

"Not good sport, Gerald. Rachel's a clean creature. She oughtn't to be let down. I wonder what one can do about it?"

Young Fuchs stood meditating, with cigarette pendant from the corner of his mouth.

"Not a man's job, exactly."

"Know anybody who could tell her?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. But isn't it a bit dangerous, sir?"

"Not to me. I'll carry it, if there's an explosion, which isn't likely. Jekyll won't want to bring the walls of Jericho down, my lad. How are funds?"

"Not too good."

Mallison dipped into a pocket, and getting up, deposited paper under an ash-tray on the counter of the American bar.

"Call it the season's bonus, my lad. I am just going on to see Maggs about a fellow who wants to buy a bungalow."

When Mallison had gone, Gerald Fuchs collected the notes from under the ash-tray. Two ten pounders, twenty quid, not so bad, but did Mallison expect him to play jackal for so paltry a sum? Damn Mallison, and his beard and his breeches, and the suave and arrogant smugness with which he fobbed you off as a poor parasite. But what a wooze! If he planted a nicely poisoned dart in that poet fellow, he would do it for his own pleasure, and not just to please Mallison. And these were democratic days. He was enjoying a little affair with Millie, Stout's second waitress, a little bit of fluff with red hair, who came to him for informal dancing lessons. Millie did not love Rachel, and was jealous of her. Well, it would be quite easy for him to swear Millie to secrecy, and then pass on the scandal. She would pass it on elsewhere, O, most certainly, and if anyone turned nasty, he could refer them to Siegfried.

Besides, he was bored with Bluewater, and had heard from a friend who was interested in a London night-club. "Plenty of pickings and pluckings, old lad; come to Canaan." Mr. Fuchs sat on a high stool by the bar, and remembered that occasion not so long ago when Skelton had sent him sprawling across Miss Lester's dance-floor. Yes, he would get his own back on Mr. Jack Skelton.

Miss Millie Barter was a young person with a very good opinion of herself. Surreptitious dancing lessons, etc., were all very well, but she was determined to exhibit her person in public, and show herself off in the company of Bluewater's tame "Exquisite." A weekly dance was given in the pavilion of Poldermouth pier, and Mr. Fuchs was told that she had had her lessons and was ripe for a real show. Well, but how would they get there?

"Green bus from Dewhurst, silly."

"We've got to get to Dewhurst."

"Can't you raise a car?"

Her red head and the tinge of contempt in her challenge provoked him. Mallison possessed two cars, but he, Mr. Fuchs, was not the holder of a driving licence. Well, damn it, what did it matter? In for a penny, in for a pound! Mr. Fuchs went up to interview Mallison, and explained the situation, and Mallison offered him his second car, a sports two-seater, for the evening.

Millie begged herself off, relying on Stout's good nature, and Fuchs calling for her at Ye Golden Hinde, drove Miss Red Head to Poldermouth. He was properly prepared in dinner-jacket and gigolo trousers, and Millie had had her hair waved at Dewhurst, and was wearing a new frock and too much lipstick.

The pier possessed an off-licence, and Miss Red Head drank a port, two gins and It, and a double whisky and soda. She began to giggle in the corner where they were sitting

out when Fuchs proceeded to prime her with his particular piece of news.

“O, go on, tell me another!”

“It’s quite true, my dear; terribly true. But you mustn’t split.”

“Coo, just fancy. And poor old Rache——”

“Yes, it’s rather rough on Rachel. I’m told the police are working up the case, and then, what ho, for the explosion.”

“You’d hardly think such things would happen, would you?”

Fuchs was the man of the world.

“Bluewater’s a pretty queer place. O, yes, I’ve seen life, in London and Paris and Monte. Come on, let’s have this one. My best pupil.”

“Do you mean that—reely?”

“You’re lovely. Join up.”

Miss Barter returned to Ye Golden Hinde, a little tipsy, and excited. But she had yet another sensation to exploit. The hotel had gone to bed, but there was light showing under Rachel’s door, for Rachel had been kept up late attending to Millie’s business and her own.

Millie knocked.

“Are you awake, Rache?”

“Yes.”

“May I come in?”

“Yes.”

Rachel was reading in bed, and she slipped the book under her pillow. It happened to be a frail volume of John Skelton’s poems, lyrics and fragments, and little colour pieces culled from the English country.

“Had a good time?”

“Marvellous. Mr. Fuchs——”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed a little.

“You went with Mr. Fuchs?”

“Yes, why not? He says I dance better than any of the

local ladies. But, Rache, he told me something. It's awfully serious, and I'm not supposed to mention it, but girls ought to back each other up, oughtn't they?"

Rachel sat up in bed. She did not like Millie, and she was wondering what insect had penetrated the girl's sensational little head.

"What is it? You're not——"

"It's about Mr. Jekyll."

"Mr. Jekyll?"

"Yes, now don't be shocked. I do feel it's a duty to tell you. It's about Mr. Skelton, too."

Rachel sat very still.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, he does come down here to see you, doesn't he, and I think you ought to be careful, Rache. Mr. Fuchs says that the police are——"

And then she blurted out the beastly thing, and being somehow shocked by Rachel's face, began to giggle. "Well, you needn't look at me like that. I'm only trying to do you a good turn. Everybody in Bluewater——" Rachel had turned back the bedclothes, and Millie, suddenly sobered and scared, retreated towards the door.

"Don't you touch me."

Rachel was standing.

"I'm not going to touch you, Millie. You say Mr. Fuchs told you this lie."

"It isn't a lie. Mr. Mallison——"

"O, Mr. Mallison is in it too. No, leave the door handle alone. I haven't finished with you yet."

Millie, frightened, spat like a cat.

"Don't you try any rough-house with me. This isn't the dining-room. You ought to be grateful."

"Grateful!"

Rachel walked past her and opened the door.

"Yes, go to bed. Do you think I believe a word of this?"

FANTASIA

And you had better not believe it, Millie, or you may find yourself in trouble."

"How dare you suggest——?"

"Get out, my dear, I know. You'll have to leave here, or I shall. I'll see Mr. Stout to-morrow."

Millie slipped out into the passage.

"You try, Rache. I don't want to stir up mud, but if——"

"Poison, you little beast, not mud."

And Rachel closed the door on her.

Alone, her strong young body seemed suddenly to grow weak, and flaccid. She wanted air. She went to the window, and leaning out, looked at the sea. Her breath came deeply like the play of the sea itself. The incredible malice of men! She put a hand to her heart, and stood straight, like a young tree after being bent by the wind. Her eyes grew wide and poignant. She went suddenly to the bed, knelt down, and drawing the book from under the pillow, opened it at random, and bending, pressed her face to it. Her eyes were dry.

"O, my dear, it isn't true. It never could be true of you."

XXVI

THERE was a path across one of the Gate Farm fields which had a peculiar charm for Richard Jekyll. It was a mere ribbon of trampled soil running diagonally across a field of young wheat. Each year it was ploughed up, and each year it was trampled hard again by the feet of labourers who passed to and fro from their cottages to their work on the farm. This brown trackway running through the vivid green of the young wheat had so great a fascination for Richard Jekyll, that each day he would walk a quarter of a mile along the main road to the group of cottages, so that he could follow this path over the Sussex soil. It had a strange permanence even in the changing rhythm of plough and harrow; it ran through the young growth and the blue-throated corn of June, and the tawny crop of late August, and over the pale stubble. At ploughing time it disappeared for a while, only to manifest itself again as the labourers' feet went to and fro. It was as old as the farm, and seemed as old as time.

At the far end of the wheat field stood a little wood of larches raised upon a moundlike hill. They were green like the wheat, even more vividly so, a kind of mysterious, other-world sanctuary, spires merging, their grey trunks crowded close. The path looped its way round the wood, and gave suddenly over the top of a thorn hedge a vast view of the valley as far as Poldermouth Bay. You saw Gate Farm and its weather-worn tiles, and the rolling arable, green and brown, and the broad maplike meadows in the valley, and the Polder brook and the dykes, and reeds and osiers, and lines of willows under a blue sky or softly canopied with clouds. Jekyll would pause here,

perhaps perch on a field gate and look at the view. Cattle grazed in the meadows. Goliath might be stirring a tilth for the root sowing, or the one team of horses harrowing young wheat. Smoke rose from the Gate Farm chimney. Beyond Poldermouth you could see the sea that had carried Roman ships and the long boats of the Northmen, and Cinque Port sails, and Spanish galleons, and the old great gun ships of Georgian England. What a county, what a view! Surely, this was a great-hearted and gentle land that claimed your love and your courage and your patience!

Jekyll leaned upon the gate. If this Sussex soil was fecund, so were his wits and his pleasure in them. The path ran on across more wheat towards the paddock spread like a neat green carpet about Gate Farm. He saw a figure vault over the further gate, David in an urgent mood, and primed with some new idea. Great lad, David! He made Jekyll think of a husky forward striding loose limbed and cheerfully ominous into the football field. What would the news be? Had a sow littered? Or was there more land on the market?

More land! Yes, not for modern prairie farming which David scorned and loathed as the trickery of despair. One thousand acres intensively cultivated, that was their ideal. Jekyll's dream was taking on detail. There should be glass-houses, and electrically lighted poultry palaces, and mushroom beds, as well as beef and wheat and fruit. Every square yard of land should be put to hard labour. Not one old man and a boy per hundred acres, but six or even ten men, each an enthusiast and an expert in his own province. A fleet of lorries. An elaborate costing department under John's care. Even village industries, pottery, basket making and the like, with Paul the Potter in charge. Already, Paul was working out a scheme which could be centred at Fernfield.

David drew near. He had that kind of earnest, smiling shimmer on his face that presaged tidings.

"Well, David, pigs good to-day?"

Garton grinned at him.

"Cowfold is coming on the market. Purchase has just dropped me a line."

"You want it?"

"Don't you, sir?"

"Get along with you, David! Well, what's it going to cost us, if we get it?"

"Perhaps four thousand. Two hundred acres, some of the best mixed land in the county. Hasn't been let down as badly as some."

"Can we work it with Forge and Gate?"

"Absolutely. I'd link it up with an estate road."

"David, David, roads will be the death of me!"

"All right, sir, call it a farm track, but if we evolve an efficient transport system——"

"Which we shall. And who would you put into it? I mean, our idea is, to link up farms and farmers, and not run bastard prairies."

"Old Killick, sir."

"Killick!"

"Yes, he's simply mad to get back on the land. I've sized him up pretty well. He might be a bit stubborn and awkward if you took him the wrong way, but the old chap has pluck and ideas."

"He's not so very old, either."

"No, that's true. And he does know this country and all its ways and whimsies. And he thinks you a sort of new Messiah."

"Thanks, David, I refuse the title. Sure he won't get cussed about some of our new ideas?"

"I've talked to him. Funny thing, sir, but he'd worried out some of the same things himself. For a Sussex local——"

"Pretty good, and chastening for us."

Garton grinned.

"Put it on me, sir. Because I took the Cambridge Agricul-

tural I don't assume that all old gnarled oaks can't sprout a countryman's fancy."

Hattersley was throwing a pot. It was to be a model pot for pupils to copy, simple and serene, and fit to be placed in a garden or even on somebody's piano to hold a sheaf of delphiniums, and Hattersley was humming a tune, and out of tune, for though a craftsman, he had no ear. "Eyes and hands, sir, but no ears." Also, he was thinking of Jekyll and all the clean and beneficent business of making and growing things. He sat on a stool close to his wheel with a bucket of clay beside him, and a jug full of water. His wheel was a primitive affair, its moulding table worked by a cumbersome wooden flywheel which, given an occasional push from a treadle, kept the spindle revolving. It was simple and efficient, and somewhat like Hattersley.

The wudge of clay was growing up under his hands in the queer way pots have, as though they were drawn up from below by the attraction of his fingers. It was a fascinating job, and Paul never tired of it. His clever hands hardly seemed to touch the wet clay, and yet it grew and bulged and seemed to shape itself almost like a blown bubble.

So intent was he on the job that he was unaware of someone coming to the open door of his workshop. The visitor leaned against the door frame, watching him, cigarette in mouth, his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Regular Adam business, old man."

Hattersley let out a "Ha", and turned his head for an instant to see Fuchs' goatlike face and purple pullover. What did the parasitic little brat want here?

"God had more trouble with Adam."

"Surely. Take you long to learn?"

"Months."

"What's the idea?"

"A pot, plain pot for the unsophisticated."

FANTASIA

Hattersley appeared to concentrate upon the job, but he was continuing to wonder what had brought Mallison's pup to his workshop, for that was how he thought of Gerald Fuchs.

"French without giggles, my lad. Not working to-day?"

"What is work?"

"Unknown quantity in some quarters."

Fuchs changed his weight from one foot to the other.

"Just mooching. There's a hen at Bluegates who wants me to teach her to lay an egg."

Nauseating little beast! Hattersley picked up a piece of slate, and removed a film of clay from the revolving pot.

"You ought to work in tin, Fuchs."

"That's rather subtle."

"O, no, obvious."

"Is this one of Jekyll's jobs?"

"Might be. Why?"

"Might not last. Didn't poor old Oscar have to retire to Paris."

Hattersley gave a quick jerk of the head.

"What's that? I don't quite catch on."

"Gosh, where have you been living?"

"In monastic innocence."

Fuchs let out a little neighing laugh.

"But not like that other monastic show. I suppose the old monks had their pansies."

Hattersley's hands were resting on his apron, and the wheel was revolving more slowly.

"Better come inside if you are going to talk scandal. What, exactly, are you driving at?"

Fuchs mooched in, and perched himself side-saddle on the bench.

"Why, Jekyll and Co."

"You mean——?"

"H.S. of course. The whole place knows about it. I wouldn't

get in too deep with the Jekyll-Skelton show. When the balloon goes up——”

Hattersley's right hand had dipped into the bucket. It gathered a sudge of clay, and with a sudden swing, flung the sticky mess well and truly into Fuchs's face.

“Get out, you little bit of vermin.”

And Fuchs got out, somewhat blindly, because a very savage Hattersley had stormed up from his stool and charged after him. The kick went home on the seat of the grey pants, and Fuchs passed rapidly down the garden path, pawing at his mealy face, for some of the stuff had got into his eyes.

Hattersley returned to his stool. He might have laughed, but this was no laughing matter. The wheel was still, the pot promising to set in an unfinished state. He set the wheel revolving, dashed some water on the pot, and gave his clever hands to it. But his thoughts were elsewhere. Yes, this was a damned serious show. If a scandal of this kind was circulating in Bluewater, and it reached the ears——? Good lord, how damnable! And who had given it birth? Not Fuchs, probably, but some master of malice. Siegfried Mallison?

Hattersley finished his pot, and leaving it to dry, he took off his apron, washed his hands, put on a rather disreputable hat, and locked up workshop and bungalow. He had a job to do, a difficult and delicate job, and in tackling it he approached it with the complete disinterestedness of the craftsman. He was not telling himself that if this beastliness was exploded like a bomb under the lives of those for whom it was intended, the shock might be disastrous to himself. What would a man like Jekyll do? Face the thing out, or turn with disgust from the place that had so slandered him? Yes, he might wash his hands of the whole business, sell out and go, leaving all the good things of this new little world unfinished. That was possible, O, yes, quite possible. A man's self-pride might be so revolted that he would not even deign to stay and live the foul thing down.

Besides, such filth clung. How could you disprove so cowardly

a lie? By going into court? And would the Law cleanse you? The smell of the thing would still hang about your person, poisoning every human association, and giving rise in cynical corners to sinister winks and giggles.

Damn it, this putrescence had to be dug up and burned. But how was it to be done without the reek of it spreading into other men's lives?

Yes, David Garton was the man. For a moment he had thought of going across to Stout's, and of asking Archie's advice, but having chosen David he knew that the choice was good. He had been seeing a lot of Garton during the last six months. Taking the field path past Rustling to the Fernfield road he followed Jekyll's path across the wheat-field and past the grove of larches. It was about half-past twelve when he reached Gate Farm.

David was in, just back from a morning tramp over the land. It was he who opened the green door to Hattersley.

"Hallo, Paul."

"Can I come in? I want a talk."

"Lunch will be on in ten minutes. Dare say we can find you a snack."

"Thanks, David. As a matter of fact I have something on my mind which is rather damnably private."

"Oh!" and Garton's blue eyes stared hard through their round spectacles.

"Yes, a very dirty business."

"Come into my parlour. Yes, my woman's deaf, and she doesn't sneak around. You look a bit cooked."

"I came up here rather fast."

"Have a whisky."

"Good idea."

They turned into that most male and untidy room of David's which contradicted in its disorderly detail the precision and orderliness of his farming. His was a kind of

magnificent largeness that threw things where it pleased and left them there. An armchair had to be cleared of a small pile of books. The mantelpiece's one duty in life appeared to be that of a parade-ground for all David's pipes.

"Squat, old man."

He kept whisky and glasses in a painted corner-cupboard, and going to open the door, he had his back to Paul.

"Well, what's the trouble?"

Hattersley blurted it out. It seemed easier to utter those unclean words while David's back was turned.

Garton's head came round with a jerk.

"What!"

"I'm sorry, David, but that's the situation. Incredibly beastly and crapulent, I know."

"Good God, do you mean to tell me people are saying that about the chief and Jack?"

"Some people, how many I can't say. Of course, young Fuchs may be merely a jackal."

"That little beast in bangles! Why, the dirty little skunk—" and words seemed to fail him.

He poured out two whiskies, and Hattersley noticed how completely steady his hands were. There was a syphon in the cupboard, and David operated it by putting a foot on a chair, and balancing the syphon on one big knee. His face was ominous. He passed Hattersley his glass, filled his own, replaced the syphon, and went to the mantelpiece for a pipe.

"Someone behind Fuchs. Is that your idea?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Mallison."

"Mallison! Yes, a sensational sort of beast, but the thing seems incredible."

"You've heard of sadism, David."

"Yes, the word's become quite popular. We all fancy ourselves as amateur psychologists. And your idea——?"

"To track it down."

"Exactly, and wring its neck. What about cornering young Fuchs and giving him a little third degree?"

Hattersley took a pull at his glass.

"That's my idea. The two of us. You'll take it on?"

Garton was lighting his pipe.

"What do you think! Supposing we go down and hunt him out when we have had some food. The thing is, Paul, that old Jekyll must never know."

Hattersley nodded.

"Like throwing vitriol over a man's soul, David."

"Gosh, let me get my hands on the man who is responsible."

His pipe was alight, and he went to the window, and standing there with his big shoulders braced, he looked across the fields to the ridge where the larchwood showed like a green hill against the sky.

"Jekyll, of all men, Hat! The thing would be ludicrous if it weren't so cruel."

They took the Morris which was housed at Gate Farm, and following the Fernfield-Dewhurst road, dropped down Stony Hill in brilliant sunshine. It was a clear day, the sea calm and gently blue, the sandhills hummocks of pale gold, and Blue-water itself looking like a cardboard model, almost a nursery product. Garton's big hands were steady on the wheel. Such a man could be dangerously quiet, and his voice had a gentleness when he spoke to the man beside him.

"Who'll do the talking, Hat, you or I?"

"Let me begin. There is such a thing as walking lightly, and if we can persuade young Fuchs to tell us what we want—"

"I agree. Play with the jackal and so put up the bigger beast. I'll try and keep my temper."

It was Bluewater's very idle hour, digestive and otiose, when it dozed in the sun, or curled itself up with a thriller. Garton turned the Morris into the track between the sandhills

and parked her on a strip of dry turf not far from the spot where Skelton had found the unconscious Jekyll. The white doors of the dance pavilion were closed, but when Garton tried them, he found that they were not locked. They looked at each other and entered the little vestibule. The polished dance floor beyond had almost the sheen of still brown water. Two other doors, flimsy things of stained wood, opened one on each side of the vestibule. One door was half open, the other shut.

The place was very silent, and Garton, treading cautiously, went to the half open door, and peered round it. The room, Fuchs' office, was empty, and David, turning, shook his head meaningly at Hattersley. And then, a distinct and suggestive sound came from the opposite room. Someone was asleep in there, and snoring.

Hattersley put his hand to the handle. The door was not locked. Very slowly he pushed it before him, stared, and made a beckoning gesture to Garton. Fuchs was lying asleep on his bed, legs and arms spread, his mouth open. He was wearing nothing but a yellow singlet and brown shorts, and a green jade bangle on each wrist. His naked feet stuck out at the end of a pair of hairless and rather skinny legs.

The two visitors slipped in, and Hattersley, with a glance at David, slammed the door.

The sound brought Gerald Fuchs to a sitting position, just as though someone had pulled a string.

"Hallo, what's the idea?"

Garton put his back against the door. The lower sash of the bedroom window was down, and there was no chance of their rat bolting by the window. David, as a man who had boxed and played rough "rigger," was a pretty good reader of faces, and Fuchs had the angry face of a funk who was afraid to be angry.

Said Hattersley, leaning on the back of the one bedroom chair: "With regard to that very interesting conversation we

had this morning, Fuchs, Mr. Garton agrees with me that the thing is too serious to be slighted. Our business here is to be told how this particular lie originated."

Fuchs had swung his legs off the bed, and he squatted there looking sallow and sulky.

"Any authority?"

"I rather think so." This was from David. "As a personal friend of the people who are concerned, I am not going out of this room until you have satisfied us."

Fuchs wriggled.

"I'm damned if I'm going to be bullied."

Garton lounged against the door.

"Don't be silly. You can have it either way. Either you tell us the truth, or I'll give you a smashing that will last you for years. As a matter of fact, it is what I am rather keen on doing. But if you have any sense you'll realize that the only decent and reasonable thing to do is to help us to strangle this lie."

Fuchs was twisting one of his bangles round and round, and Garton saw that there was no fight in him.

"How do you know it's a lie?"

"If you ask me that question again, I'll——"

"All right, all right, don't be so peevish. I don't want to be unfair to anybody."

"That's better."

"As a matter of fact—Mallison told me."

Hattersley, still leaning on his chair, and watching the figure on the bed, gave a fierce jerk of the head.

"I thought so."

"Tell us what he said."

Fuchs squirmed.

"O, just what I've repeated. He assured me the thing was true, said everybody knew, and that people ought to be warned."

"Nice fellow! And you believed him?"

"Well, when a man of Mallison's standing says a thing like that——"

"You rush round to broadcast it. God, you know, I think I ought to thrash you."

Actually, he made a mischievous movement towards the bed, and Fuchs sprang up, and backing against the wall, put up his hands, fingers open and clawed like a woman's.

"Don't you touch me. I've told you."

"Yes, you rat."

But Hattersley, entering into the savage humour of the business, put out an arm as though to keep David back.

"Easy, David. What I suggest is that Mr. Fuchs might like to write us a formal little note to say that he has been misinformed by a certain person, and that he very much regrets——"

Fuchs spluttered.

"I'm damned if I will. How do I know that——"

"Be careful," said David.

"The letter will not be used against him, though it might be produced against the real culprit, when we decide to deal with him. Then, I suggest, that discretion would prompt Mr. Fuchs to leave Bluewater."

"I agree," said David.

They waited. They watched the various progressive expressions pass over Gerald Fuchs' face, and Hattersley, who was almost sorry for the little beast, gave him the deciding chance.

"Come along, be a sportsman, Fuchs. You have helped to spread a particularly foul lie about a particularly pleasant gentleman. The decent thing to do is——"

Fuchs' eyes were fixed upon David's big fists.

"All right, all right, if you'll assure me that I have made a mistake——"

"I'll give you that assurance," said David with his slow smile.

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So Fuchs wrote his letter, using a mauve-coloured letter-pad and a fountain pen that was decorated with flowers in coloured sealing wax. It was a poor scrawl, written at Hattersley's dictation, but he signed it.

And then, suddenly, he burst into tears, for Hattersley had pocketed the document.

"I don't want to do anybody any harm. Supposing Mallison turns nasty?"

Garton observed him with deliberate disgust.

"You can leave Mr. Mallison to us, my child. Now, if you take my advice, you'll clear. Try St. Maxim or St. Tropez or some nice little place like that for three months. I think that's about all we want, Hattersley."

"Yes, just about all."

XXVII

ARCHIE STOUT, like many large men and large dogs, was a peaceful creature who liked to like and be liked. His jocundity was the product of a good digestion, and a heart that was never out of temper, but though his very largeness and his good humour made it difficult for other men to quarrel with him, women, of course, were different. They are prone to exploit the saint and spoil the sinner, and even Stout's paternal face had perspired over that morning's scene. Yes, make a note, my lad, not to employ any more red-headed wenches about the place.

He had presented Millie with a month's wages and some fatherly advice, packed her and her luggage into a car, and despatched her to Dewhurst station. Thank God, that was over! But what a disgusting eruption, like something red and messy on one's face. The morning's saving grace had been Rachel's.

"Do you want me to stay after this, sir?"

He had been a little shy of looking at Rachel.

"Just as long as you please, my dear, and thank you."

"I want to thank you, sir."

"Don't, my dear; not necessary. I shall be sorry to lose you when you do go. And someone will be lucky."

She had turned to leave him, and looking rather flustered he had added a few last words.

"Don't take this to heart. It is worse than a lie. But you know that. Good girl."

He was sitting at his office desk, scribbling on a blotting pad with a pencil. His fingers and his thoughts seemed to be interlocked, and to be working together. In one corner of the pad he

sketched in something that might have been an envelope or an oblong cake of soap. As a matter of fact it was meant to be a cigarette-case. Four strokes of the pencil, and a rude M appeared. H'm, Mallison! Rather incredible! But then, hysteria, and the various aberrations and manifestations of the human psyche were not morning coffee and bacon and eggs. Had Jimmie Jettison seen a tiger, a real tiger on the prowl? Just jungle mischief, malice in a striped skin? Stout's fingers scribbled like a boy playing at noughts and crosses. Richard Jekyll, Jack Skelton, Rachel, the asp lying hidden amid Hattersley's shirts! And that little slug of a Fuchs! Pah, what a pattern. Rather incredible, and yet——?

There were footsteps and a knock that was somehow dramatic.

"Come in. Hallo, it's you, Paul. Well, well, just the man who was in my mind."

Hattersley was wearing his wolf's face, but it was the face of a wise beast hot on the trail. Almost you could see him wrinkling up his jowl and showing the laughing fangs. Did wolves laugh like some dogs did?

"Heard any news, Archie?"

Stout sat back in his chair.

"I've had one of my girls throwing fits. Yes, packed her off. It caused me to sweat."

"Not—Rachel?"

Stout smiled, and looked up with a kind of affectionate coyness at his friend.

"No, my lad, not Rachel. I see you know something."

Hattersley sat sideways on the desk, and feeling in a pocket, produced a piece of mauve-coloured paper.

"Read that. Private and confidential."

Stout read it, and then dropped it on the desk as though it were somebody's dirty handkerchief.

"Little rat! Yes, that bears out my morning's drama. This place wants cleaning up, Paul."

Hattersley's teeth showed between very red lips.

"We're on the job."

"Who?"

"Big David and I. Care to join in?"

Stout shrugged, a gesture in which his large tummy shared.

"Don't know. Too many cooks. Not that I'm funkng. But wait a bit, Hat. I've been cerebrating."

The pencil still slanted between Stout's thumb and fingers, and he scrawled dashes and question-marks on the pad.

"Remember that cigarette-case of Jekyll's?"

"Very much so."

"Let's suppose a certain person placed it where it was found."

"Mallison!"

"Well, why not, if the part of universal poisoner seems to pique him? Some of these ultra-clever people appear to retain the qualities of nasty, sadistic little urchins. But what if he was the person?"

"You mean, how did he come by the case? Great socks, Archie, it means that he hit Jekyll on the head and robbed him."

"Just so."

"But, good lord, why?"

"Yes, why? Because he's a perversion. Because he was bored. Because your philosopher may, in his private life, revert for the sake of sensational contrast to the primitives. Because he likes to pose to himself in all sorts of parts. Because rape and murder do appeal to lurking savage in man. Because he's excessively vain, the completely cultured and swinish egoist."

Hattersley sat like a huddled, pensive faun, his lower lip thrust out, his forehead overcast.

"By God, if we can catch him out! By the way, Archie, does the girl know about this other beastliness?"

"Afraid so."

"The swine. Why she and Jack——"

"Rachel's rather a white woman, Hat."

"Yes, I know—but—— O, damn it, you can hit a man from behind, but to poison a dream with a stench! Well, big David and I are taking it on."

"Just how?"

"Going to call on a certain person at a nice and quiet hour and put him on the spot."

"Be careful, old man. I have a feeling that he could be a rather dangerous beast in a tight corner."

"Nothing would please me better," said Hattersley, grimly, "only, I'm afraid young Garton will get in before I shall. When you get a lad like David really hotted up——"

"But if you beat the fellow up too badly, the business might get beyond you."

"Don't worry, Archie. We're wise. There are two people on God's earth who have to be kept as innocent as babes."

"Jekyll and boy Skelton?"

"Exactly. And blessed babes they are, in some ways, both of 'em."

Stout had gone to the boat-house to help in running a motor-boat down the slipway when Rachel came to him. Could she speak to him for a moment? She could. He walked along the little quay with her until they were out of earshot of the men at work in the boat-house.

"What is it, my dear?"

"Do you mind if I go off after dinner is served, sir?"

They were standing facing the sea.

"Not a bit, Rachel."

"Mary and Kate say they will clear away."

"That's all right. Not worrying?"

He saw her smile. Those firm, clean lips of hers had a peculiar sweetness. He had seen a woman look at a small child in just that way.

"No, sir. I know what to do."

Stout frowned for a moment. How wise was she? For mere

impulse, however compassionate, can be dangerous in such a crisis.

"You'll forgive me, Rachel, but some things are better left to fade away."

She stood straight and still, that smile flickering about her mouth.

"I know. But I shall never say I know. Nor will he know that I know."

Stout's face beamed relief.

"That's infinitely wise of you, my dear. I think I'll leave it at that. Good luck to you."

It was growing dark with the gradual darkness of a warm spring night when she left the sandhills, and took the path past Hattersley's bungalow for the valley below Rustling Park. Other conspirators had preceded her, but this she did not know. So still was it that she could hear the sea making a little plash along the shingle. A sickled moon lay in the sky. Trees, hedgerows, grasses had been green grey in the twilight, but now in the cleft of the valley they were of a clouded blackness. Dew had fallen, and the earth smelt sweet. Also, the spirit of her seemed to quicken to all the manifestations of this natural world, with its pockets of shadow and spaces that were less dark, and the grass that was friendly to her feet.

A sweet smell drifted to her from a bank. Mayflower in bloom. The ground was higher here, and more open to the sky, and she could see the old thorns dimly powdered with flower. The path climbed slowly, to become darkened by great beech trees, and she was not afraid, though it was colder here, and she could remember as a child being frightened of such trees and the way the branches reached out over you. Somehow they seemed to bless the woman in her. Yes, she knew what to do. And he would never know, nor—perhaps—divine the act of faith that had brought her to him on this spring night. Stars, and a sickle moon, and the duskiness of young leaves, hedge

bottoms plumed with chervil, the last primroses pale on the banks. The sound of the sea died away. There was nothing but a great stillness until she came to an open field, and saw a few lights pricking the northern sky, and she could see those other lights strung in a curve along the sea's edge. She felt high above her world, and somehow profoundly sure of it. A little swing-gate would let her through into the road, and as she came to it a car swept by, its lights greening the road's verges.

She swung the gate, and heard it kiss the post behind her, and something in her laughed with a quick tenderness that was near to tears.

Skelton unbuckled his belt and threw it into a chair. There had been company drill at Dewhurst, and he had taken his first parade without being confounded under the eyes of all those men by a sensitive self-consciousness. He had funked that first parade and worried himself in bed drilling a shadow company until he had felt word-perfect, though, however word-perfect you might be, there was the horror of drying-up in public. Well, thank God, he hadn't. He seemed to have forgotten his second self when once he had had the brown files moving.

Jekyll was away for two nights, staying at his London club and attending to the last formalities in the flotation of the "Sons of Sussex." Mrs. Sandys had left a cold supper on the table, pressed beef and salad, stewed plums and custard, and Cheshire cheese. Skelton opened a bottle of beer, and sitting down, attacked this most English meal. Sandys and Co. had gone to bed, having fallen into country ways, though they were not quite so avian as Carter who roosted and rose with the birds. A window was open, and the night supremely still.

Something cracked in a corner of the room, but John had become familiar with that particular sound. The old house was full of such noises, especially so at night, and Paul Hattersley had explained them to him. Forge Farm's floor-joists were

of oak, and oak, at all ages, is never still, expanding and contracting, and complaining, or startling you almost mischievously with a ghostly pistol-shot. Skelton had finished his meal, and though he was not of an age when the slackening of buttons becomes a necessity, his right puttee felt somewhat tight. Yes, he could suppose that this mild discomfort had been suffered in the cause of vanity, and bending down to slacken the tape, he caught a little sound out there in the garden.

The garden gate, though reconditioned and reset upon its hinges, still claimed the prerogative of age, the right to creak, a sound that was more audible at night. Skelton raised his head to listen, but though one lattice was open, he heard no other sound. Yet, accepting the gate's message, it could signify only one thing on a windless night such as this, and going to the window, he leaned out.

"Anyone there?"

And then he saw her standing close to the left-hand lattice, but for the moment she was a mere human shape, until she moved nearer and into the light.

"Rachel!"

His right hand went out to her, but there was a bed of tulips and wallflowers under the window, and she stood back from him on the grass.

"Can I come in, John?"

"Why, of course. The chief's in town, and I've been soldiering. Walked all the way?"

"Yes."

He went to the porch door, unlocked it, and let her in, but though he touched her, she did not answer the challenge of his hand. And he, swiftly sensitive to the apartness of her mood, stood back and let her pass, though watching her with the eyes of a lover.

"Worried about anything, Rachel?"

"Yes, my dear, but that's my fault."

"Sit down. Take your hat off. We shan't be bothered here."

FANTASIA

She put her hands to her hat, and he took it from her.

"Well, what's the trouble? That's the best chair."

She stood a moment, straight and still.

"I ought not to have come to you like this."

"You? Why, I would have saved you it if——"

"O, no, my dear. I had to come because I have changed my mind. I have been worried."

"Rachel."

"Yes, it seemed all wrong to me."

His poor face looked frightened.

"You don't mean——? But, my dear, it's all so right."

"No, not that. I mean, that if you want me to, I'll marry you."

He stood quite still for a moment, looking at her, and then he tossed her hat to join his belt in the basket-chair.

"O, my dear, do I want you? Come here."

But she put her hands against his shoulders.

"Wait—will you ever be ashamed of me? I couldn't bear that. I know I'm——"

This time he would not be gainsaid.

"If you ever say that again, I'll—— But what is it, after all, but a few tricks! And we're to be country folk, not county, my dear, nor suburban, thank God."

She lay on the sofa under the window, holding his head in the hollow of her arms.

"That's as it should be, Rachel. What made you change your mind?"

She ran a hand through his hair.

"I wasn't so strong as I thought. I just couldn't——"

"You gave me a fright, beloved."

"Did I? I wouldn't hurt a hair of your head."

"Isn't that rather my job? Or is it——?"

"I think it's the woman's."

"You would. But, I say, Rachel, we could manage with one of the new cottages. couldn't we, until the company builds us

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a little place of our own? I've got my eye on the very spot. I'll show you to-morrow."

She drew a deep breath and was silent for a second or two.

"I don't mind where we live, Jack."

"But I do."

XXVIII

HATTERSLEY led the way. He knew where the park path crossed the ha-ha by a little brick bridge and ended at the iron gate of the manor garden. There were cypresses here, and flowering trees, pyrus, and crab, Japanese cherries, thorns, lilacs and laburnums. A grass path sloped gently into the rose garden below the lower terrace. A flight of steps broke upwards between brick walls whose pillars carried stone vases planted with clipped box trees. More grass and a vast herbaceous border stretching east and west, then—more steps, and the flagstones of the upper terrace.

Hattersley carried a torch, but he had not used it. Both of them were wearing crêpe-soled shoes. The Georgian house towered above them like a cliff, its white windowsashes and stone parapet with sections of balustrading, dimly rhythmic in the darkness.

Hattersley touched Garton's arm, and pointed with the torch towards a window on the ground floor, the last window but one from the south-east corner of the house. Hattersley knew that room and its two french windows. He had unhappy memories of humiliating moments sacrificed there to Siegfried Mallison. The rest of the house appeared to be in darkness; one french window had the curtains drawn across it; the other was open and showing a strip of light.

Hattersley put his mouth close to Garton's ear.

"That's the library. Not a bad place for an interview. No need to ring bells."

Garton nodded.

"Let's take a look inside. What about a signal when we take the stage?"

"I'll pinch you."

They crossed the terrace silently, and moving along the front of the house, came to the open window. The space between the half-drawn curtains gave them a view of the middle of the room. A man was whistling, and the sound had a mischievous, jocund casualness, but the part of the room visible to them was empty, though they could see Mallison's desk, and the brilliant Persian plates that coloured the wall above it.

They stood there with their shoulders touching and their heads close together, both of them stooping slightly. And suddenly, Mallison came into view. He had a bunch of keys in his hand, and they saw him unlock a little cupboard in the bureau, and take something out. His honey coloured head had a halo of light. The whistling had died to a kind of purring sibilant whisper. Then he moved to the bookcase immediately to the right of the bureau, removed some books, put his hand into the space, pressed, and with a jerk of the arm slid a small section of the panelling to one side.

Garton was conscious of the pressure of Hattersley's arm. Mallison had paused and was caressing his little blond beard. He had his back towards them, and he appeared to be contemplating that secret niche in the panelled wall. A sudden movement, and he had turned about and was facing the window; Hattersley's hand had thrust Garton to one side. It was a moment for utter stillness and holding of the breath. They heard Mallison walk to the window, and twitch the curtains together, but he did not shut the window.

Someone let out a deep sigh. Hattersley, who had stepped to one side and pressed close to the wall, moved back again. David felt himself touched, and then the pressure of Paul's thumb and finger.

Hattersley put a curtain aside and entered. Mallison was at the far end of the room; as a matter of fact he had gone to lock the library door, nor was he aware of the invasion until he heard Paul's voice.

FANTASIA

“Evening, Mallison. Excuse the informal entry.”

Mallison had turned the key in the door. He swung round, stared, head up, blond beard cocked.

“I beg your pardon. I do possess a front door, gentlemen.”

“Obviously,” said Hattersley, watching him, and moving casually across the room, “but in this case——”

“I prefer my front door used. If you wish to see me, I shall be obliged——”

And then his tawny eyes lit up with a sudden glare of comprehension, for Hattersley’s casual slouch across the room was a strategic movement made to cut Mallison off from that secret niche behind the bookcase.

“Please sit down, gentlemen. I will excuse the informality.”

David had remained by the window; Hattersley posed, hands in pockets, near the bookcase.

“We won’t bother, Mallison, thanks. As a matter of fact this visit isn’t exactly a friendly one.”

Mallison’s eyes had become mere slits.

“Indeed! And what, if I may ask——?”

“We have a few questions to put to you.”

“How nice of you. And am I to understand that Mr. Garton—there—is what we call the assisting bully.”

David grinned at him.

“Not quite that.”

“Perhaps, then, I should apologize.”

He was moving almost imperceptibly towards the bureau, taking a step, pausing, smiling, indulging in a shrug of the shoulders. Then, with the face of a man gathering himself for some final physical effort, he took three quick strides towards the bureau. They saw his hands go out.

“Look out, David.”

Mallison had a drawer open, and his right hand inside it, before Garton swept up to him, and grasped both his wrists from behind.

“I’d leave that alone, sir.”

Mallison stood rigid. His body was pressed against David's. Suddenly, he bent forward, then straightened, and throwing his head back, drove it against Garton's chin. David went white and rigid, but he had taken such blows before in his boxing days, and though the crack shook him, he held on to Mallison's wrists.

"Better take it away, Hat, whatever it is. Be careful."

Hattersley came and put a hand into the drawer. His fingers fastened on metal. Mallison was struggling, but David, with his face pressed against Mallison's neck so that the butting trick could not be repeated, held him.

"Got it?"

"Yes. The safety catch is down."

"Just as well. Have a look in the drawer for further toys."

"All right."

Hattersley pocketed the automatic, and Garton, swiftly shifting his grip to Mallison's arms, swung him and sent him spinning. He revolved, one leg half up in the air, arms spread, struck a chair, crashed over it, and fell on his face with his hands flung out. But if either of them imagined that this was the end of the fracas, the man on the floor undeceived them. They saw him rise on his hands and knees. Then, with a deliberation that was calculated, he got on his feet. He was smiling, though the smile was something between a snarl and a smirk. The rush he made at Garton was so sudden and so savage that David's fists were hardly up before Mallison was on him. Nor were David's fists brought into use. There was cunning in the beast. He swung a leg as he charged in, and the toe of his boot caught Garton cleanly under the ribs.

David was out this time. The breath went out of him, and he crumpled, his knees sagging, his face dead white, and as he doubled up and slumped floorwards, Mallison's boot caught him in the face.

Hattersley's turn, and Hattersley was ready for it. He forgot all about the pistol in his pocket, and with a face that

was as mad as Mallison's, rushed in. No blows were struck. They closed, swayed, and went down. They rolled over and over with twirling legs until they reached a wall and stopped there. Hattersley was on top, and fighting for the other man's throat, but Mallison with a heave and a kick, had him over and came uppermost. There was spittle on his beard. He panted, but he had Hattersley down, one knee on his crutch, his thumbs feeling for Hattersley's eyeballs.

But David was up, groggy and chalk faced. He saw those two thumbs pressing into Hattersley's eye-sockets. He leapt in, and stooping, struck, and Mallison sagged sideways. Before he could fall, David's left hand had him by the collar. He lifted him, held him off, struck again, and Mallison went down against the wall and lay there with the complete flaccidity of a man who had been stunned.

Hattersley was up, panting and still wild of eye.

"God, Dave, he nearly had me. The beast's as strong as a mad monkey."

Garton rubbed the back of a hand across his mouth; there was blood on it.

"Real rough stuff, Hat. Everything off. He got my midriff all right. Gosh, I feel a bit sick."

"Put your head down, old man."

"No. I shall be all right in a jiffy. Somewhat used to it. I say, what about that hole in the wall? Rather intriguing. Yes, I think I'll sit down for a moment. Give me the gentleman's pop-gun and I'll watch him while you investigate. Funny, all this fuss and fury, and we haven't even started the argument. And, damn it, I've lost my specs."

"Broken, I'm afraid."

"Well, I can see red all right, if the blighter wants any more of it."

David turned a chair so that he could watch the unconscious Mallison, and sitting down with Mallison's pistol in one hand, felt for a handkerchief and dabbed his bloody mouth and

chin. Hattersley had gone to the hole in the wall. The secret niche was dark, and picking up the torch which he had laid on Mallison's bureau, he shone the light into the cavity. He saw two or three bundles of letters, and a collection of unexpected trophies, and one dark, thin, oblong object, a leather wallet. He put a hand in and picked it out.

Garton heard his sharp exclamation.

"Gosh! What do you think I've found? A wallet with R.J. stamped on it. Money inside, too. Jekyll's wallet."

"Gemini!"

"Seems that we have dug up Jekyll's Mr. Hyde. And now I know who planted that cigarette-case in my cupboard. Seems incredible."

"Not so very incredible," said David grimly, "after the mad show he put up here. Anything else of interest?"

"Women's letters. Pah, here's a bundle in Ann Lester's hand! And what do you think?"

"Something septic?"

"A piece of pink stocking-suspender, and a strip of silk torn off something."

"Trophies from the sex struggle. Seems we've caught a real highbrow jungle-beast, Hat. But we have caught him."

Hattersley was pocketing the various exhibits.

"Absolutely. More than the whip-hand, David. We've got a scourge to make him quit. Out of England in a week, what, or some interesting information passed to the police!"

"Look out, he's coming round."

Mallison's lids had opened. They blinked and met the blue glare of Garton's short-sighted, unbespectacled eyes. And Mallison lay still, as though the elemental rage had died out of him, leaving him cold and flabby. Hattersley had come to stand beside David's chair, and together they watched that evil face recover its full consciousness. It tried to smirk at them. Some of the high colour came back to it. The tawny eyes filled with sharp sinister lights.

"Ready to listen, Mallison?"

Mallison raised himself on one elbow, and then sat propped against the wall. He said nothing.

"Exhibit number one, my friend," and Hattersley displayed Jekyll's wallet; "rather the psychological moment for us, I think."

Mallison's eyes were fixed on the wallet.

"There was a cigarette-case too, if you remember. And that you planted on me. Nice sport. Why didn't you take up pig-sticking? Exhibit two, a bundle of a certain lady's letters, which we shall return to her, unread. Exhibit three," and he produced Gerald Fuchs' mauve sheet—"a document that confesses that you were the person responsible for trying to fasten a foul rumour upon Jekyll and Skelton. Anything to say?"

Mallison sagged against the wall like a man whose savage self was invisibly bleeding.

"O, go to hell!"

"Better be polite. We have all the cards, my friend, and you have nothing to bluff on. Naturally, we shall keep these interesting finds, but you will be out of the country in seven days. Got that?"

It was David's turn. He slipped the pistol into his jacket pocket.

"Lucky for you, Mr. Tiger, that you didn't smash anything but my spectacles. I have an idea, Hattersley."

"Let's have it."

"Mr. Siegfried Mallison is leaving for abroad. Obviously the Bluewater estate and this property must be put on the market. I suggest that Mr. Mallison should instruct the local agents to have a notice board erected within three days. A very large board, outside the park gates on the highroad. For immediate sale. Owner going abroad?"

Hattersley chuckled.

"An excellent proposition. Got that, Mallison? A board up in three days, or you are for it."

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“Out of the country in seven. If you are on ship you’ll wireless us—‘Weather perfect, food excellent,’ or something just like that. And no tricks. I suggest Hawaii or Arizona or Mexico. And if I were you I would stay there. You can still produce the intelligentsia stuff for the world’s robots.”

There was a pause. Mallison’s beard was down on his chest, and his face looked turgid.

David’s voice rang sharply.

“Get up, walk. Let’s see that you can do it. I hit you pretty hard.”

The tawny eyes glared at him.

“What, contumacious. Get up, man, or I’ll kick you up. Walk over to that door and stand there. Yes, we have emptied the jackdaw’s nest. Get up——”

And Mallison obeyed him. Almost, his movements were those of a tawny creature slinking cowed into the corner of a cage.

The moon, the stars, the sea, sleeping tree-tops, the smell of the earth.—“All the dear old verities,” as Jekyll might have put it. Again, Hattersley led the way, for David without his spectacles was half blind in the darkness. He was a thrifty soul was David; he regretted those spectacles and said so, they had cost him three guineas. Meanwhile, Paul the Potter was conducting a sort of monologue, thinking aloud, as they came down towards the sea. It was essential that these interesting exhibits should be locked away in some safe place until such a time as Siegfried Mallison had adopted a garland of flowers or a Mexican hat. Indeed, Mexico would be an admirable exercise ground for him. Hattersley’s suggestion was that these incriminating articles should be handed over to Archie Stout and locked up in the hotel safe. Archie’s safe lived with him in his bedroom, and therefore was additionally a safe.

“Mind this tree root, David. Now, what about our two precious babes?”

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Garton was feeling his jaw. It was becoming sore and stiff.

"Better keep them on the milk-bottle, hadn't we, for ever and ever?"

"That's my idea. Explanations are awkward things, and provoke curiosity. I believe in leaving well alone."

They saw the sandhills rolling like a turbulent sea against that other sea which was very still. The lights of Bluewater were like a splash of sequins on the night's gown, and Hattersley paused for a moment, and was jostled by the man behind him.

"Sorry, Hat. I'm a bit blind in this light."

"All right, old man. I was moved to wonder what will happen to the tiger's toy-town."

"Pity we can't treat it with the Indore process. But, I say, are you convinced that Mallison will sell out?"

"Pretty well convinced."

"I'm not. I shall be waiting to see that board go up. He's an ugly bit of work. Supposing——"

"He's not real berserk, David. I don't think that sort is. He went mad for five minutes, like a beast who had never been caged before or prodded with hot bars. But did you see the way he got up and slunk into that corner?"

"Yes, and my feeling was he would have blazed at us if he had had this pistol."

"No," said Hattersley's deep voice, "no, my lad. When a man like Mallison who loves himself so furiously, begins to think, he's a beaten man. He'll clear out for other conquests. He will want a new audience to pose to. Women. Besides, he's stinkingly rich, and can spread the honey. O, let's have done with Mallison. God, I can smell the sea."

Stout was a good man to whom to tell a story. He could look shocked, strike an attitude that was not pose, perspire and grow hot, and even speak of the enemy as an evil beast. Archie had blood and bottom, and was not a tired young

sceptic with a cigarette stuck in its negative little face, a bit of human blotting-paper that reacted mildly to red ink. Stout locked up those exhibits in his safe, and took David to the bathroom, and ordered double whiskies for everybody. "Yes, my lad, your mouth does look a bit of a mess. Mallison's boot? God damn him!" Iodine? No, a little too drastic. Stout selected warm water, and a bottle of new-skin. And if all these sensational happenings were to be preserved in cold-storage, how did David propose to explain this badge of honour?

"O, I've got a lie, all right, and a reserve pair of specs."

"Is it a good lie? It is wise to be thorough."

"Quite a posh lie. It is connected with a cow, one of my specials who is sick."

"A sick cow, David!"

"Yes, I've got her stalled and under observation. She gave me one."

"No lady, my lad, obviously! She might have spared your spectacles."

"Yes, damn it; they cost me three guineas!"

Hattersley also needed some attention to toilet after his rough and tumble. He had lost a collar-stud, and his hair was more wild than usual. In Stout's office they sat down to their drinks, and to a consultation upon the problem presented by a packet of letters. It was Stout's suggestion that they should be retained until Mallison had proved himself the obedient villain, and that the packet then should be posted, registered, from a London post-office to Miss Lester. She would never know who had returned her letters. She might even ascribe some virtue to Mallison.

"Virtue!" said Stout, taking a pull at his glass. "Virtue triumphant, and the villain foiled! Quite in the good old Henty style. Never read Henty, David, I suppose?"

"Never heard of him."

"No matter, you're almost a live Henty. Well, seems to

me I had better get the car out and give you fellows a lift home."

"I can walk," said Paul. "I'm rather on my toes."

"No, I'll do the thing thoroughly. I suppose there is no chance of Mallison going mad in the night and coming down to eat you up?"

Hattersley laughed.

"I think that tiger has lost his breeches."

"Take the gun, Hat," said David.

"I'll take it as a trophy."

"If you ask me, I'd have it under the pillow with the safety catch on."

Stout brought his car out, and Garton and Hattersley climbed into the back seat. It smelt faintly of beer and of onions, for in a crisis Stout's car carried all kinds of useful merchandise. They took the road towards White Ways, and it occurred to Archie Stout that all the Mallison nomenclature, the almost Peter-Pan fancifulness of the place was the sinister creation of a mature and evil small boy whose egoistic dreams of pirates and blood and gold had been lived out in secret orgies. He said so to the two in the back seat, and slowing up, took the corner into Love Lane in spite of Paul's protest.

"Drop me here, Archie."

"No, at your gate. Hallo——!"

For the swinging lights of the car slanted upon two surprised lovers who had been strolling with linked arms down Love Lane. Stout and Hattersley saw them for an instant, standing under a tamarisk hedge, their faces like the faces of two dreamers startled into wakefulness.

"Well, well," said Stout, as he drove on, "that helps us considerably. Clean air and light, and all that, and the too sophisticated—silenced."

David, minus his spectacles, had not recognized the man in khaki and the girl in black.

"Who was it?"

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Hattersley gave him a dig with his elbow.

"For your edification, child, John and Rachel, and most happily grouped."

"Gosh!" said David, "why that's a clincher! God bless 'em."

"Sure. Almost a cinch."

"Shut up," said Stout, "be English, Hat. And my hat off to Rachel. She has straightened out the page better than any of us."

"How?" said David.

"If Rachel marries Jack, which—from their faces—I should say is probable, the sun shines and the evil shadows depart, and carrion crows cease from croaking."

"Good lord, yes," said David, "I see that—now. I seem to be a bit of a boob without my specs."

Stout stopped the car by Paul's gate.

"As boobs go, David, you are about the best I have met. You'll make an admirable husband."

"Is that necessary, sir?"

"It helps, considerably."

XXIX

IT was on the morning after Jekyll's return from London that Skelton spoke to him about his marriage. They were in the office together, John dealing with the morning's correspondence, and Jekyll studying a large scale ordnance map which had been fastened to the wall with drawing-pins.

"I want to tell you that Rachel has changed her mind, sir."

Jekyll's back straightened, but he kept his face towards the wall.

"Oh! Not——"

"She will marry me. Do you mind if it is quite soon?"

"What right have I to mind, Jack?"

"Well, sir, you have been awfully good to us all. Your views about things do matter."

"Thank you, Jack. I don't belong to the Labour Party and so feel it my duty to lecture the whole world on what it should do, and what it should not do. So much the village grocer's attitude. Where are you going to live?"

"Might we have one of the new cottages for a while?"

"Is Rachel willing?"

"Quite."

"Good. The company shall put you up a house."

"Thank you, sir, most awfully."

Jekyll turned, and pipe in mouth, looked at John with wise affection. Then he strolled to the window, and leaning his arms on the sill, surveyed the English scene.

"Quite happy about it, John?"

"Is that a challenge, sir?"

"God forbid!"

"I know that I shall have to meet some sort of challenge. That which could hurt Rachel hurts me. You see, sir, she's sensitive."

"I'm glad."

"Marrying out of one's class. But what is class? A convention. And people in one's own class may have all the wrong reactions. If Rachel wasn't sensitive——"

"Which many educated, bright young things are not."

"Exactly. I don't want a comrade who is all Berkeley Grill or Embassy Club. I don't want her to be able to patter at second hand on Aldous Huxley and Cezanne and Epstein, or Siegfried Mallison. I want her to react to me as—woman, a woman with the real stuff in her, a woman who understands what life is, country life. If she were just a cow, or suburban—— If she couldn't understand why I get silly about apple blossom and the new moon and all that——"

"Quite," said Jekyll, "and Rachel understands?"

"Yes. Somehow she's got the subtlety of simplicity. You may not believe it——"

"Why shouldn't I believe it, Jack?"

"Thank you, sir. We're not class-creatures, but two rather sensitive human beings. As I said, what hurts her, hurts me, and if one's wise as to that—— What I mean is, we shall both learn. She'll never shock me with crudities, for there is a difference between simplicity and crudity. I think I should loathe your really brainy woman. So bossy and restless, all information and no understanding."

Jekyll laughed gently.

"Rather a sweeping generalization, Jack! I have met brainy women who were not all north-east wind."

"O, I know, sir. But I'd rather have south-west."

"So much more comfortable!"

"A green lap and quiet eyes, and a voice that isn't always talking. If a woman can sit and look at things, and be silent, not like a cow, but——"

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Again, Jekyll laughed gently.

"And you, Jack, you will——"

Skelton gave him a quick smile.

"Not all what I want, sir! Yes, there are other reactions. And pretty deep ones, I can assure you."

Jekyll went for his morning walk, following the main road until he came to the stile on his path through the young wheat. Yes, this perfect spring was becoming a little difficult. It was proving itself to be the kind of spring which delights the urban crowd, but may be disastrous and suicidal for the countryman. "Isn't it lovely," says the gent in the car—"no rain for weeks," and he leaves his litter about, and starts his heath fires, and is sure in his little urban soul that the spring is O.K. Even Jekyll's amateur eyes could see that the wheat was betraying a tinge of yellow. The path was caked like brick. No rain for weeks, and night frosts playing the devil in the orchards. It was rumoured that there would not be a plum in England, and that the strawberry crop was half ruined, and that hay would be thin, and the root crop non-existent unless rain came. But why should the little urban fellow care? What were plums? Didn't they come from South Africa? And the farmers were always grumbling—anyway. Rain! "Confound it, we don't want rain. We are playing tennis on Saturday."

"What these urban worlds need is a famine year, with no food imports available," said Jekyll to himself, and then smiled at and apologized for his ferocity. Poor little people, they would all be so very helpless if you turned off the tap! It was a question of ignorance. And then he saw big David swinging along the path towards him, and as David approached, Richard Jekyll discovered that there was something amiss with his manager's face. David might be feeling a little savage and bothered about the drought, but what—exactly had happened to his mouth?

"Hallo, David."

"Morning, sir."

"No rain yet."

David did not react to the cussedness of the weather. He might be feeling a little grim about it, but were a countryman to indulge in hysterical outbursts about meteorological problems he would not live long or happily. You did not rave like a semi-alien crowd presuming to be English in Hyde Park.

"O, we're not so badly off as some people. Our soil's got bottom."

"Had a crash, or anything?"

David grinned.

"O, you mean my mouth, sir. Polly did that."

"How unladylike of her! But how——?"

"She's been a bit sick, sir, and I had her stalled and isolated for observation. I went to have a look at her the other night, and when I wanted her to show a leg, she gave me one."

"Bad girl! Pride of pedigree—perhaps. What about your glasses?"

"O, yes, she smashed them all right, sir."

"Put it down under replacements and repairs, David."

"O, no, sir. Polly's off the sick list. I was just going along to look at one of the new leys. Rather starved, I'm afraid. Must get rain before long."

Jekyll passed on towards the larch wood, which now was looking greener than the wheat, and David, having unburdened himself of that magnificent lie, vaulted the stile and took the road through Fernfield. He knew quite well how his young leys were standing the drought, and his urge was towards the main gates of Rustling Manor. It was a dim day, heavily overcast, with a chilly draught from the north-east, and in a normal year the sullen sky above would have produced rain, but this year was abnormal.

The manor gates were recessed from the road between two stone pillars, and were overshadowed on either side by old beech trees that were coming into leaf. Garton saw something

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white gleaming against the young green. An agent's board! Yes, the thing stood there in stark newness, a regular hoarding mounted on timber legs, and aglisten with fresh black and white paint.

RUSTLING MANOR

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Garton stood and grinned at it. So, Mr. Siegfried Mallison had wasted no time. For him it had been no mere wind in the willows, but a fierce, icy blast that had blown him—beard and breeches—towards other dimensions! With ironical solemnity David took his hat off to the board erected so peremptorily by Messrs. Pride & Purchase. Hail—O shabby tiger! Tails down and suprarenal glands quiescent! David let out a laugh, and turned back towards Fernfield. He would ring up Hattersley at lunch time and give him the news.

“Board up. Tiger tame.”

And, on the outskirts of Fernfield he fell in with old Killick who was leaning over a gate, and looking with a countryman's eyes at the clouds.

“Any news o' Cowfold, Mister Garton?”

“We've got it. I think Mr. Jekyll is going to put you in.”

Killick smacked the top of the gate with a hard hand.

“Gord, that'll make a young man o' me! What a gentleman! I tell 'ee, Mister Garton, I was dryin' up like an ol' tree butt. And there be rain comin'.”

“Sure?”

“I can smell it. Mayn't be to-day, but to-morrow. I guess the wind's goin' round.”

Richard Jekyll sat on the field-gate by the larch wood, and looked at the English scene, this elusive spring—“Winter painted green” as someone had put it, and yet, even on this sour, bleak day, with the wind in the north-east, he felt that his

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fate was to love it. Yes, this England, the real England gave you contrasts, and whipped up your courage, and was a man's country in the way it challenged you to fight and yet keep your temper. Robin Hood's country, and had he not his Will Scarlet and Little John, men who could shoot with the long bow and crack heads as in the Crecy days? Yes, damn the ranters, and the smug people who slavered on platforms and preached brotherly love and hate in one breath. Class consciousness! Pah!

So, John was to be married. Poor old John! Those two young things would have much to learn, but learning is life. To hell with Safety First!

And he thought—"I suppose most people would vote me a damned old fool. Going on the land and going gaga. Well, well, but this England and I are going to wrestle together, and if she throws me as Francis threw King Hal, I'll get up and try her again. Besides, I'm not bored. I may become a little rustic, but I seem to have done with medicine bottles. And fancy Pretty Poll smacking David's face! Donald Duck would have enjoyed that—English beef and beer."

And as he sat there with his eyes crinkled up, and with the larch tops swaying near him, the grey sky broke for a moment and sent a shaft of sunlight down into the green Polder Valley.

"Good," said Jekyll, "cheerio! That's England. Damn it, are we downhearted?"

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