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THE LADYBIRD

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THE LADYBIRD

How many swords had Lady Beveridge in her pierced heart! Yet there always seemed room for another. Since she had determined that her heart of pity and kindness should never die. If it had not been for this determination she herself might have died of sheer agony, in the years 1916 and 1917, when her boys were killed, and her brother, and death seemed to be mowing with wide swaths through her family. But let us forget.

Lady Beveridge loved humanity, and come what might, she would continue to love it. Nay, in the human sense, she would love her enemies. Not the criminals among the enemy, the men who committed atrocities. But the men who were enemies through no choice of their own. She would be swept into no general hate.

Somebody had called her the soul of England. It was not ill said, though she was half Irish. But of an old, aristocratic, loyal family famous for its brilliant men. And she, Lady Beveridge, had for years as much influence on the tone of English politics as any individual alive. The close friend of the real leaders in the House of Lords and in the Cabinet, she was content that the men should act, so long as they breathed from her as from the rose of life the pure fragrance of truth and genuine love. She had no misgiving regarding her own spirit.

She, she would never lower her delicate silken flag. For instance, throughout all the agony of the war she never forgot the enemy prisoners; she was determined to do her best for them. During the first years she still had influence. But during the last years of the war power slipped out of the hands of her and her sort, and she found she could do nothing any more: almost nothing. Then it seemed as if the many swords had gone home into the heart of this little, unyielding Mater Dolorosa. The new generation jeered at her. She was a shabby, old–fashioned little aristocrat, and her drawing–room was out of date.

But we anticipate. The years 1916 and 1917 were the years when the old spirit died for ever in England. But Lady Beveridge struggled on. She was being beaten.

It was in the winter of 1917—or in the late autumn. She had been for a fortnight sick, stricken, paralysed by the fearful death of her youngest boy. She felt she MUST give in, and just die. And then she remembered how many others were lying in agony.

So she rose, trembling, frail, to pay a visit to the hospital where lay the enemy sick and wounded, near London. Countess Beveridge was still a privileged woman. Society was beginning to jeer at this little, worn bird of an out–of–date righteousness and aesthetic. But they dared not think ill of her.

She ordered the car and went alone. The Earl, her husband, had taken his gloom to Scotland. So, on a sunny, wan November morning Lady Beveridge descended at the hospital, Hurst Place. The guard knew her, and saluted as she passed. Ah, she was used to such deep respect! It was strange that she felt it so bitterly, when the respect became shallower. But she did. It was the beginning of the end to her.

The matron went with her into the ward. Alas, the beds were all full, and men were even lying on pallets on the floor. There was a desperate, crowded dreariness and helplessness in the place: as if nobody wanted to make a sound or utter a word. Many of the men were haggard and unshaven, one was delirious, and talking fitfully in the Saxon dialect. It went to Lady Beveridge's heart. She had been educated in Dresden, and had had many dear friendships in the city. Her children also had been educated there. She heard the Saxon dialect with pain.

She was a little, frail, bird–like woman, elegant, but with that touch of the blue–stocking of the nineties which was unmistakable. She fluttered delicately from bed to bed, speaking in perfect German, but with a thin, English intonation: and always asking if there was anything she could do. The men were mostly officers and gentlemen. They made little requests which she wrote down in a book. Her long, pale, rather worn face, and her nervous little gestures somehow inspired confidence.

One man lay quite still, with his eyes shut. He had a black beard. His face was rather small and sallow. He might be dead. Lady Beveridge looked at him earnestly, and fear came into her face.

'Why, Count Dionys!' she said, fluttered. 'Are you asleep?'

It was Count Johann Dionys Psanek, a Bohemian. She had known him when he was a boy, and only in the spring of 1914 he and his wife had stayed with Lady Beveridge in her country house in Leicestershire.

His black eyes opened: large, black, unseeing eyes, with curved black lashes. He was a small man, small as a boy, and his face too was rather small. But all the lines were fine, as if they had been fired with a keen male energy. Now the yellowish swarthy paste of his flesh seemed dead, and the fine black brows seemed drawn on the face of one dead. The eyes, however, were alive: but only just alive, unseeing and unknowing.

'You know me, Count Dionys? You know me, don't you?' said Lady Beveridge, bending forward over the bed.

There was no reply for some time. Then the black eyes gathered a look of recognition, and there came the ghost of a polite smile.

'Lady Beveridge.' The lips formed the words. There was practically no sound.

'I am so glad you can recognize me. And I am so sorry you are hurt. I am so sorry.'

The black eyes watched her from that terrible remoteness of death, without changing.

'There is nothing I can do for you? Nothing at all?' she said, always speaking German.

And after a time, and from a distance, came the answer from his eyes, a look of weariness, of refusal, and a wish to be left alone; he was unable to strain himself into consciousness. His eyelids dropped.

'I am so sorry,' she said. 'If ever there is anything I can do—'

The eyes opened again, looking at her. He seemed at last to hear, and it was as if his eyes made the last weary gesture of a polite bow. Then slowly his eyelids closed again.

Poor Lady Beveridge felt another sword–thrust of sorrow in her heart, as she stood looking down at the motionless face, and at the black fine beard. The black hairs came out of his skin thin and fine, not very close together. A queer, dark, aboriginal little face he had, with a fine little nose: not an Aryan, surely. And he was going to die.

He had a bullet through the upper part of his chest, and another bullet had broken one of his ribs. He had been in hospital five days.

Lady Beveridge asked the matron to ring her up if anything happened. Then she drove away, saddened. Instead of going to Beveridge House, she went to her daughter’s flat near the park— near Hyde Park. Lady Daphne was poor. She had married a commoner, son of one of the most famous politicians in England, but a man with no money. And Earl Beveridge had wasted most of the large fortune that had come to him, so that the daughter had very little, comparatively.

Lady Beveridge suffered, going in the narrow doorway into the rather ugly flat. Lady Daphne was sitting by the electric fire in the small yellow drawing–room, talking to a visitor. She rose at once, seeing her little mother.

‘Why, mother, ought you to be out? I’m sure not.’

‘Yes, Daphne darling. Of course I ought to be out.’

‘How are you?’ The daughter’s voice was slow and sonorous, protective, sad. Lady Daphne was tall, only twenty–five years old. She had been one of the beauties, when the war broke out, and her father had hoped she would make a splendid match. Truly, she had married fame: but without money. Now, sorrow, pain, thwarted passion had done her great damage. Her husband was missing in the East. Her baby had been born dead. Her two darling brothers were dead. And she was ill, always ill.

A tall, beautifully–built girl, she had the fine stature of her father. Her shoulders were still straight. But how thin her white throat! She wore a simple black frock stitched with coloured wool round the top, and held in a loose coloured girdle: otherwise no ornaments. And her face was lovely, fair, with a soft exotic white complexion and delicate pink cheeks. Her hair was soft and heavy, of a lovely pallid gold colour, ash–blond. Her hair, her complexion were so perfectly cared for as to be almost artificial, like a hot–house flower.

But alas, her beauty was a failure. She was threatened with phthisis, and was far too thin. Her eyes were the saddest part of her. They had slightly reddened rims, nerve–worn, with heavy, veined lids that seemed as if they did not want to keep up. The eyes themselves were large and of a beautiful green–blue colour. But they were full, languid, almost glaucous.

Standing as she was, a tall, finely–built girl, looking down with affectionate care on her mother, she filled the heart with ashes. The little pathetic mother, so wonderful in her way, was not really to be pitied for all her sorrow. Her life was in her sorrows, and her efforts on behalf of the sorrows of others. But Daphne was not born for grief and philanthropy. With her splendid frame, and her lovely, long, strong legs, she was Artemis or Atalanta rather than Daphne. There was a certain width of brow and even of chin that spoke a strong, reckless nature, and the curious, distraught slant of her eyes told of a wild energy dammed up inside her.

That was what ailed her: her own wild energy. She had it from her father, and from her father’s desperate race. The earldom had begun with a riotous, dare–devil border soldier, and this was the blood that flowed on. And alas, what was to be done with it?

Daphne had married an adorable husband: truly an adorable husband. Whereas she needed a dare–devil. But in her MIND she hated all dare–devils: she had been brought up by her mother to admire only the good.

So, her reckless, anti–philanthropic passion could find no outlet— and SHOULD find no outlet, she thought. So her own blood turned against her, beat on her own nerves, and destroyed her. It was nothing but frustration and anger which made her ill, and made the doctors fear consumption. There it was, drawn on her rather wide mouth: frustration, anger, bitterness. There it was the same in the roll of her green–blue eyes, a slanting, averted look: the same anger furtively turning back on itself. This anger reddened her eyes and shattered her nerves. And yet her whole will was fixed in her adoption of her mother’s creed, and in condemnation of her handsome, proud, brutal father, who had made so much misery in the family. Yes, her will was fixed in the determination that life should be gentle and good and benevolent. Whereas her blood was reckless, the blood of daredevils. Her will was the stronger of the two. But her blood had its revenge on her. So it is with strong natures today: shattered from the inside.

‘You have no news, darling?’ asked the mother.

‘No. My father–in–law had information that British prisoners had been brought into Hasrun, and that details would be forwarded by the Turks. And there was a rumour from some Arab prisoners that Basil was one of the British brought in wounded.’

‘When did you hear this?’

‘Primrose came in this morning.’

‘Then we can hope, dear.’

‘Yes.’

Never was anything more dull and bitter than Daphne’s affirmative of hope. Hope had become almost a curse to her. She wished there need be no such thing. Ha, the torment of hoping, and the INSULT to one’s soul. Like the importunate widow dunning for her deserts. Why could it not all be just clean disaster, and have done with it? This dilly–dallying with despair was worse than despair. She had hoped so much: ah, for her darling brothers she had hoped with such anguish. And the two she loved best were dead. So were most others she had hoped for, dead. Only this uncertainty about her husband still rankling.

‘You feel better, dear?’ said the little, unquenched mother.

‘Rather better,’ came the resentful answer.

‘And your night?’

‘No better.’

There was a pause.

‘You are coming to lunch with me, Daphne darling?’

‘No, mother dear. I promised to lunch at the Howards with Primrose. But I needn’t go for a quarter of an hour. Do sit down.’

Both women seated themselves near the electric fire. There was that bitter pause, neither knowing what to say. Then Daphne roused herself to look at her mother.

‘Are you sure you were fit to go out?’ she said. ‘What took you out so suddenly?’

‘I went to Hurst Place, dear. I had the men on my mind, after the way the newspapers had been talking.’

‘Why ever do you read the newspapers!’ blurted Daphne, with a certain burning, acid anger. ‘Well,’ she said, more composed. ‘And do you feel better now you’ve been?’

‘So many people suffer besides ourselves, darling.’

‘I know they do. Makes it all the worse. It wouldn’t matter if it were only just us. At least, it would matter, but one could bear it more easily. To be just one of a crowd all in the same state.’

‘And some even worse, dear.’

‘Oh, quite! And the worse it is for all, the worse it is for one.’

‘Is that so, darling? Try not to see too darkly. I feel if I can give just a little bit of myself to help the others—you know—it alleviates me. I feel that what I can give to the men lying there, Daphne, I give to my own boys. I can only help them now through helping others. But I can still do that, Daphne, my girl.’

And the mother put her little white hand into the long, white cold hand of her daughter. Tears came to Daphne’s eyes, and a fearful stony grimace to her mouth.

‘It’s so wonderful of you that you can feel like that,’ she said.

‘But you feel the same, my love. I know you do.’

‘No, I don’t. Everyone I see suffering these same awful things, it makes me wish more for the end of the world. And I quite see that the world won’t end—’

‘But it will get better, dear. This time it’s like a great sickness—like a terrible pneumonia tearing the breast of the world.’

‘Do you believe it will get better? I don’t.’

‘It will get better. Of course it will get better. It is perverse to think otherwise, Daphne. Remember what HAS been before, even in Europe. Ah, Daphne, we must take a bigger view.’

‘Yes, I suppose we must.’

The daughter spoke rapidly, from the lips, in a resonant, monotonous tone. The mother spoke from the heart.

‘And Daphne, I found an old friend among the men at Hurst Place.’

‘Who?’

‘Little Count Dionys. You remember him?’

‘Quite. What’s wrong?’

‘Wounded rather badly—through the chest. So ill.’

‘Did you speak to him?’

‘Yes. I recognized him in spite of his beard.’

‘Beard!’

‘Yes—a black beard. I suppose he could not be shaven. It seems strange that he is still alive, poor man.’

‘Why strange? He isn’t old. How old is he?’

‘Between thirty and forty. But so ill, so wounded, Daphne. And so small. So small, so sallow—smorto, you know the Italian word. The way dark people look. There is something so distressing in it.’

‘Does he look VERY small now—uncanny?’ asked the daughter.

‘No, not uncanny. Something of the terrible far–awayness of a child that is very ill and can’t tell you what hurts it. Poor Count Dionys, Daphne. I didn’t know, dear, that his eyes were so black, and his lashes so curved and long. I had never thought of him as beautiful.’

‘Nor I. Only a little comical. Such a dapper little man.’

‘Yes. And yet now, Daphne, there is something remote and in a sad way heroic in his dark face. Something primitive.’

‘What did he say to you?’

‘He couldn’t speak to me. Only with his lips, just my name.’

‘So bad as that?’

‘Oh yes. They are afraid he will die.’

‘Poor Count Dionys. I liked him. He was a bit like a monkey, but he had his points. He gave me a thimble on my seventeenth birthday. Such an amusing thimble.’

‘I remember, dear.’

‘Unpleasant wife, though. Wonder if he minds dying far away from her. Wonder if she knows.’

‘I think not. They didn’t even know his name properly. Only that he was a colonel of such and such a regiment.’

‘Fourth Cavalry,’ said Daphne. ‘Poor Count Dionys. Such a lovely name, I always thought: Count Johann Dionys Psanek. Extraordinary dandy he was. And an amazingly good dancer, small, yet electric. Wonder if he minds dying.’

‘He was so full of life, in his own little animal way. They say small people are always conceited. But he doesn’t look conceited now, dear. Something ages old in his face—and, yes, a certain beauty, Daphne.’

‘You mean long lashes.’

‘No. So still, so solitary—and ages old, in his race. I suppose he must belong to one of those curious little aboriginal races of Central Europe. I felt quite new beside him.’

‘How nice of you,’ said Daphne.

Nevertheless, next day Daphne telephoned to Hurst Place to ask for news of him. He was about the same. She telephoned every day. Then she was told he was a little stronger. The day she received the message that her husband was wounded and a prisoner in Turkey, and that his wounds were healing, she forgot to telephone for news of the little enemy Count. And the following day she telephoned that she was coming to the hospital to see him.

He was awake, more restless, more in physical excitement. They could see the nausea of pain round his nose. His face seemed to Daphne curiously hidden behind the black beard, which nevertheless was thin, each hair coming thin and fine, singly, from the sallow, slightly translucent skin. In the same way his moustache made a thin black line round his mouth. His eyes were wide open, very black, and of no legible expression. He watched the two women coming down the crowded, dreary room, as if he did not see them. His eyes seemed too wide.

It was a cold day, and Daphne was huddled in a black sealskin coat with a skunk collar pulled up to her ears, and a dull gold cap with wings pulled down on her brow. Lady Beveridge wore her sable coat, and had that odd, untidy elegance which was natural to her, rather like a ruffled chicken.

Daphne was upset by the hospital. She looked from right to left in spite of herself, and everything gave her a dull feeling of horror: the terror of these sick, wounded enemy men. She loomed tall and obtrusive in her furs by the bed, her little mother at her side.

‘I hope you don’t mind my coming!’ she said in German to the sick man. Her tongue felt rusty, speaking the language.

‘Who is it then?’ he asked.

‘It is my daughter, Lady Daphne. You remembered ME, Lady Beveridge! This is my daughter, whom you knew in Saxony. She was so sorry to hear you were wounded.’

The black eyes rested on the little lady. Then they returned to the looming figure of Daphne. And a certain fear grew on the low, sick brow. It was evident the presence loomed and frightened him. He turned his face aside. Daphne noticed how his fine black hair grew uncut over his small, animal ears.

‘You don’t remember me, Count Dionys?’ she said dully.

‘Yes,’ he said. But he kept his face averted.

She stood there feeling confused and miserable, as if she had made a faux pas in coming.

‘Would you rather be left alone?’ she said. ‘I’m sorry.’

Her voice was monotonous. She felt suddenly stifled in her closed furs, and threw her coat open, showing her thin white throat and plain black slip dress on her flat breast. He turned again unwillingly to look at her. He looked at her as if she were some strange creature standing near him.

‘Good–bye,’ she said. ‘Do get better.’

She was looking at him with a queer, slanting, downward look of her heavy eyes as she turned away. She was still a little red round the eyes, with nervous exhaustion.

‘You are so tall,’ he said, still frightened.

‘I was always tall,’ she replied, turning half to him again.

‘And I, small,’ he said.

‘I am so glad you are getting better,’ she said.

‘I am not glad,’ he said.

‘Why? I’m sure you are. Just as we are glad because we want you to get better.’

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I have wished to die.’

‘Don’t do that, Count Dionys. Do get better,’ she said, in the rather deep, laconic manner of her girlhood. He looked at her with a farther look of recognition. But his short, rather pointed nose was lifted with the disgust and weariness of pain, his brows were tense. He watched her with that curious flame of suffering which is forced to give a little outside attention, but which speaks only to itself.

‘Why did they not let me die?’ he said. ‘I wanted death now.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘You mustn’t. You must live. If we CAN live we must.’

‘I wanted death,’ he said.

‘Ah, well,’ she said, ‘even death we can’t have when we want it, or when we think we want it.’

‘That is true,’ he said, watching her with the same wide black eyes. ‘Please to sit down. You are too tall as you stand.’

It was evident he was a little frightened still by her looming, overhanging figure.

‘I am sorry I am too tall,’ she said, taking a chair which a man– nurse had brought her. Lady Beveridge had gone away to speak with the men. Daphne sat down, not knowing what to say further. The pitch–black look in the Count’s wide eyes puzzled her.

‘Why do you come here? Why does your lady mother come?’ he said.

‘To see if we can do anything,’ she answered.

‘When I am well, I will thank your ladyship.’

‘All right,’ she replied. ‘When you are well I will let my lord the Count thank me. Please do get well.’

‘We are enemies,’ he said.

‘Who? You and I and my mother?’

‘Are we not? The most difficult thing is to be sure of anything. If they had let me die!’

‘That is at least ungrateful, Count Dionys.’

‘Lady Daphne! Yes. Lady Daphne! Beautiful, the name is. You are always called Lady Daphne? I remember you were so bright a maiden.’

‘More or less,’ she said, answering his question.

‘Ach! We should all have new names now. I thought of a name for myself, but I have forgotten it. No longer Johann Dionys. That is shot away. I am Karl or Wilhelm or Ernst or Georg. Those are names I hate. Do you hate them?’

‘I don’t like them—but I don’t hate them. And you mustn’t leave off being Count Johann Dionys. If you do I shall have to leave off being Daphne. I like your name so much.’

‘Lady Daphne! Lady Daphne!’ he repeated. ‘Yes, it rings well, it sounds beautiful to me. I think I talk foolishly. I hear myself talking foolishly to you.’ He looked at her anxiously.

‘Not at all,’ she said.

‘Ach! I have a head on my shoulders that is like a child’s windmill, and I can’t prevent its making foolish words. Please to go away, not to hear me. I can hear myself.’

‘Can’t I do anything for you?’ she asked.

‘No, no! No, no! If I could be buried deep, very deep down, where everything is forgotten! But they draw me up, back to the surface. I would not mind if they buried me alive, if it were very deep, and dark, and the earth heavy above.’

‘Don’t say that,’ she replied, rising.

‘No, I am saying it when I don’t wish to say it. Why am I here? Why am I here? Why have I survived into this? Why can I not stop talking?’

He turned his face aside. The black, fine, elfish hair was so long, and pushed up in tufts from the smooth brown nape of his neck. Daphne looked at him in sorrow. He could not turn his body. He could only move his head. And he lay with his face hard averted, the fine hair of his beard coming up strange from under his chin and from his throat, up to the socket of his ear. He lay quite still in this position. And she turned away, looking for her mother. She had suddenly realized that the bonds, the connexions between him and his life in the world had broken, and he lay there, a bit of loose, palpitating humanity, shot away from the body of humanity.

It was ten days before she went to the hospital again. She had wanted never to go again, to forget him, as one tries to forget incurable things. But she could not forget him. He came again and again into her mind. She had to go back. She had heard that he was recovering very slowly.

He looked really better. His eyes were not so wide open, they had lost that black, inky exposure which had given him such an unnatural look, unpleasant. He watched her guardedly. She had taken off her furs, and wore only her dress and a dark, soft feather toque.

‘How are you?’ she said, keeping her face averted, unwilling to meet his eyes.

‘Thank you, I am better. The nights are not so long.’

She shuddered, knowing what long nights meant. He saw the worn look in her face too, the reddened rims of her eyes.

‘Are you not well? Have you some trouble?’ he asked her.

‘No, no,’ she answered.

She had brought a handful of pinky, daisy–shaped flowers.

‘Do you care for flowers?’ she asked.

He looked at them. Then he slowly shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘If I am on horseback, riding through the marshes or through the hills, I like to see them below me. But not here. Not now. Please do not bring flowers into this grave. Even in gardens, I do not like them. When they are upholstery to human life.’

‘I will take them away again,’ she said.

‘Please do. Please give them to the nurse.’

Daphne paused.

‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘you wish I would not come to disturb you.’

He looked into her face.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You are like a flower behind a rock, near an icy water. No, you do not live too much. I am afraid I cannot talk sensibly. I wish to hold my mouth shut. If I open it, I talk this absurdity. It escapes from my mouth.’

‘It is not so very absurd,’ she said.

But he was silent—looking away from her.

‘I want you to tell me if there is really nothing I can do for you,’ she said.

‘Nothing,’ he answered.

‘If I can write any letter for you.’

‘None,’ he answered.

‘But your wife and your two children. Do they know where you are?’

‘I should think not.’

‘And where are they?’

‘I do not know. Probably they are in Hungary.’

‘Not at your home?’

‘My castle was burnt down in a riot. My wife went to Hungary with the children. She has her relatives there. She went away from me. I wished it too. Alas for her, I wished to be dead. Pardon me the personal tone.’

Daphne looked down at him—the queer, obstinate little fellow.

‘But you have somebody you wish to tell—somebody you want to hear from?’

‘Nobody. Nobody. I wish the bullet had gone through my heart. I wish to be dead. It is only I have a devil in my body that will not die.’

She looked at him as he lay with closed, averted face.

‘Surely it is not a devil which keeps you alive,’ she said. ‘It is something good.’

‘No, a devil,’ he said.

She sat looking at him with a long, slow, wondering look.

‘Must one hate a devil that makes one live?’ she asked.

He turned his eyes to her with a touch of a satiric smile.

‘If one lives, no,’ he said.

She looked away from him the moment he looked at her. For her life she could not have met his dark eyes direct.

She left him, and he lay still. He neither read nor talked throughout the long winter nights and the short winter days. He only lay for hours with black, open eyes, seeing everything around with a touch of disgust, and heeding nothing.

Daphne went to see him now and then. She never forgot him for long. He seemed to come into her mind suddenly, as if by sorcery.

One day he said to her:

‘I see you are married. May I ask you who is your husband?’

She told him. She had had a letter also from Basil. The Count smiled slowly.

‘You can look forward,’ he said, ‘to a happy reunion and new, lovely children, Lady Daphne. Is it not so?’

‘Yes, of course,’ she said.

‘But you are ill,’ he said to her.

‘Yes—rather ill.’

‘Of what?’

‘Oh!’ she answered fretfully, turning her face aside. ‘They talk about lungs.’ She hated speaking of it. ‘Why, how do you know I am ill?’ she added quickly.

Again he smiled slowly.

‘I see it in your face, and hear it in your voice. One would say the Evil One had cast a spell on you.’

‘Oh no,’ she said hastily. ‘But do I look ill?’

‘Yes. You look as if something had struck you across the face, and you could not forget it.’

‘Nothing has,’ she said. ‘Unless it’s the war.’

‘The war!’ he repeated.

‘Oh, well, don’t let us talk of it,’ she said.

Another time he said to her:

‘The year has turned—the sun must shine at last, even in England. I am afraid of getting well too soon. I am a prisoner, am I not? But I wish the sun would shine. I wish the sun would shine on my face.’

‘You won’t always be a prisoner. The war will end. And the sun DOES shine even in the winter in England,’ she said.

‘I wish it would shine on my face,’ he said.

So that when in February there came a blue, bright morning, the morning that suggests yellow crocuses and the smell of a mezereon tree and the smell of damp, warm earth, Daphne hastily got a taxi and drove out to the hospital.

‘You have come to put me in the sun,’ he said the moment he saw her.

‘Yes, that’s what I came for,’ she said.

She spoke to the matron, and had his bed carried out where there was a big window that came low. There he was put full in the sun. Turning, he could see the blue sky and the twinkling tops of purplish, bare trees.

‘The world! The world!’ he murmured.

He lay with his eyes shut, and the sun on his swarthy, transparent, immobile face. The breath came and went through his nostrils invisibly. Daphne wondered how he could lie so still, how he could look so immobile. It was true as her mother had said: he looked as if he had been cast in the mould when the metal was white hot, all his lines were so clean. So small, he was, and in his way perfect.

Suddenly his dark eyes opened and caught her looking.

‘The sun makes even anger open like a flower,’ he said.

‘Whose anger?’ she said.

‘I don’t know. But I can make flowers, looking through my eyelashes. Do you know how?’

‘You mean rainbows?’

‘Yes, flowers.’

And she saw him, with a curious smile on his lips, looking through his almost closed eyelids at the sun.

‘The sun is neither English nor German nor Bohemian,’ he said. ‘I am a subject of the sun. I belong to the fire–worshippers.’

‘Do you?’ she replied.

‘Yes, truly, by tradition.’ He looked at her smiling. ‘You stand there like a flower that will melt,’ he added.

She smiled slowly at him with a slow, cautious look of her eyes, as if she feared something.

‘I am much more solid than you imagine,’ she said.

Still he watched her.

‘One day,’ he said, ‘before I go, let me wrap your hair round my hands, will you?’ He lifted his thin, short, dark hands. ‘Let me wrap your hair round my hands, like a bandage. They hurt me. I don’t know what it is. I think it is all the gun explosions. But if you let me wrap your hair round my hands. You know, it is the hermetic gold—but so much of water in it, of the moon. That will soothe my hands. One day, will you?’

‘Let us wait till the day comes,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he answered, and was still again.

‘It troubles me,’ he said after a while, ‘that I complain like a child, and ask for things. I feel I have lost my manhood for the time being. The continual explosions of guns and shells! It seems to have driven my soul out of me like a bird frightened away at last. But it will come back, you know. And I am so grateful to you; you are good to me when I am soulless, and you don’t take advantage of me. Your soul is quiet and heroic.’

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘Don’t talk!’

The expression of shame and anguish and disgust crossed his face.

‘It is because I can’t help it,’ he said. ‘I have lost my soul, and I can’t stop talking to you. I can’t stop. But I don’t talk to anyone else. I try not to talk, but I can’t prevent it. Do you draw the words out of me?’

Her wide, green–blue eyes seemed like the heart of some curious, full–open flower, some Christmas rose with its petals of snow and flush. Her hair glinted heavy, like water–gold. She stood there passive and indomitable with the wide–eyed persistence of her wintry, blond nature.

Another day when she came to see him, he watched her for a time, then he said:

‘Do they all tell you you are lovely, you are beautiful?’

‘Not quite all,’ she replied.

‘But your husband?’

‘He has said so.’

‘Is he gentle? Is he tender? Is he a dear lover?’

She turned her face aside, displeased.

‘Yes,’ she replied curtly.

He did not answer. And when she looked again he was lying with his eyes shut, a faint smile seeming to curl round his short, transparent nose. She could faintly see the flesh through his beard, as water through reeds. His black hair was brushed smooth as glass, his black eyebrows glinted like a curve of black glass on the swarthy opalescence of his brow.

Suddenly he spoke, without opening his eyes.

‘You have been very kind to me,’ he said.

‘Have I? Nothing to speak of.’

He opened his eyes and looked at her.

‘Everything finds its mate,’ he said. ‘The ermine and the pole–cat and the buzzard. One thinks so often that only the dove and the nightingale and the stag with his antlers have gentle mates. But the pole–cat and the ice–bears of the north have their mates. And a white she–bear lies with her cubs under a rock as a snake lies hidden, and the male bear slowly swims back from the sea, like a clot of snow or a shadow of a white cloud passing on the speckled sea. I have seen her too, and I did not shoot her, nor him when he landed with fish in his mouth, wading wet and slow and yellow–white over the black stones.'

'You have been in the North Sea?'

'Yes. And with the Eskimo in Siberia, and across the Tundras. And a white sea–hawk makes a nest on a high stone, and sometimes looks out with her white head over the edge of the rocks. It is not only a world of men, Lady Daphne.'

'Not by any means,' said she.

'Else it were a sorry place.'

'It is bad enough,' said she.

'Foxes have their holes. They have even their mates, Lady Daphne, that they bark to and are answered. And an adder finds his female. Psanek means an outlaw; did you know?'

'I did not.'

'Outlaws, and brigands, have often the finest woman–mates.'

'They do,' she said.

'I will be Psanek, Lady Daphne. I will not be Johann Dionys any more, I will be Psanek. The law has shot me through.'

'You might be Psanek and Johann and Dionys as well,' she said.

'With the sun on my face? Maybe,' he said, looking to the sun.

There were some lovely days in the spring of 1918. In March the Count was able to get up. They dressed him in a simple, dark–blue uniform. He was not very thin, only swarthy–transparent, now his beard was shaven and his hair was cut. His smallness made him noticeable, but he was masculine, perfect in his small stature. All the smiling dapperness that had made him seem like a monkey to Daphne when she was a girl had gone now. His eyes were dark and haughty; he seemed to keep inside his own reserves, speaking to nobody if he could help it, neither to the nurses nor the visitors nor to his fellow–prisoners, fellow–officers. He seemed to put a shadow between himself and them, and from across this shadow he looked with his dark, beautifully–fringed eyes, as a proud little beast from the shadow of its lair. Only to Daphne he laughed and chatted.

She sat with him one day in March on the terrace of the hospital, on a morning when white clouds went endlessly and magnificently about a blue sky, and the sunshine felt warm after the blots of shadow.

'When you had a birthday, and you were seventeen, didn't I give you a thimble?' he asked her.

'Yes. I have it still.'

'With a gold snake at the bottom, and a Mary–beetle of green stone at the top, to push the needle with.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you ever use it?’

‘No. I sew rarely.’

‘Would it displease you to sew something for me?’

‘You won’t admire my stitches. What would you wish me to sew?’

‘Sew me a shirt that I can wear. I have never before worn shirts from a shop, with a maker’s name inside. It is very distasteful to me.’

She looked at him—his haughty little brows.

‘Shall I ask my maid to do it?’ she said.

‘Oh, please, no! Oh, please, no, do not trouble. No, please, I would not want it unless you sewed it yourself, with the Psanek thimble.’

She paused before she answered. Then came her slow:

‘Why?’

He turned and looked at her with dark, searching eyes.

‘I have no reason,’ he said, rather haughtily.

She left the matter there. For two weeks she did not go to see him. Then suddenly one day she took the bus down Oxford Street and bought some fine white flannel. She decided he must wear flannel.

That afternoon she drove out to Hurst Place. She found him sitting on the terrace, looking across the garden at the red suburb of London smoking fumily in the near distance, interrupted by patches of uncovered ground and a flat, tin–roofed laundry.

‘Will you give me measurements for your shirt?’ she said.

‘The number of the neck–band of this English shirt is fifteen. If you ask the matron she will give you the measurement. It is a little too large, too long in the sleeves, you see,’ and he shook his shirt cuff over his wrist. ‘Also too long altogether.’

‘Mine will probably be unwearable when I’ve made them,’ said she.

‘Oh no. Let your maid direct you. But please do not let her sew them.’

‘Will you tell me why you want me to do it?’

‘Because I am a prisoner, in other people’s clothes, and I have nothing of my own. All the things I touch are distasteful to me. If your maid sews for me, it will still be the same. Only you might give me what I want, something that buttons round my throat and on my wrists.’

‘And in Germany—or in Austria?’

‘My mother sewed for me. And after her, my mother’s sister, who was the head of my house.’

‘Not your wife?’

‘Naturally not. She would have been insulted. She was never more than a guest in my house. In my family there are old traditions— but with me they have come to an end. I had best try to revive them.’

‘Beginning with traditions of shirts?’

‘Yes. In our family the shirt should be made and washed by a woman of our own blood: but when we marry, by the wife. So when I married I had sixty shirts, and many other things—sewn by my mother and my aunt, all with my initial, and the ladybird, which is our crest.’

‘And where did they put the initial?’

‘Here!’ He put his finger on the back of his neck, on the swarthy, transparent skin. ‘I fancy I can feel the embroidered ladybird still. On our linen we had no crown: only the ladybird.’

She was silent, thinking.

‘You will forgive what I ask you?’ he said, ‘since I am a prisoner and can do no other, and since fate has made you so that you understand the world as I understand it. It is not really indelicate, what I ask you. There will be a ladybird on your finger when you sew, and those who wear the ladybird understand.’

‘I suppose,’ she mused, ‘it is as bad to have your bee in your shirt as in your bonnet.’

He looked at her with round eyes.

‘Don’t you know what it is to have a bee in your bonnet?’ she said.

‘No.’

‘To have a bee buzzing among your hair! To be out of your wits,’ she smiled at him.

‘So!’ he said. ‘Ah, the Psaneks have had a ladybird in their bonnets for many hundred years.’

‘Quite, quite mad,’ she said.

‘It may be,’ he answered. ‘But with my wife I was quite sane for ten years. Now give me the madness of the ladybird. The world I was sane about has gone raving. The ladybird I was mad with is wise still.’

‘At least, when I sew the shirts, if I sew them,’ she said, ‘I shall have the ladybird at my finger’s end.’

‘You want to laugh at me.’

‘But surely you know you are funny, with your family insect.’

‘My family insect? Now you want to be rude to me.’

‘How many spots must it have?’

‘Seven.’

‘Three on each wing. And what do I do with the odd one?’

‘You put that one between its teeth, like the cake for Cerebus.’

‘I’ll remember that.’

When she brought the first shirt, she gave it to the matron. Then she found Count Dionys sitting on the terrace. It was a beautiful spring day. Near at hand were tall elm trees and some rooks cawing.

‘What a lovely day!’ she said. ‘Are you liking the world any better?’

‘The world?’ he said, looking up at her with the same old discontent and disgust on his fine, transparent nose.

‘Yes,’ she replied, a shadow coming over her face.

‘Is this the world—all those little red–brick boxes in rows, where couples of little people live, who decree my destiny?’

‘You don’t like England?’

‘Ah, England! Little houses like little boxes, each with its domestic Englishman and his domestic wife, each ruling the world because all are alike, so alike.’

‘But England isn’t all houses.’

‘Fields then! Little fields with innumerable hedges. Like a net with an irregular mesh, pinned down over this island and everything under the net. Ah, Lady Daphne, forgive me. I am ungrateful. I am so full of bile, of spleen, you say. My only wisdom is to keep my mouth shut.’

‘Why do you hate everything?’ she said, her own face going bitter.

‘Not everything. If I were free! If I were outside the law. Ah, Lady Daphne, how does one get outside the law?’

‘By going inside oneself,’ she said. ‘Not outside.’

His face took on a greater expression of disgust.

‘No, no. I am a man, I am a man, even if I am little. I am not a spirit, that coils itself inside a shell. In my soul is anger, anger, anger. Give me room for my anger. Give me room for that.’

His black eyes looked keenly into hers. She rolled her eyes as if in a half–trance. And in a monotonous, tranced voice she said:

‘Much better get over your anger. And WHY are you angry?’

‘There is no why. If it were love, you would not ask me, why do you love? But it is anger, anger, anger. What else can I call it? And there is no why.’

Again he looked at her with his dark, sharp, questioning, tormented eyes.

‘Can’t you get rid of it?’ she said, looking aside.

‘If a shell exploded and blew me into a thousand fragments,’ he said, ‘it would not destroy the anger that is in me. I know that. No, it will never dissipate. And to die is no release. The anger goes on gnashing and whimpering in death. Lady Daphne, Lady Daphne, we have used up all the love, and this is what is left.’

‘Perhaps YOU have used up all your love,’ she replied. ‘You are not everybody.’

‘I know it. I speak for me and you.’

‘Not for me,’ she said rapidly.

He did not answer, and they remained silent.

At length she turned her eyes slowly to him.

‘Why do you say you speak for me?’ she said, in an accusing tone.

‘Pardon me. I was hasty.’

But a faint touch of superciliousness in his tone showed he meant what he had said. She mused, her brow cold and stony.

‘And why do you tell ME about your anger?’ she said. ‘Will that make it better?’

‘Even the adder finds his mate. And she has as much poison in her mouth as he.’

She gave a little sudden squirt of laughter.

‘Awfully poetic thing to say about me,’ she said.

He smiled, but with the same corrosive quality.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘you are not a dove. You are a wild–cat with open eyes, half dreaming on a bough, in a lonely place, as I have seen her. And I ask myself—What are her memories, then?’

‘I wish I were a wild–cat,’ she said suddenly.

He eyed her shrewdly, and did not answer.

‘You want more war?’ she said to him bitterly.

‘More trenches? More Big Berthas, more shells and poison–gas, more machine–drilled science–manoeuvred so–called armies? Never. Never. I would rather work in a factory that makes boots and shoes. And I would rather deliberately starve to death than work in a factory that makes boots and shoes.’

‘Then what do you want?’

‘I want my anger to have room to grow.’

‘How?’

‘I do not know. That is why I sit here, day after day. I wait.’

‘For your anger to have room to grow?’

‘For that.’

‘Good–bye, Count Dionys.’

‘Good–bye, Lady Daphne.’

She had determined never to go and see him again. She had no sign from him. Since she had begun the second shirt, she went on with it. And then she hurried to finish it, because she was starting a round of visits that would end in the summer sojourn in Scotland. She intended to post the shirt. But after all, she took it herself.

She found Count Dionys had been removed from Hurst Place to Voynich Hall, where other enemy officers were interned. The being thwarted made her more determined. She took the train next day to go to Voynich Hall.

When he came into the ante–room where he was to receive her, she felt at once the old influence of his silence and his subtle power. His face had still that swarthy–transparent look of one who is unhappy, but his bearing was proud and reserved. He kissed her hand politely, leaving her to speak.

‘How are you?’ she said. ‘I didn’t know you were here. I am going away for the summer.’

‘I wish you a pleasant time,’ he said. They were speaking English.

‘I brought the other shirt,’ she said. ‘It is finished at last.’

‘That is a greater honour than I dared expect,’ he said.

‘I’m afraid it may be more honourable than useful. The other didn’t fit, did it?’

‘Almost,’ he said. ‘It fitted the spirit, if not the flesh,’ he smiled.

‘I’d rather it had been the reverse, for once,’ she said. ‘Sorry.’

‘I would not have it one stitch different.’

‘Can we sit in the garden?’

‘I think we may.’

They sat on a bench. Other prisoners were playing croquet not far off. But these two were left comparatively alone.

‘Do you like it better here?’ she said.

‘I have nothing to complain of,’ he said.

‘And the anger?’

‘It is doing well, I thank you,’ he smiled.

‘You mean getting better?’

‘Making strong roots,’ he said, laughing.

‘Ah, so long as it only makes roots!’ she said.

‘And your ladyship, how is she?’

‘My ladyship is rather better,’ she replied.

‘Much better, indeed,’ he said, looking into her face.

‘Do you mean I LOOK much better?’ she asked quickly.

‘Very much. It is your beauty you think of. Well, your beauty is almost itself again.’

‘Thanks.’

'You brood on your beauty as I on my anger. Ah, your ladyship, be wise, and make friends with your anger. That is the way to let your beauty blossom.'

'I was not unfriendly with you, was I?' she said.

'With me?' His face flickered with a laugh. 'Am I your anger? Your vicar in wrath? So then, be friends with the angry me, your ladyship. I ask nothing better.'

'What is the use,' she said, 'being friends with the ANGRY you? I would much rather be friends with the happy you.'

'That little animal is extinct,' he laughed. 'And I am glad of it.'

'But what remains? Only the angry you? Then it is no use my trying to be friends.'

'You remember, dear Lady Daphne, that the adder does not suck his poison all alone, and the pole–cat knows where to find his she– pole–cat. You remember that each one has his own dear mate,' he laughed. 'Dear, deadly mate.'

'And what if I do remember those bits of natural history, Count Dionys?'

'The she–adder is dainty, delicate, and carries her poison lightly. The wild–cat has wonderful green eyes that she closes with memory like a screen. The ice–bear hides like a snake with her cubs, and her snarl is the strangest thing in the world.'

'Have you ever heard me snarl?' she asked suddenly.

He only laughed, and looked away.

They were silent. And immediately the strange thrill of secrecy was between them. Something had gone beyond sadness into another, secret, thrilling communion which she would never admit.

'What do you do all day here?' she asked.

'Play chess, play this foolish croquet, play billiards, and read, and wait, and remember.'

'What do you wait for?'

'I don't know.'

'And what do you remember?'

'Ah, that. Shall I tell you what amuses me? Shall I tell you a secret?'

'Please don't, if it's anything that matters.'

'It matters to nobody but me. Will you hear it?'

'If it does not implicate me in any way.'

'It does not. Well, I am a member of a certain old secret society— no, don't look at me, nothing frightening—only a society like the free–masons.'

'And?'

'And—well, as you know, one is initiated into certain so–called secrets and rites. My family has always been initiated. So I am an initiate too. Does it interest you?'

'Why, of course.'

‘Well. I was always rather thrilled by these secrets. Or some of them. Some seemed to me far–fetched. The ones that thrilled me even never had any relation to actual life. When you knew me in Dresden and Prague, you would not have thought me a man invested with awful secret knowledge, now would you?’

‘Never.’

‘No. It was just a little exciting side–show. And I was a grimacing little society man. But now they become true. It becomes true.’

‘The secret knowledge?’

‘Yes.’

‘What, for instance?’

‘Take actual fire. It will bore you. Do you want to hear?’

‘Go on.’

‘This is what I was taught. The true fire is invisible. Flame, and the red fire we see burning, has its back to us. It is running away from us. Does that mean anything to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, the yellowness of sunshine—light itself—that is only the glancing aside of the real original fire. You know that is true. There would be no light if there was no refraction, no bits of dust and stuff to turn the dark fire into visibility. You know that’s a fact. And that being so, even the sun is dark. It is only his jacket of dust that makes him visible. You know that too. And the true sunbeams coming towards us flow darkly, a moving darkness of the genuine fire. The sun is dark, the sunshine flowing to us is dark. And light is only the inside–turning away of the sun’s directness that was coming to us. Does that interest you at all?’

‘Yes,’ she said dubiously.

‘Well, we’ve got the world inside out. The true living world of fire is dark, throbbing, darker than blood. Our luminous world that we go by is only the reverse of this.’

‘Yes, I like that,’ she said.

‘Well! Now listen. The same with love. This white love that we have is the same. It is only the reverse, the whited sepulchre of the true love. True love is dark, a throbbing together in darkness, like the wild–cat in the night, when the green screen opens and her eyes are on the darkness.’

‘No, I don’t see that,’ she said in a slow, clanging voice.

‘You, and your beauty—that is only the inside–out of you. The real you is the wild–cat invisible in the night, with red fire perhaps coming out of its wide, dark eyes. Your beauty is your whited sepulchre.’

‘You mean cosmetics,’ she said. ‘I’ve got none on today—not even powder.’

He laughed.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘Consider me. I used to think myself small but handsome, and the ladies used to admire me moderately, never very much. A trim little fellow, you know. Well, that was just the inside–out of me. I am a black tom–cat howling in the night, and it is then that fire comes out of me. This me you look at is my whited sepulchre. What do you say?'

She was looking into his eyes. She could see the darkness swaying in the depths. She perceived the invisible, cat–like fire stirring deep inside them, felt it coming towards her. She turned her face aside. Then he laughed, showing his strong white teeth, that seemed a little too large, rather dreadful.

She rose to go.

'Well,' she said. 'I shall have the summer in which to think about the world inside–out. Do write if there is anything to say. Write to Thoresway. Good–bye!'

'Ah, your eyes!' he said. 'They are like jewels of stone.'

Being away from the Count, she put him out of her mind. Only she was sorry for him a prisoner in that sickening Voynich Hall. But she did not write. Nor did he.

As a matter of fact, her mind was now much more occupied with her husband. All arrangements were being made to effect his exchange. From month to month she looked for his return. And so she thought of him.

Whatever happened to her, she thought about it, thought and thought a great deal. The consciousness of her mind was like tablets of stone weighing her down. And whoever would make a new entry into her must break these tablets of stone piece by piece. So it was that in her own way she thought often enough of the Count's world inside–out. A curious latency stirred in her consciousness that was not yet an idea.

He said her eyes were like jewels of stone. What a horrid thing to say! What did he want her eyes to be like? He wanted them to dilate and become all black pupil, like a cat's at night. She shrank convulsively from the thought, and tightened her breast.

He said her beauty was her whited sepulchre. Even that, she knew what he meant. The invisibility of her he wanted to love. But ah, her pearl–like beauty was so dear to her, and it was so famous in the world.

He said her white love was like moonshine, harmful, the reverse of love. He meant Basil, of course. Basil always said she was the moon. But then Basil loved her for that. The ecstasy of it! She shivered, thinking of her husband. But it had also made her nerve– worn, her husband's love. Ah, nerve–worn.

What then would the Count's love be like? Something so secret and different. She would not be lovely and a queen to him. He hated her loveliness. The wild–cat has its mate. The little wild–cat that he was. Ah!

She caught her breath, determined not to think. When she thought of Count Dionys she felt the world slipping away from her. She would sit in front of a mirror, looking at her wonderful cared–for face that had appeared in so many society magazines. She loved it so, it made her feel so vain. And she looked at her blue–green eyes—the eyes of the wild–cat on a bough. Yes, the lovely blue– green iris drawn tight like a screen. Supposing it should relax. Supposing it should unfold, and open out the dark depths, the dark, dilated pupil!

Supposing it should?

Never! She always caught herself back. She felt she might be killed before she could give way to that relaxation that the Count wanted of her. She could not. She just could not. At the very thought of it some hypersensitive nerve started with a great twinge in her breast; she drew back, forced to keep her guard. Ah no, Monsieur le Comte, you shall never take her ladyship off her guard.

She disliked the thought of the Count. An impudent little fellow. An impertinent little fellow! A little madman, really. A little outsider. No, no. She would think of her husband: an adorable, tall, well–bred Englishman, so easy and simple, and with the amused look in his blue eyes. She thought of the cultured, casual trail of his voice. It set her nerves on fire. She thought of his strong, easy body—beautiful, white–fleshed, with the fine springing of warm–brown hair like tiny flames. He was the Dionysos, full of sap, milk and honey, and northern golden wine: he, her husband. Not that little unreal Count. Ah, she dreamed of her husband, of the love–days, and the honeymoon, the lovely, simple intimacy. Ah, the marvellous revelation of that intimacy, when he left himself to her so generously. Ah, she was his wife for this reason, that he had given himself to her so greatly, so generously. Like an ear of corn he was there for her gathering— her husband, her own, lovely, English husband. Ah, when would he come again, when would he come again!

She had letters from him—and how he loved her. Far away, his life was all hers. All hers, flowing to her as the beam flows from a white star right down to us, to our heart. Her lover, her husband.

He was now expecting to come home soon. It had all been arranged. ‘I hope you won’t be disappointed in me when I do get back,’ he wrote. ‘I am afraid I am no longer the plump and well–looking young man I was. I’ve got a big scar at the side of my mouth, and I’m as thin as a starved rabbit, and my hair’s going grey. Doesn’t sound attractive, does it? And it isn’t attractive. But once I can get out of this infernal place, and once I can be with you again, I shall come in for my second blooming. The very thought of being quietly in the same house with you, quiet and in peace, makes me realize that if I’ve been through hell, I have known heaven on earth and can hope to know it again. I am a miserable brute to look at now. But I have faith in you. You will forgive my appearance, and that alone will make me feel handsome.’

She read this letter many times. She was not afraid of his scar or his looks. She would love him all the more.

Since she had started making shirts—those two for the Count had been an enormous labour, even though her maid had come to her assistance forty times: but since she had started making shirts, she thought she might continue. She had some good suitable silk: her husband liked silk underwear.

But she still used the Count’s thimble. It was gold outside and silver inside, and was too heavy. A snake was coiled round the base, and at the top, for pressing the needle, was inlet a semi– translucent apple–green stone, perhaps jade, carved like a scarab, with little dots. It was too heavy. But then she sewed so slowly. And she liked to feel her hand heavy, weighted. And as she sewed she thought about her husband, and she felt herself in love with him. She thought of him, how beautiful he was, and how she would love him now he was thin: she would love him all the more. She would love to trace his bones, as if to trace his living skeleton. The thought made her rest her hands in her lap and drift into a muse. Then she felt the weight of the thimble on her finger, and took it off, and sat looking at the green stone. The ladybird. The ladybird. And if only her husband would come soon, soon. It was wanting him that made her so ill. Nothing but that. She had wanted him so badly. She wanted now. Ah, if she could go to him now, and find him, wherever he was, and see him and touch him and take all his love.

As she mused, she put the thimble down in front of her, took up a little silver pencil from her work–basket, and on a bit of blue paper that had been the band of a small skein of silk she wrote the lines of the silly little song

> ‘Wenn ich ein Voglein war’
> Und auch zwei Fluglein hatt’
> Flag’ ich zu dir—’

That was all she could get on her bit of pale–blue paper.

> ‘If I were a little bird
> And had two little wings
> I’d fly to thee—

Silly enough, in all conscience. But she did not translate it, so it did not seem quite so silly.

At that moment her maid announced Lady Bingham—her husband’s sister. Daphne crumpled up the bit of paper in a flurry, and in another minute Primrose, his sister, came in. The newcomer was not a bit like a primrose, being long–faced and clever, smart, but not a bit elegant, in her new clothes.

‘Daphne dear, what a domestic scene! I suppose it’s rehearsal. Well, you may as well rehearse, he’s with Admiral Burns on the Ariadne. Father just heard from the Admiralty: quite fit. He’ll be here in a day or two. Splendid, isn’t it? And the war is going to end. At least it seems like it. You’ll be safe of your man now, dear. Thank heaven when it’s all over. What are you sewing?’

‘A shirt,’ said Daphne.

‘A shirt! Why, how clever of you. I should never know which end to begin. Who showed you?’

‘Millicent.’

‘And how did SHE know? She’s no business to know how to sew shirts: nor cushions nor sheets either. Do let me look. Why, how perfectly marvellous you are!—every bit by hand too. Basil isn’t worth it, dear, really he isn’t. Let him order his shirts in Oxford Street. Your business is to be beautiful, not to sew shirts. What a dear little pin–poppet, or rather needle–woman! I say, a satire on us, that is. But what a darling, with mother–of– pearl wings to her skirts! And darling little gold–eyed needles inside her. You screw her head off, and you find she’s full of pins and needles. Woman for you! Mother says won’t you come to lunch tomorrow. And won’t you come to Brassey’s to tea with me at this minute.

Do, there’s a dear. I’ve got a taxi.’

Daphne bundled her sewing loosely together.

When she tried to do a bit more, two days later, she could not find her thimble. She asked her maid, whom she could absolutely trust. The girl had not seen it. She searched everywhere. She asked her nurse—who was now her housekeeper—and footman. No, nobody had seen it. Daphne even asked her sister–in–law.

‘Thimble, darling? No, I don’t remember a thimble. I remember a dear little needle–lady, whom I thought such a precious satire on us women. I didn’t notice a thimble.’

Poor Daphne wandered about in a muse. She did not want to believe it lost. It had been like a talisman to her. She tried to forget it. Her husband was coming, quite soon, quite soon. But she could not raise herself to joy. She had lost her thimble. It was as if Count Dionys accused her in her sleep of something, she did not quite know what.

And though she did not really want to go to Voynich Hall, yet like a fatality she went, like one doomed. It was already late autumn, and some lovely days. This was the last of the lovely days. She was told that Count Dionys was in the small park, finding chestnuts. She went to look for him. Yes, there he was in his blue uniform stooping over the brilliant yellow leaves of the sweet chestnut tree, that lay around him like a fallen nimbus of glowing yellow, under his feet, as he kicked and rustled, looking for the chestnut burrs. And with his short, brown hands he was pulling out the small chestnuts and putting them in his pockets. But as she approached he peeled a nut to eat it. His teeth were white and powerful.

‘You remind me of a squirrel laying in a winter store,’ said she.

‘Ah, Lady Daphne—I was thinking and did not hear you.’

‘I thought you were gathering chestnuts—even eating them.’

‘Also!’ he laughed. He had a dark, sudden charm when he laughed, showing his rather large white teeth. She was not quite sure whether she found him a little repulsive.

‘Were you REALLY thinking?’ she said, in her slow, resonant way.

‘Very truly.’

‘And weren’t you enjoying the chestnut a bit?’

‘Very much. Like sweet milk. Excellent, excellent.’ He had the fragments of the nut between his teeth, and bit them finely. ‘Will you take one too.’ He held out the little, pointed brown nuts on the palm of his hand.

She looked at them doubtfully.

‘Are they as tough as they always were?’ she said.

‘No, they are fresh and good. Wait, I will peel one for you.’

They strayed about through the thin clump of trees.

‘You have had a pleasant summer; you are strong?’

‘Almost QUITE strong,’ said she. ‘Lovely summer, thanks. I suppose it’s no good asking you if you have been happy?’

‘Happy?’ He looked at her direct. His eyes were black, and seemed to examine her. She always felt he had a little contempt of her. ‘Oh yes,’ he said, smiling. ‘I have been very happy.’

‘So glad.’

They drifted a little farther, and he picked up an apple–green chestnut burr out of the yellow–brown leaves, handling it with sensitive fingers that still suggested paws to her.

‘How did you succeed in being happy?’ she said.

‘How shall I tell you? I felt that the same power which put up the mountains could pull them down again—no matter how long it took.’

‘And was that all?’

‘Was it not enough?’

‘I should say decidedly too little.’

He laughed broadly, showing the strong, negroid teeth.

‘You do not know all it means,’ he said.

‘The thought that the mountains were going to be pulled down?’ she said. ‘It will be so long after my day.’

‘Ah, you are bored,’ he said. ‘But I—I found the God who pulls things down: especially the things that men have put up. Do they not say that life is a search after God, Lady Daphne? I have found my God.’

‘The god of destruction,’ she said, blanching.

‘Yes—not the devil of destruction, but the god of destruction. The blessed god of destruction. It is strange’—he stood before her, looking up at her—‘but I have found my God. The god of anger, who throws down the steeples and the factory chimneys. Ah, Lady Daphne, he is a man’s God, he is a man’s God. I have found my God, Lady Daphne.’

‘Apparently. And how are you going to serve him?’

A naive glow transfigured his face.

‘Oh, I will help. With my heart I will help while I can do nothing with my hands. I say to my heart: Beat, hammer, beat with little strokes. Beat, hammer of God, beat them down. Beat it all down.’

Her brows knitted, her face took on a look of discontent.

‘Beat what down?’ she asked harshly.

‘The world, the world of man. Not the trees—these chestnuts, for example’—he looked up at them, at the tufts and loose pinions of yellow—‘not these—nor the chattering sorcerers, the squirrels— nor the hawk that comes. Not those.’

‘You mean beat England?’ she said.

‘Ah, no. Ah, no. Not England any more than Germany—perhaps not as much. Not Europe any more than Asia.'

'Just the end of the world?'

'No, no. No, no. What grudge have I against a world where little chestnuts are so sweet as these! Do you like yours? Will you take another?'

'No, thanks.'

'What grudge have I against a world where even the hedges are full of berries, bunches of black berries that hang down, and red berries that thrust up. Never would I hate the world. But the world of man. Lady Daphne'—his voice sank to a whisper—'I HATE IT. Zzz!' he hissed. 'Strike, little heart! Strike, strike, hit, smite! Oh, Lady Daphne!'—his eyes dilated with a ring of fire.

'What?' she said, scared.

'I believe in the power of my red, dark heart. God has put the hammer in my breast—the little eternal hammer. Hit—hit—hit! It hits on the world of man. It hits, it hits! And it hears the thin sound of cracking. The thin sound of cracking. Hark!'

He stood still and made her listen. It was late afternoon. The strange laugh of his face made the air seem dark to her. And she could easily have believed that she heard a faint, fine shivering, cracking, through the air, a delicate crackling noise.

'You hear it? Yes? Oh, may I live long! May I live long, so that my hammer may strike and strike, and the cracks go deeper, deeper! Ah, the world of man! Ah, the joy, the passion in every heart– beat! Strike home, strike true, strike sure. Strike to destroy it. Strike! Strike! To destroy the world of man. Ah, God. Ah, God, prisoner of peace. Do I not know you, Lady Daphne? Do I not? Do I not?'

She was silent for some moments, looking away at the twinkling lights of a station beyond.

'Not the white plucked lily of your body. I have gathered no flower for my ostentatious life. But in the cold dark, your lily root, Lady Daphne. Ah, yes, you will know it all your life, that I know where your root lies buried, with its sad, sad quick of life. What does it matter!'

They had walked slowly towards the house. She was silent. Then at last she said, in a peculiar voice:

'And you would never want to kiss me?'

'Ah, no!' he answered sharply.

She held out her hand.

'Good–bye, Count Dionys,' she drawled, fashionably. He bowed over her hand, but did not kiss it.

'Good–bye, Lady Daphne.'

She went away, with her brow set hard. And henceforth she thought only of her husband, of Basil. She made the Count die out of her. Basil was coming, he was near. He was coming back from the East, from war and death. Ah, he had been through awful fire of experience. He would be something new, something she did not know. He was something new, a stronger lover who had been through terrible fire, and had come out strange and new, like a god. Ah, new and terrible his love would be, pure and intensified by the awful fire of suffering. A new lover—a new bridegroom—a new, supernatural wedding–night. She shivered in anticipation, waiting for her husband. She hardly noticed the wild excitement of the Armistice. She was waiting for something more wonderful to her.

And yet the moment she heard his voice on the telephone, her heart contracted with fear. It was his well–known voice, deliberate, diffident, almost drawling, with the same subtle suggestion of deference, and the rather exaggerated Cambridge intonation, up and down. But there was a difference, a new icy note that went through her veins like death.

‘Is that you, Daphne? I shall be with you in half an hour. Is that all right for you? Yes, I’ve just landed, and shall come straight to you. Yes, a taxi. Shall I be too sudden for you, darling? No? Good, oh good! Half an hour, then! I say, Daphne? There won’t be anyone else there, will there? Quite alone! Good! I can ring up Dad afterwards. Yes, splendid, splendid. Sure you’re all right, my darling? I’m at death’s door till I see you. Yes. Good–bye—half an hour. Good–bye.’

When Daphne had hung up the receiver she sat down almost in a faint. What was it that so frightened her? His terrible, terrible altered voice, like cold, blue steel. She had no time to think. She rang for her maid.

‘Oh, my lady, it isn’t bad news?’ cried Millicent, when she caught sight of her mistress white as death.

‘No, good news. Major Apsley will be here in half an hour. Help me to dress. Ring to Murry’s first to send in some roses, red ones, and some lilac–coloured iris—two dozen of each, at once.’

Daphne went to her room. She didn’t know what to wear, she didn’t know how she wanted her hair dressed. She spoke hastily to her maid. She chose a violet–coloured dress. She did not know what she was doing. In the middle of dressing the flowers came, and she left off to put them in the bowls. So that when she heard his voice in the hall, she was still standing in front of the mirror reddening her lips and wiping it away again.

‘Major Apsley, my lady!’ murmured the maid, in excitement.

‘Yes, I can hear. Go and tell him I shall be one minute.’

Daphne’s voice had become slow and sonorous, like bronze, as it always did when she was upset. Her face looked almost haggard, and in vain she dabbed with the rouge.

‘How does he look?’ she asked curtly, when her maid came back.

‘A long scar here,’ said the maid, and she drew her finger from the left–hand corner of her mouth into her cheek, slanting downwards.

‘Make him look very different?’ asked Daphne.

‘Not so VERY different, my lady,’ said Millicent gently. ‘His eyes are the same, I think.’ The girl also was distressed.

‘All right,’ said Daphne. She looked at herself a long, last look as she turned away from the mirror. The sight of her own face made her feel almost sick. She had seen so much of herself. And yet even now she was fascinated by the heavy droop of her lilac–veined lids over her slow, strange, large, green–blue eyes. They WERE mysterious–looking. And she gave herself a long, sideways glance, curious and Chinese. How was it possible there was a touch of the Chinese in her face?—she so purely an English blonde, an Aphrodite of the foam, as Basil had called her in poetry. Ah well! She left off her thoughts and went through the hall to the drawing–room.

He was standing nervously in the middle of the room in his uniform. She hardly glanced at his face—and saw only the scar.

‘Hullo, Daphne,’ he said, in a voice full of the expected emotion. He stepped forward and took her in his arms, and kissed her forehead.

‘So glad! So glad it’s happened at last,’ she said, hiding her tears.

‘So glad what has happened, darling?’ he asked, in his deliberate manner.

‘That you’re back.’ Her voice had the bronze resonance, she spoke rather fast.

‘Yes, I’m back, Daphne darling—as much of me as there is to bring back.’

‘Why?’ she said. ‘You’ve come back whole, surely?’ She was frightened.

‘Yes, apparently I have. Apparently. But don’t let’s talk of that. Let’s talk of you, darling. How are you? Let me look at you. You are thinner, you are older. But you are more wonderful than ever. Far more wonderful.’

‘How?’ said she.

‘I can’t exactly say how. You were only a girl. Now you are a woman. I suppose it’s all that’s happened. But you are wonderful as a woman, Daphne darling—more wonderful than all that’s happened. I couldn’t have believed you’d be so wonderful. I’d forgotten—or else I’d never known. I say, I’m a lucky chap really. Here I am, alive and well, and I’ve got you for a wife. It’s brought you out like a flower. I say, darling, there is more now than Venus of the foam—grander. How beautiful you are! But you look like the beauty of all life—as if you were moon–mother of the world—Aphrodite. God is good to me after all, darling. I ought never to utter a single complaint. How lovely you are—how lovely you are, my darling! I’d forgotten you—and I thought I knew you so well. Is it true that you belong to me? Are you really mine?’

They were seated on the yellow sofa. He was holding her hand, and his eyes were going up and down, from her face to her throat and her breast. The sound of his words, and the strong, cold desire in his voice excited her, pleased her, and made her heart freeze. She turned and looked into his light blue eyes. They had no longer the amused light, nor the young look. They burned with a hard, focused light, whitish.

‘It’s all right. You are mine, aren’t you, Daphne darling?’ came his cultured, musical voice, that had always the well–bred twang of diffidence.

She looked back into his eyes.

‘Yes, I am yours,’ she said, from the lips.

‘Darling! Darling!’ he murmured, kissing her hand.

Her heart beat suddenly so terribly, as if her breast would be ruptured, and she rose in one movement and went across the room. She leaned her hand on the mantelpiece and looked down at the electric fire. She could hear the faint, faint noise of it. There was silence for a few moments.

Then she turned and looked at him. He was watching her intently. His face was gaunt, and there was a curious deathly sub–pallor, though his cheeks were not white. The scar ran livid from the side of his mouth. It was not so very big. But it seemed like a scar in him himself, in his brain, as it were. In his eyes was that hard, white, focused light that fascinated her and was terrible to her. He was different. He was like death; like risen death. She felt she dared not touch him. White death was still upon him. She could tell that he shrank with a kind of agony from contact. 'Touch me not, I am not yet ascended unto the Father.' Yet for contact he had come. Something, someone seemed to be looking over his shoulder. His own young ghost looking over his shoulder. Oh, God! She closed her eyes, seeming to swoon. He remained leaning forward on the sofa, watching her.

'Aren't you well, darling?' he asked. There was a strange, incomprehensible coldness in his very fire. He did not move to come near her.

'Yes, I'm well. It is only that after all it is so sudden. Let me get used to you,' she said, turning aside her face from him. She felt utterly like a victim of his white, awful face.

'I suppose I must be a bit of a shock to you,' he said. 'I hope you won't leave off loving me. It won't be that, will it?'

The strange coldness in his voice! And yet the white, uncanny fire.

'No, I shan't leave off loving you,' she admitted, in a low tone, as if almost ashamed. She DARED not have said otherwise. And the saying it made it true.

'Ah, if you're sure of that,' he said. 'I'm a pretty unlovely sight to behold, I know, with this wound–scar. But if you can forgive it me, darling. Do you think you can?' There was something like compulsion in his tone.

She looked at him, and shivered slightly.

'I love you—more than before,' she said hurriedly.

'Even the scar?' came his terrible voice, inquiring.

She glanced again, with that slow, Chinese side–look, and felt she would die.

'Yes,' she said, looking away at nothingness. It was an awful moment to her. A little, slightly imbecile smile widened on his face.

He suddenly knelt at her feet, and kissed the toe of her slipper, and kissed the instep, and kissed the ankle in the thin black stocking.

'I knew,' he said in a muffled voice. 'I knew you would make good. I knew if I had to kneel, it was before you. I knew you were divine, you were the one—Cybele—Isis. I knew I was your slave. I knew. It has all been just a long initiation. I had to learn how to worship you.'

He kissed her feet again and again, without the slightest self– consciousness, or the slightest misgiving. Then he went back to the sofa, and sat there looking at her, saying:

‘It isn’t love, it is worship. Love between me and you will be a sacrament, Daphne. That’s what I had to learn. You are beyond me. A mystery to me. My God, how great it all is. How marvellous!’

She stood with her hand on the mantelpiece, looking down and not answering. She was frightened—almost horrified: but she was thrilled deep down to her soul. She really felt she could glow white and fill the universe like the moon, like Astarte, like Isis, like Venus. The grandeur of her own pale power. The man religiously worshipped her, not merely amorously. She was ready for him—for the sacrament of his supreme worship.

He sat on the sofa with his hands spread on the yellow brocade and pushing downwards behind him, down between the deep upholstery of the back and the seat. He had long, white hands with pale freckles. And his fingers touched something. With his long white fingers he groped and brought it out. It was the lost thimble. And inside it was the bit of screwed–up blue paper.

‘I say, is that YOUR thimble?’ he asked.

She started, and went hurriedly forward for it.

‘Where was it?’ she said, agitated.

But he did not give it to her. He turned it round and pulled out the bit of blue paper. He saw the faint pencil marks on the screwed–up ball, and unrolled the band of paper, and slowly deciphered the verse.

> ‘Wenn ich ein Voglein war’
> Und auch zwei Fluglein hatt’
> Flog’ ich zu dir—’

‘How awfully touching that is,’ he said. ‘A Voglein with two little Fluglein! But what a precious darling child you are! Whom did you want to fly to, if you were a Voglein?’ He looked up at her with a curious smile.

‘I can’t remember,’ she said, turning aside her head.

‘I hope it was to me,’ he said. ‘Anyhow, I shall consider it was, and shall love you all the more for it. What a darling child! A Voglein if you please, with two little wings! Why, how beautifully absurd of you, darling!’

He folded the scrap of paper carefully, and put it in his pocket– book, keeping the thimble all the time between his knees.

‘Tell me when you lost it, Daphne,’ he said, examining the bauble.

‘About a month ago—or two months.’

‘About a month ago—or two months. And what were you sewing? Do you mind if I ask? I like to think of you then. I was still in that beastly El Hasrun. What were you sewing, darling, two months ago, when you lost your thimble?’

‘A shirt.’

‘I say, a shirt! Whose shirt?’

‘Yours.’

‘There. Now we’ve run it to earth. Were you really sewing a shirt for me! Is it finished? Can I put it on at this minute?’

‘That one isn’t finished, but the first one is.’

‘I say, darling, let me go and put it on. To think I should have it next my skin! I shall feel you all round me, all over me. I say how marvellous that will be! Won’t you come?’

‘Won’t you give me the thimble?’ she said.

‘Yes, of course. What a noble thimble too! Who gave it you?’

‘Count Dionys Psanek.’

‘Who was he?’

‘A Bohemian Count, in Dresden. He once stayed with us in Thoresway—with a tall wife. Didn’t you meet them?’

‘I don’t think I did. I don’t think I did. I don’t remember. What was he like?’

‘A little man with black hair and a rather low, dark forehead— rather dressy.’

‘No, I don’t remember him at all. So he gave it you. Well, I wonder where he is now? Probably rotted, poor devil.’

‘No, he’s interned in Voynich Hall. Mother and I have been to see him several times. He was awfully badly wounded.’

‘Poor little beggar! In Voynich Hall! I’ll look at him before he goes. Odd thing, to give you a thimble. Odd gift! You were a girl then, though. Do you think he had it made, or do you think he found it in a shop?’

‘I think it belonged to the family. The ladybird at the top is part of their crest—and the snake as well, I think.’

‘A ladybird! Funny thing for a crest. Americans would call it a bug. I must look at him before he goes. And you were sewing a shirt for me! And then you posted me this little letter into the sofa. Well, I’m awfully glad I received it, and that it didn’t go astray in the post, like so many things. “Wenn ich ein Voglein war”—you perfect child! But that is the beauty of a woman like you: you are so superb and beyond worship, and then such an exquisite naive child. Who could help worshipping you and loving you: immortal and mortal together. What, you want the thimble? Here! Wonderful, wonderful, white fingers. Ah, darling, you are more goddess than child, you long, limber Isis with sacred hands. White, white, and immortal! Don’t tell me your hands could die, darling: your wonderful Proserpine fingers. They are immortal as February and snowdrops. If you lift your hands the spring comes. I CAN’T help kneeling before you, darling. I am no more than a sacrifice to you, an offering. I WISH I could die in giving myself to you, give you all my blood on your altar, for ever.’

She looked at him with a long, slow look, as he turned his face to her. His face was white with ecstasy. And she was not afraid. Somewhere, saturnine, she knew it was absurd. But she chose not to know. A certain swoon–sleep was on her. With her slow, green–blue eyes she looked down on his ecstasized face, almost benign. But in her right hand unconsciously she held the thimble fast, she only gave him her left hand. He took her hand and rose to his feet in that curious priestly ecstasy which made him more than a man or a soldier, far, far more than a lover to her.

Nevertheless, his home–coming made her begin to be ill again. Afterwards, after his love, she had to bear herself in torment. To her shame and her heaviness, she knew she was not strong enough, or pure enough, to bear this awful outpouring adoration–lust. It was not her fault she felt weak and fretful afterwards, as if she wanted to cry and be fretful and petulant, wanted someone to save her. She could not turn to Basil, her husband. After his ecstasy of adoration–lust for her, she recoiled from him. Alas, she was not the goddess, the superb person he named her. She was flawed with the fatal humility of her age. She could not harden her heart and burn her soul pure of this humility, this misgiving. She could not finally believe in her own woman–godhead—only in her own female mortality.

That fierce power of being alone, even with your lover, the fierce power of the woman in excelsis—alas, she could not keep it. She could rise to the height for the time, the incandescent, transcendent, moon–fierce womanhood. But alas, she could not stay intensified and resplendent in her white, womanly powers, her female mystery. She relaxed, she lost her glory, and became fretful. Fretful and ill and never to be soothed. And then naturally her man became ashy and somewhat acrid, while she ached with nerves, and could not eat.

Of course she began to dream about Count Dionys: to yearn wistfully for him. And it was absolutely a fatal thought to her that he was going away. When she thought that—that he was leaving England soon—going away into the dark for ever—then the last spark seemed to die in her. She felt her soul perish, whilst she herself was worn and soulless like a prostitute. A prostitute goddess. And her husband, the gaunt, white, intensified priest of her, who never ceased from being before her like a lust.

‘Tomorrow,’ she said to him, gathering her last courage and looking at him with a side look, ‘I want to go to Voynich Hall.’

‘What, to see Count Psanek? Oh, good! Yes, very good! I’ll come along as well. I should like very much to see him. I suppose he’ll be getting sent back before long.’

It was a fortnight before Christmas, very dark weather. Her husband was in khaki. She wore her black furs and a black lace veil over her face, so that she seemed mysterious. But she lifted the veil and looped it behind, so that it made a frame for her face. She looked very lovely like that—her face pure like the most white hellebore flower, touched with winter pink, amid the blackness of her drapery and furs. Only she was rather too much like the picture of a modern beauty: too much the actual thing. She had half an idea that Dionys would hate her for her effective loveliness. He would see it and hate it. The thought was like a bitter balm to her. For herself, she loved her loveliness almost with obsession.

The Count came cautiously forward, glancing from the lovely figure of Lady Daphne to the gaunt well–bred Major at her side. Daphne was so beautiful in her dark furs, the black lace of her veil thrown back over her close–fitting, dull–gold–threaded hat, and her face fair like a winter flower in a cranny of darkness. But on her face, that was smiling with a slow self–satisfaction of beauty and of knowledge that she was dangling the two men, and setting all the imprisoned officers wildly on the alert, the Count could read that acridity of dissatisfaction and of inefficiency. And he looked away to the livid scar on the Major’s cheek.

‘Count Dionys, I wanted to bring my husband to see you. May I introduce him to you? Major Apsley—Count Dionys Psanek.’

The two men shook hands rather stiffly.

‘I can sympathize with you being fastened up in this place,’ said Basil in his slow, easy fashion. ‘I hated it, I assure you, out there in the East.’

‘But your conditions were much worse than mine,’ smiled the Count.

‘Well, perhaps they were. But prison is prison, even if it were heaven itself.’

‘Lady Apsley has been the one angel of my heaven,’ smiled the Count.

‘I’m afraid I was as inefficient as most angels,’ said she.

The small smile never left the Count’s dark face. It was true as she said, he was low–browed, the black hair growing low on his brow, and his eyebrows making a thick bow above his dark eyes, which had again long black lashes. So that the upper part of his face seemed very dusky–black. His nose was small and somewhat translucent. There was a touch of mockery about him, which was intensified even by his small, energetic stature. He was still carefully dressed in the dark–blue uniform, whose shabbiness could not hinder the dark flame of life which seemed to glow through the cloth from his body. He was not thin—but still had a curious swarthy translucency of skin in his low–browed face.

‘What would you have been more?’ he laughed, making equivocal dark eyes at her.

‘Oh, of course, a delivering angel—a cinema heroine,’ she replied, closing her eyes and turning her face aside.

All the while the white–faced, tall Major watched the little man with a fixed, half–smiling scrutiny. The Count seemed to notice. He turned to the Englishman.

‘I am glad that I can congratulate you, Major Apsley, on your safe and happy return to your home.’

‘Thanks. I hope I may be able to congratulate you in the same way before long.’

‘Oh yes,’ said the Count. ‘Before long I shall be shipped back.’

‘Have you any news of your family?’ interrupted Daphne.

‘No news,’ he replied briefly, with sudden gravity.

‘It seems you’ll find a fairish mess out in Austria,’ said Basil.

‘Yes, probably. It is what we had to expect,’ replied the Count.

‘Well, I don’t know. Sometimes things do turn out for the best. I feel that’s as good as true in my case,’ said the Major.

‘Things have turned out for the best?’ said the Count, with an intonation of polite inquiry.

‘Yes. Just for me personally, I mean—to put it quite selfishly. After all, what we’ve learned is that a man can only speak for himself. And I feel it’s been dreadful, but it’s not been lost. It was like an ordeal one had to go through,’ said Basil.

‘You mean the war?’

‘The war and everything that went with it.’

‘And when you’ve been through the ordeal?’ politely inquired the Count.

‘Why, you arrive at a higher state of consciousness, and therefore of life. And so, of course, at a higher plane of love. A surprisingly higher plane of love, that you had never suspected the existence of before.’

The Count looked from Basil to Daphne, who was posing her head a little self–consciously.

‘Then indeed the war has been a valuable thing,’ he said.

‘Exactly!’ cried Basil. ‘I am another man.’

‘And Lady Apsley?’ queried the Count.

‘Oh’—her husband faced round to her—‘she is ABSOLUTELY another woman—and MUCH more wonderful, more marvellous.’

The Count smiled and bowed slightly.

‘When we knew her ten years ago, we should have said then that it was impossible,’ said he, ‘for her to be more wonderful.’

‘Oh, quite!’ returned the husband. ‘It always seems impossible. And the impossible is always happening. As a matter of fact, I think the war has opened another circle of life to us—a wider ring.’

‘It may be so,’ said the Count.

‘You don’t feel it so yourself?’ The Major looked with his keen, white attention into the dark, low–browed face of the other man. The Count looked smiling at Daphne.

‘I am only a prisoner still, Major, therefore I feel my ring quite small.’

‘Yes, of course you do. Of course. Well, I do hope you won’t be a prisoner much longer. You must be dying to get back into your own country.’

‘Yes, I shall be glad to be free. Also,’ he smiled. ‘I shall miss my prison and my visits from the angels.’

Even Daphne could not be sure he was mocking her. It was evident the visit was unpleasant to him. She could see he did not like Basil. Nay, more, she could feel that the presence of her tall, gaunt, idealistic husband was hateful to the little swarthy man. But he passed it all off in smiles and polite speeches.

On the other hand, Basil was as if fascinated by the Count. He watched him absorbedly all the time, quite forgetting Daphne. She knew this. She knew that she was quite gone out of her husband’s consciousness, like a lamp that has been carried away into another room. There he stood completely in the dark, as far as she was concerned, and all his attention focused on the other man. On his pale, gaunt face was a fixed smile of amused attention.

‘But don’t you get awfully bored,’ he said, ‘between the visits?’

The Count looked up with an affection of frankness.

‘No, I do not,’ he said. ‘I can brood, you see, on the things that come to pass.’

‘I think that’s where the harm comes in,’ replied the Major. ‘One sits and broods, and is cut off from everything, and one loses one’s contact with reality. That’s the effect it had on me, being a prisoner.’

‘Contact with reality—what is that?’

‘Well—contact with anybody, really—or anything.’

‘Why must one have contact?’

‘Well, because one must,’ said Basil.

The Count smiled slowly.

‘But I can sit and watch fate flowing, like black water, deep down in my own soul,’ he said. ‘I feel that there, in the dark of my own soul, things are happening.’

‘That may be. But whatever happens, it is only one thing, really. It is a contact between your own soul and the soul of one other being, or of many other beings. Nothing else can happen to man. That’s how I figured it out for myself. I may be wrong. But that’s how I figured it out when I was wounded and a prisoner.’

The Count’s face had gone dark and serious.

‘But is this contact an aim in itself?’ he asked.

‘Well’—said the Major—he had taken his degree in philosophy—‘it seems to me it is. It results inevitably in some form of activity. But the cause and the origin and the life–impetus of all action, activity, whether constructive or destructive, seems to me to be in the dynamic contact between human beings. You bring to pass a certain dynamic contact between men, and you get war. Another sort of dynamic contact, and you get them all building a cathedral, as they did in the Middle Ages.’

‘But was not the war, or the cathedral, the real aim, and the emotional contact just the means?’ said the Count.

‘I don’t think so,’ said the Major, his curious white passion beginning to glow through his face. The three were seated in a little card–room, left alone by courtesy by the other men. Daphne was still draped in her dark, too–becoming drapery. But alas, she sat now ignored by both men. She might just as well have been an ugly little nobody, for all the notice that was taken of her. She sat in the window–seat of the dreary small room with a look of discontent on her exotic, rare face, that was like a delicate white and pink hot–house flower. From time to time she glanced with long, slow looks from man to man: from her husband, whose pallid, intense, white glowing face was pressed forward across the table to the Count, who sat back in his chair, as if in opposition, and whose dark face seemed clubbed together in a dark, unwilling stare. Her husband was QUITE unaware of anything but his own white identity. But the Count still had a grain of secondary consciousness which hovered round and remained aware of the woman in the window–seat. The whole of his face, and his forward–looking attention was concentrated on Basil. But somewhere at the back of him he kept track of Daphne. She sat uneasy, in discontent, as women always do sit when men are locked together in a combustion of words. At the same time, she followed the argument. It was curious that, while her sympathy at this moment was with the Count, it was her husband whose words she believed to be true. The contact, the emotional contact was the real thing, the so–called 'aim' was only a by–product. Even wars and cathedrals, in her mind, were only by–products. The real thing was what the warriors and cathedral–builders had had in common, as a great uniting feeling: the thing they felt for one another, and for their women in particular, of course.

'There are a great many kinds of contact, nevertheless,' said Dionys.

'Well, do you know,' said the Major, 'it seems to me there is really only one supreme contact, the contact of love. Mind you, the love may take on an infinite variety of forms. And in my opinion, no form of love is wrong, so long as it IS love, and you yourself HONOUR what you are doing. Love has an extraordinary variety of forms! And that is all that there is in life, it seems to me. But I grant you, if you deny the VARIETY of love you deny love altogether. If you try to specialize love into one set of accepted feelings, you wound the very soul of love. Love MUST be multiform, else it is just tyranny, just death.'

'But why call it all LOVE?' said the Count.

'Because it seems to me it IS love: the great power that draws human beings together, no matter what the result of the contact may be. Of course there is hate, but hate is only the recoil of love.'

'Do you think the old Egypt was established on love?' asked Dionys.

'Why, of course! And perhaps the most multiform, the most comprehensive love that the world has seen. All that we suffer from now is that our way of love is narrow, exclusive, and therefore not love at all; more like death and tyranny.'

The Count slowly shook his head, smiling slowly and as if sadly.

'No,' he said. 'No. It is no good. You must use another word than love.'

'I don't agree at all,' said Basil.

'What word then?' blurted Daphne.

The Count looked at her.

'Obedience, submission, faith, belief, responsibility, power,' he said slowly, picking out the words slowly, as if searching for what he wanted, and never quite finding it. He looked with his quiet dark eyes into her eyes. It was curious, she disliked his words intensely, but she liked him. On the other hand, she believed absolutely what her husband said, yet her physical sympathy was against him.

'Do you agree, Daphne?' asked Basil.

'Not a bit,' she replied, with a heavy look at her husband.

'Nor I,' said Basil. 'It seems to me, if you love, there is no obedience nor submission, except to the soul of love. If you mean obedience, submission, and all the rest, to the soul of love itself, I quite agree. But if you mean obedience, submission of one person to another, and one man having power over others—I don’t agree, and never shall. It seems to me just there where we have gone wrong. Kaiser Wilhelm II wanted power—’

‘No, no,’ said the Count. ‘He was a mountebank. He had no conception of the sacredness of power.’

‘He proved himself very dangerous.’

‘Oh yes. But peace can be even more dangerous still.’

‘Tell me, then. Do you believe that you, as an aristocrat, should have feudal power over a few hundreds of other men, who happen to be born serfs, or not aristocrats?’

‘Not as a hereditary aristocrat, but as a MAN who is by nature an aristocrat,’ said the Count, ‘it is my sacred duty to hold the lives of other men in my hands, and to shape the issue. But I can never fulfil my destiny till men will willingly put their lives in my hands.’

‘You don’t expect them to, do you?’ smiled Basil.

‘At this moment, no.’

‘Or at any moment!’ The Major was sarcastic.

‘At a certain moment the men who are really living will come beseeching to put their lives into the hands of the greater men among them, beseeching the greater men to take the sacred responsibility of power.’

‘Do you think so? Perhaps you mean men will at last begin to choose leaders whom they will LOVE,’ said Basil. ‘I wish they would.’

‘No, I mean that they will at last yield themselves before men who are greater than they: become vassals by choice.’

‘Vassals!’ exclaimed Basil, smiling. ‘You are still in the feudal ages, Count.’

‘Vassals. Not to any hereditary aristocrat—Hohenzollern or Hapsburg or Psanek,’ smiled the Count. ‘But to the man whose soul is born single, able to be alone, to choose and to command. At last the masses will come to such men and say: “You are greater than we. Be our lords. Take our life and our death in your hands, and dispose of us according to your will. Because we see a light in your face, and burning on your mouth.”’

The Major smiled for many moments, really piqued and amused, watching the Count, who did not turn a hair.

‘I say, you must be awfully naive, Count, if you believe the modern masses are ever going to behave like that. I assure you, they never will.’

‘If they did,’ said the Count, ‘would you call it a new reign of love, or something else?’

‘Well, of course, it would contain an element of love. There would have to be an element of love in their feeling for their leaders.’

‘Do you think so? I thought that love assumed an equality in difference. I thought that love gave to every man the right to judge the acts of other men—“This was not an act of love, therefore it was wrong.” Does not democracy, and love, give to every man this right?’

‘Certainly,’ said Basil.

‘Ah, but my chosen aristocrat would say to those who chose him: “If you choose me, you give up forever your right to judge me. If you have truly chosen to follow me, you have thereby rejected all your right to criticize me. You can no longer either approve or disapprove of me. You have performed the sacred act of choice. Henceforth you can only obey.”’

‘They wouldn’t be able to help criticizing, for all that,’ said Daphne, blurting in her say.

He looked at her slowly, and for the first time in her life she was doubtful of what she was saying.

‘The day of Judas,’ he said, ‘ends with the day of love.’

Basil woke up from a sort of trance.

‘I think, of course, Count,’ he said, ‘that it’s an awfully amusing idea. A retrogression slap back to the Dark Ages.’

‘Not so,’ said the Count. ‘Men—the mass of men—were never before free to perform the sacred act of choice. Today—soon—they may be free.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Many tribes chose their kings and chiefs.’

‘Men have never before been quite free to choose: and to know what they are doing.’

‘You mean they’ve only made themselves free in order voluntarily to saddle themselves with new lords and masters?’

‘I do mean that.’

‘In short, life is just a vicious circle?’

‘Not at all. An ever–widening circle, as you say. Always more wonderful.’

‘Well, it’s all frightfully interesting and amusing—don’t you think so, Daphne? By the way, Count, where would women be? Would they be allowed to criticize their husbands?’

‘Only before marriage,’ smiled the Count. ‘Not after.’

‘Splendid!’ said Basil. ‘I’m all for that bit of your scheme, Count. I hope you’re listening, Daphne.’

‘Oh yes. But then I’ve only married YOU, I’ve got my right to criticize all the other men,’ she said in a dull, angry voice.

‘Exactly. Clever of you! So the Count won’t get off! Well now, what do you think of the Count’s aristocratic scheme for the future, Daphne? Do you approve?’

‘Not at all. But then little men have always wanted power,’ she said cruelly.

‘Oh, big men as well, for that matter,’ said Basil, conciliatory.

‘I have been told before,’ smiled the Count, ‘little men are always bossy. I am afraid I have offended Lady Daphne?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not really. I’m amused, really. But I always dislike any suggestion of bullying.’

‘Indeed, so do I,’ said he.

‘The Count didn’t mean bullying, Daphne,’ said Basil. ‘Come, there is really an allowable distinction between responsible power and bullying.’

‘When men put their heads together about it,’ said she.

She was haughty and angry, as if she were afraid of losing something. The Count smiled mischievously at her.

‘You are offended, Lady Daphne? But why? You are safe from any spark of my dangerous and extensive authority.’

Basil burst into a roar of laughter.

‘It IS rather funny, you to be talking of power and of not being criticized,’ he said. ‘But I should like to hear more: I would like to hear more.’

As they drove home, he said to his wife:

‘You know I like that little man. He’s a quaint little bantam. And he sets one thinking.’

Lady Daphne froze to four degrees below zero, under the north wind of this statement, and not another word was to be thawed out of her.

Curiously enough, it was now Basil who was attracted by the Count, and Daphne who was repelled. Not that she was so bound up in her husband. Not at all. She was feeling rather sore against men altogether. But as so often happens, in this life based on the wicked triangle, Basil could only follow his enthusiasm for the Count in his wife’s presence. When the two men were alone together, they were awkward, resistant, they could hardly get out a dozen words to one another. When Daphne was there, however, to complete the circuit of the opposing currents, things went like a house on fire.

This, however, was not much consolation to Lady Daphne. Merely to sit as a passive medium between two men who are squibbing philosophical nonsense to one another: no, it was not good enough! She almost hated the Count: low–browed little fellow, belonging to the race of prehistoric slaves. But her grudge against her white– faced, spiritually intense husband was sharp as vinegar. Let down: she was let down between the pair of them.

What next? Well, what followed was entirely Basil’s fault. The winter was passing: it was obvious the war was really over, that Germany was finished. The Hohenzollern had fizzled out like a very poor squib, the Hapsburg was popping feebly in obscurity, the Romanov was smudged out without a sputter. So much for imperial royalty. Henceforth democratic peace.

The Count, of course, would be shipped back now like returned goods that had no market any more. There was a world peace ahead. A week or two, and Voynich Hall would be empty.

Basil, however, could not let matters follow their simple course. He was awfully intrigued by the Count. He wanted to entertain him as a guest before he went. And Major Apsley could get anything in reason, at this moment. So he obtained permission for the poor little Count to stay a fortnight at Thoresway, before being shipped back to Austria. Earl Beveridge, whose soul was black as ink since the war, would never have allowed the little alien enemy to enter his house, had it not been for the hatred which had been aroused in him, during the last two years, by the degrading spectacle of the so–called patriots who had been howling their mongrel indecency in the public face. These mongrels had held the Press and the British public in abeyance for almost two years. Their one aim was to degrade and humiliate anything that was proud or dignified remaining in England. It was almost the worst nightmare of all, this coming to the top of a lot of public filth which was determined to suffocate the souls of all dignified men.

Hence, the Earl, who never intended to be swamped by unclean scum, whatever else happened to him, stamped his heels in the ground and stood on his own feet. When Basil said to him, would he allow the Count to have a fortnight's decent peace in Thoresway before all was finished, Lord Beveridge gave a slow consent, scandal or no scandal. Indeed, it was really to defy scandal that he took such a step. For the thought of his dead boys was bitter to him: and the thought of England fallen under the paws of smelly mongrels was bitterer still.

Lord Beveridge was at Thoresway to receive the Count, who arrived escorted by Basil. The English Earl was a big, handsome man, rather heavy, with a dark, sombre face that would have been haughty if haughtiness had not been made so ridiculous. He was a passionate man, with a passionate man's sensitiveness, generosity, and instinctive overbearing. But HIS dark passionate nature, and his violent sensitiveness had been subjected now to fifty–five years' subtle repression, condemnation, repudiation, till he had almost come to believe in his own wrongness. His little, frail wife, all love for humanity, she was the genuine article. Himself, he was labelled selfish, sensual, cruel, etc., etc. So by now he always seemed to be standing aside, in the shadow, letting himself be obliterated by the pallid rabble of the democratic hurry. That was the impression he gave of a man standing back, half–ashamed, half–haughty, semi–hidden in the dark background.

He was a little on the defensive as Basil came in with the Count.

'Ah—how do you do, Count Psanek?' he said, striding largely forward and holding out his hand. Because he was the father of Daphne the Count felt a certain tenderness for the taciturn Englishman.

'You do me too much honour, my lord, receiving me in your house,' said the small Count proudly.

The Earl looked at him slowly, without speaking: seemed to look down on him, in every sense of the words.

'We are still men, Count. We are not beasts altogether.'

'You wish to say that my countrymen are so very nearly beasts, Lord Beveridge?' smiled the Count, curling his fine nose.

Again the Earl was slow in replying.

'You have a low opinion of my manners, Count Psanek.'

'But perhaps a just appreciation of your meaning, Lord Beveridge,' smiled the Count, with the same reckless little look of contempt on his nose.

Lord Beveridge flushed dark, with all his native anger offended.

‘I am glad Count Psanek makes my own meaning clear to me,’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon a thousand times, my lord, if I give offence in doing so,’ replied the Count.

The Earl went black, and felt a fool. He turned his back on the Count. And then he turned round again, offering his cigar–case.

‘Will you smoke?’ he said. There was kindness in his tone.

‘Thank you,’ said the Count, taking a cigar.

‘I dare say,’ said Lord Beveridge, ‘that all men are beasts in some way. I am afraid I have fallen into the common habit of speaking by rote, and not what I really mean. Won’t you take a seat?’

‘It is only as a prisoner that I have learned that I am NOT truly a beast. No, I am myself. I am not a beast,’ said the Count, seating himself.

The Earl eyed him curiously.

‘Well,’ he said, smiling, ‘I suppose it is best to come to a decision about it.’

‘It is necessary, if one is to be safe from vulgarity.’

The Earl felt a twinge of accusation. With his agate–brown, hard– looking eyes he watched the black–browed little Count.

‘You are probably right,’ he said.

But he turned his face aside.

They were five people at dinner—Lady Beveridge was there as hostess.

‘Ah, Count Dionys,’ she said with a sigh, ‘do you really feel that the war is over?’

‘Oh yes,’ he replied quickly. ‘This war is over. The armies will go home. THEIR cannon will not sound any more. Never again like this.’

‘Ah, I hope so,’ she sighed.

‘I am sure,’ he said.

‘You think there’ll be no more war?’ said Daphne.

For some reason she had made herself very fine, in her newest dress of silver and black and pink–chenille, with bare shoulders, and her hair fashionably done. The Count in his shabby uniform turned to her. She was nervous, hurried. Her slim white arm was near him, with the bit of silver at the shoulder. Her skin was white like a hot–house flower. Her lips moved hurriedly.

‘Such a war as this there will never be again,’ he said.

‘What makes you so sure?’ she replied, glancing into his eyes.

‘The machine of war has got out of our control. We shall never start it again, till it has fallen to pieces. We shall be afraid.’

‘Will everybody be afraid?’ said she, looking down and pressing back her chin.

‘I think so.’

‘We will hope so,’ said Lady Beveridge.

‘Do you mind if I ask you, Count,’ said Basil, ‘what you feel about the way the war has ended? The way it has ended for YOU, I mean.’

‘You mean that Germany and Austria have lost the war? It was bound to be. We have all lost the war. All Europe.’

‘I agreee there,’ said Lord Beveridge.

‘We’ve all lost the war?’ said Daphne, turning to look at him.

There was pain on his dark, low–browed face. He suffered having the sensitive woman beside him. Her skin had a hothouse delicacy that made his head go round. Her shoulders were broad, rather thin, but the skin was white and so sensitive, so hot–house delicate. It affected him like the perfume of some white, exotic flower. And she seemed to be sending her heart towards him. It was as if she wanted to press her breast to his. From the breast she loved him, and sent out love to him. And it made him unhappy; he wanted to be quiet, and to keep his honour before these hosts.

He looked into her eyes, his own eyes dark with knowledge and pain. She, in her silence and her brief words seemed to be holding them all under her spell. She seemed to have cast a certain muteness on the table, in the midst of which she remained silently master, leaning forward to her plate, and silently mastering them all.

‘Don’t I think we’ve all lost the war?’ he replied, in answer to her question. ‘It was a war of suicide. Nobody could win it. It was suicide for all of us.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘What about America and Japan?’

‘They don’t count. They only helped US to commit suicide. They did not enter vitally.’

There was such a look of pain on his face, and such a sound of pain in his voice, that the other three closed their ears, shut off from attending. Only Daphne was making him speak. It was she who was drawing the soul out of him, trying to read the future in him as the augurs read the future in the quivering entrails of the sacrificed beast. She looked direct into his face, searching his soul.

‘You think Europe has committed suicide?’ she said.

‘Morally.’

‘Only morally?’ came her slow, bronze–like words, so fatal.

‘That is enough,’ he smiled.

‘Quite,’ she said, with a slow droop of her eyelids. Then she turned away her face. But he felt the heart strangling inside his breast. What was she doing now? What was she thinking? She filled him with uncertainty and with uncanny fear.

‘At least,’ said Basil, ‘those infernal guns are quiet.’

‘For ever,’ said Dionys.

‘I wish I could believe you, Count,’ said the Major.

The talk became more general—or more personal. Lady Beveridge asked Dionys about his wife and family. He knew nothing save that they had gone to Hungary in 1916, when his own house was burnt down. His wife might even have gone to Bulgaria with Prince Bogorik. He did not know.

‘But your children, Count!’ cried Lady Beveridge.

‘I do not know. Probably in Hungary, with their grandmother. I will go when I get back.’

‘But have you never WRITTEN?—never inquired?’

‘I could not write. I shall know soon enough—everything.’

‘You have no son?’

‘No. Two girls.’

‘Poor things!’

‘Yes.’

‘I say, isn’t it an odd thing to have a ladybird on your crest?’ asked Basil, to cheer up the conversation.

‘Why queer? Charlemagne had bees. And it is a Marienkafer—a Mary–beetle. The beetle of Our Lady. I think it is quite a heraldic insect, Major,’ smiled the Count.

‘You’re proud of it?’ said Daphne, suddenly turning to look at him again, with her slow, pregnant look.

‘I am, you know. It has such a long genealogy—our spotted beetle. Much longer than the Psaneks. I think, you know, it is a descendant of the Egyptian scarabeus, which is a very mysterious emblem. So I connect myself with the Pharaohs: just through my ladybird.’

‘You feel your ladybird has crept through so many ages,’ she said.

‘Imagine it!’ he laughed.

‘The scarab IS a piquant insect,’ said Basil.

‘Do you know Fabre?’ put in Lord Beveridge. ‘He suggests that the beetle rolling a little ball of dung before him, in a dry old field, must have suggested to the Egyptians the First Principle that set the globe rolling. And so the scarab became the symbol of the creative principle—or something like that.’

‘That the earth is a tiny ball of dry dung is good,’ said Basil.

‘Between the claws of a ladybird,’ added Daphne.

‘That is what it is, to go back to one’s origin,’ said Lady Beveridge.

‘Perhaps they meant that it was the principle of decomposition which first set the ball rolling,’ said the Count.

‘The ball would have to be THERE first,’ said Basil.

‘Certainly. But it hadn’t started to roll. Then the principle of decomposition started it.’ The Count smiled as if it were a joke.

‘I am no Egyptologist,’ said Lady Beveridge, ‘so I can’t judge.’

The Earl and Countess Beveridge left next day. Count Dionys was left with the two young people in the house. It was a beautiful Elizabethan mansion, not very large, but with those magical rooms that are all a twinkle of small–paned windows, looking out from the dark panelled interior. The interior was cosy, panelled to the ceiling, and the ceiling moulded and touched with gold. And then the great square bow of the window with its little panes intervening like magic between oneself and the world outside, the crest in stained glass crowning its colour, the broad window–seat cushioned in faded green. Dionys wandered round the house like a little ghost, through the succession of small and large twinkling sitting–rooms and lounge rooms in front, down the long, wide corridor with the wide stairhead at each end, and up the narrow stairs to the bedrooms above, and on to the roof.

It was early spring, and he loved to sit on the leaded, pale–grey roof that had its queer seats and slopes, a little pale world in itself. Then to look down over the garden and the sloping lawn to the ponds massed round with trees, and away to the elms and furrows and hedges of the shires. On the left of the house was the farmstead, with ricks and great–roofed barns and dark–red cattle. Away to the right, beyond the park, was a village among trees, and the spark of a grey church spire.

He liked to be alone, feeling his soul heavy with its own fate. He would sit for hours watching the elm trees standing in rows like giants, like warriors across the country. The Earl had told him that the Romans had brought these elms to Britain. And he seemed to see the spirit of the Romans in them still. Sitting there alone in the spring sunshine, in the solitude of the roof, he saw the glamour of this England of hedgerows and elm trees, and the labourers with slow horses slowly drilling the sod, crossing the brown furrow: and the roofs of the village, with the church steeple rising beside a big black yew tree: and the chequer of fields away to the distance.

And the charm of the old manor around him, the garden with its grey stone walls and yew hedges—broad, broad yew hedges and a peacock pausing to glitter and scream in the busy silence of an English spring, when celandines open their yellow under the hedges, and violets are in the secret, and by the broad paths of the garden polyanthus and crocuses vary the velvet and flame, and bits of yellow wallflower shake raggedly, with a wonderful triumphance, out of the cracks of the wall. There was a fold somewhere near, and he could hear the treble bleat of the growing lambs, and the deeper, contented baa–ing of the ewes.

This was Daphne’s home, where she had been born. She loved it with an ache of affection. But now it was hard to forget her dead brothers. She wandered about in the sun, with two old dogs padding after her. She talked with everybody—gardener, groom, stableman, with the farm–hands. That filled a large part of her life— straying round talking with the work–people. They were, of course, respectful to her—but not at all afraid of her. They knew she was poor, that she could not afford a car, nor anything. So they talked to her very freely: perhaps a little too freely. Yet she let it be. It was her one passion at Thoresway to hear the dependants talk and talk—about everything. The curious feeling of intimacy across a breach fascinated her. Their lives fascinated her: what they thought, what they FELT. These, what they felt. That fascinated her. There was a gamekeeper she could have loved — an impudent, ruddy–faced, laughing, ingratiating fellow; she could have loved him, if he had not been isolated beyond the breach of his birth, her culture, her consciousness.

Her CONSCIOUSNESS seemed to make a great gulf between her and the lower classes, the unconscious classes. She accepted it as her doom. She could never meet in real contact anyone but a super–conscious, finished being like herself: or like her husband. Her father had some of the unconscious blood–warmth of the lower classes. But he was like a man who is damned. And the Count, of course. The Count had something that was hot and invisible, a dark flame of life that might warm the cold white fire of her own blood. But—

They avoided each other. All three, they avoided one another. Basil, too, went off alone. Or he immersed himself in poetry. Sometimes he and the Count played billiards. Sometimes all three walked in the park. Often Basil and Daphne walked to the village, to post. But truly, they avoided one another, all three. The days slipped by.

At evening they sat together in the small west room that had books and a piano and comfortable shabby furniture of faded rose–coloured tapestry: a shabby room. Sometimes Basil read aloud: sometimes the Count played the piano. And they talked. And Daphne stitch by stitch went on with a big embroidered bedspread, which she might finish if she lived long enough. But they always went to bed early. They were nearly always avoiding one another.

Dionys had a bedroom in the east bay—a long way from the rooms of the others. He had a habit, when he was quite alone, of singing, or rather crooning, to himself the old songs of his childhood. It was only when he felt he was quite alone: when other people seemed to fade out of him, and all the world seemed to dissolve into darkness, and there was nothing but himself, his own soul, alive in the middle of his own small night, isolate for ever. Then, half unconscious, he would croon in a small, high–pitched, squeezed voice, a sort of high dream–voice, the songs of his childhood dialect. It was a curious noise: the sound of a man who is alone in his own blood: almost the sound of a man who is going to be executed.

Daphne heard the sound one night when she was going downstairs again with the corridor lantern to find a book. She was a bad sleeper, and her nights were a torture to her. She, too, like a neurotic, was nailed inside her own fretful self–consciousness. But she had a very keen ear. So she started as she heard the small, bat–like sound of the Count’s singing to himself. She stood in the midst of the wide corridor, that was wide as a room, carpeted with a faded lavender–coloured carpet, with a piece of massive dark furniture at intervals by the wall, and an oak arm– chair and sometimes a faded, reddish Oriental rug. The big horn lantern which stood at nights at the end of the corridor she held in her hand. The intense ‘peeping’ sound of the Count, like a witchcraft, made her forget everything. She could not understand a word, of course. She could not understand the noise even. After listening for a long time, she went on downstairs. When she came back again he was still, and the light was gone from under his door.

After this, it became almost an obsession to her to listen for him. She waited with fretful impatience for ten o’clock, when she could retire. She waited more fretfully still for the maid to leave her, and for her husband to come and say good–night. Basil had the room across the corridor. And then in resentful impatience she waited for the sounds of the house to become still. Then she opened her door to listen.

And far away, as if from far, far away in the unseen, like a ventriloquist sound or a bat’s uncanny peeping, came the frail, almost inaudible sound of the Count’s singing to himself before he went to bed. It WAS inaudible to anyone but herself. But she, by concentration, seemed to hear supernaturally. She had a low arm– chair by the door, and there, wrapped in a huge old black silk shawl, she sat and listened. At first she could not hear. That is, she could hear the sound. But it was only a sound. And then, gradually, gradually she began to follow the thread of it. It was like a thread which she followed out of the world: out of the world. And as she went, slowly, by degrees, far, far away, down the thin thread of his singing, she knew peace—she knew forgetfulness. She could pass beyond the world, away beyond where her soul balanced like a bird on wings, and was perfected.

So it was, in her upper spirit. But underneath was a wild, wild yearning, actually to go, actually to be given. Actually to go, actually to die the death, actually to cross the border and be gone, to be gone. To be gone from this herself, from this Daphne, to be gone from father and mother, brothers and husband, and home and land and world: to be gone. To be gone to the call from the beyond: the call. It was the Count calling. He was calling her. She was sure he was calling her. Out of herself, out of her world, he was calling her.

Two nights she sat just inside her room, by the open door, and listened. Then when he finished she went to sleep, a queer, light, bewitched sleep. In the day she was bewitched. She felt strange and light, as if pressure had been removed from around her. Some pressure had been clamped round her all her life. She had never realized it till now; now it was removed, and her feet felt so light, and her breathing delicate and exquisite. There had always been a pressure against her breathing. Now she breathed delicate and exquisite, so that it was a delight to breathe. Life came in exquisite breaths, quickly, as if it delighted to come to her.

The third night he was silent—though she waited and waited till the small hours of the morning. He was silent, he did not sing. And then she knew the terror and blackness of the feeling that he might never sing any more. She waited like one doomed, throughout the day. And when the night came she trembled. It was her greatest nervous terror, lest her spell should be broken, and she should be thrown back to what she was before.

Night came, and the kind of swoon upon her. Yes, and the call from the night. The call! She rose helplessly and hurried down the corridor. The light was under his door. She sat down in the big oak arm–chair that stood near his door, and huddled herself tight in her black shawl. The corridor was dim with the big, star– studded, yellow lantern–light. Away down she could see the lamp– light in her doorway; she had left her door ajar.

But she saw nothing. Only she wrapped herself close in the black shawl, and listened to the sound from the room. It called. Oh, it called her! Why could she not go? Why could she not cross through the closed door.

Then the noise ceased. And then the light went out, under the door of his room. Must she go back? Must she go back? Oh, impossible. As impossible as that the moon should go back on her tracks, once she has risen. Daphne sat on, wrapped in her black shawl. If it must be so, she would sit on through eternity. Return she never could.

And then began the most terrible song of all. It began with a rather dreary, slow, horrible sound, like death. And then suddenly came a real call—fluty, and a kind of whistling and a strange whirr at the changes, most imperative, and utterly inhuman. Daphne rose to her feet. And at the same moment up rose the whistling throb of a summons out of the death moan.

Daphne tapped low and rapidly at the door. ‘Count! Count!’ she whispered. The sound inside ceased. The door suddenly opened. The pale, obscure figure of Dionys.

‘Lady Daphne!’ he said in astonishment, automatically standing aside.

‘You called,’ she murmured rapidly, and she passed intent into his room.

‘No, I did not call,’ he said gently, his hand on the door still.

‘Shut the door,’ she said abruptly.

He did as he was bid. The room was in complete darkness. There was no moon outside. She could not see him.

‘Where can I sit down?’ she said abruptly.

‘I will take you to the couch,’ he said, putting out his hand and touching her in the dark. She shuddered.

She found the couch and sat down. It was quite dark.

‘What are you singing?’ she said rapidly.

‘I am so sorry. I did not think anyone could hear.’

‘What was it you were singing?’

‘A song of my country.’

‘Had it any words?’

‘Yes, it is a woman who was a swan, and who loved a hunter by the marsh. So she became a woman and married him and had three children. Then in the night one night the king of the swans called to her to come back, or else he would die. So slowly she turned into a swan again, and slowly she opened her wide, wide wings, and left her husband and her children.’

There was silence in the dark room. The Count had been really startled, startled out of his mood of the song into the day–mood of human convention. He was distressed and embarrassed by Daphne’s presence in his dark room. She, however, sat on and did not make a sound. He, too, sat down in a chair by the window. It was everywhere dark. A wind was blowing in gusts outside. He could see nothing inside his room: only the faint, faint strip of light under the door. But he could feel her presence in the darkness. It was uncanny, to feel her near in the dark, and not to see any sign of her, nor to hear any sound.

She had been wounded in her bewitched state by the contact with the every–day human being in him. But now she began to relapse into her spell, as she sat there in the dark. And he, too, in the silence, felt the world sinking away from him once more, leaving him once more alone on a darkened earth, with nothing between him and the infinite dark space. Except now her presence. Darkness answering to darkness, and deep answering to deep. An answer, near to him, and invisible.

But he did not know what to do. He sat still and silent as she was still and silent. The darkness inside the room seemed alive like blood. He had no power to move. The distance between them seemed absolute.

Then suddenly, without knowing, he went across in the dark, feeling for the end of the couch. And he sat beside her on the couch. But he did not touch her. Neither did she move. The darkness flowed about them thick like blood, and time seemed dissolved in it. They sat with the small, invisible distance between them, motionless, speechless, thoughtless.

Then suddenly he felt her finger–tips touch his arm, and a flame went over him that left him no more a man. He was something seated in flame, in flame unconscious, seated erect, like an Egyptian King–god in the statues. Her finger–tips slid down him, and she herself slid down in a strange, silent rush, and he felt her face against his closed feet and ankles, her hands pressing his ankles. He felt her brow and hair against his ankles, her face against his feet, and there she clung in the dark, as if in space below him. He still sat erect and motionless. Then he bent forward and put his hand on her hair.

‘Do you come to me?’ he murmured. ‘Do you come to me?’

The flame that enveloped him seemed to sway him silently.

‘Do you really come to me?’ he repeated. ‘But we have nowhere to go.’

He felt his bare feet wet with her tears. Two things were struggling in him, the sense of eternal solitude, like space, and the rush of dark flame that would throw him out of his solitude towards her.

He was thinking too. He was thinking of the future. He had no future in the world: of that he was conscious. He had no future in this life. Even if he lived on, it would only be a kind of enduring. But he felt that in the after–life the inheritance was his. He felt the after–life belonged to him.

Future in the world he could not give her. Life in the world he had not to offer her. Better go on alone. Surely better go on alone.

But then the tears on his feet: and her face that would face him as he left her! No, no. The next life was his. He was master of the after–life. Why fear for this life? Why not take the soul she offered him? Now and for ever, for the life that would come when they both were dead. Take her into the underworld. Take her into the dark Hades with him, like Francesca and Paolo. And in hell hold her fast, queen of the underworld, himself master of the underworld. Master of the life to come. Father of the soul that would come after.

‘Listen,’ he said to her softly. ‘Now you are mine. In the dark you are mine. And when you die you are mine. But in the day you are not mine, because I have no power in the day. In the night, in the dark, and in death, you are mine. And that is for ever. No matter if I must leave you. I shall come again from time to time. In the dark you are mine. But in the day I cannot claim you. I have no power in the day, and no place. So remember. When the darkness comes, I shall always be in the darkness of you. And as long as I live, from time to time I shall come to find you, when I am able to, when I am not a prisoner. But I shall have to go away soon. So don’t forget—you are the night wife of the ladybird, while you live and even when you die.’

Later, when he took her back to her room, he saw the door still ajar.

‘You shouldn’t leave a light in your room,’ he murmured.

In the morning there was a curious remote look about him. He was quieter than ever, and seemed very far away. Daphne slept late. She had a strange feeling as if she had slipped off all her cares. She did not care, she did not grieve, she did not fret any more. All that had left her. She felt she could sleep, sleep, sleep—for ever. Her face, too, was very still, with a delicate look of virginity that she had never had before. She had always been Aphrodite, the self–conscious one. And her eyes, the green–blue, had been like slow, living jewels, resistant. Now they had unfolded from the hard flower–bud, and had the wonder, and the stillness of a quiet night.

Basil noticed it at once.

‘You’re different, Daphne,’ he said. ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘I wasn’t thinking,’ she said, looking at him with candour.

‘What were you doing then?’

‘What does one do when one doesn’t think? Don’t make me puzzle it out, Basil.’

‘Not a bit of it, if you don’t want to.’

But he was puzzled by her. The sting of his ecstatic love for her seemed to have left him. Yet he did not know what else to do but to make love to her. She went very pale. She submitted to him, bowing her head because she was his wife. But she looked at him with fear, with sorrow, with real suffering. He could feel the heaving of her breast, and knew she was weeping. But there were no tears on her face, she was only death pale. Her eyes were shut.

‘Are you in pain?’ he asked her.

‘No! no!’ She opened her eyes, afraid lest she had disturbed him. She did not want to disturb him.

He was puzzled. His own ecstatic, deadly love for her had received a check. He was out of the reckoning.

He watched her when she was with the Count. Then she seemed so meek—so maidenly—so different from what he had known of her. She was so still, like a virgin girl. And it was this quiet, intact quality of Virginity in her which puzzled him most, puzzled his emotions and his ideas. He became suddenly ashamed to make love to her. And because he was ashamed, he said to her as he stood in her room that night:

‘Daphne, are you in love with the Count?’

He was standing by the dressing–table, uneasy. She was seated in a low chair by the tiny dying wood fire. She looked up at him with wide, slow eyes. Without a word, with wide, soft, dilated eyes she watched him. What was it that made him feel all confused? He turned his face aside, away from her wide, soft eyes.

‘Pardon me, dear. I didn’t intend to ask such a question. Don’t take any notice of it,’ he said. And he strode away and picked up a book. She lowered her head and gazed abstractedly into the fire, without a sound. Then he looked at her again, at her bright hair that the maid had plaited for the night. Her plait hung down over her soft pinkish wrap.

His heart softened to her as he saw her sitting there. She seemed like his sister. The excitement of desire had left him, and now he seemed to see clear and feel true for the first time in his life. She was like a dear, dear sister to him. He felt that she was his blood–sister, nearer to him than he had imagined any woman could be. So near—so dear—and all the sex and the desire gone. He didn't want it—he hadn't wanted it. This new pure feeling was so much more wonderful.

He went to her side.

'Forgive me, darling,' he said, 'for having questioned you.'

She looked up at him with the wide eyes, without a word. His face was good and beautiful. Tears came to her eyes.

'You have the right to question me,' she said sadly.

'No,' he said. 'No, darling. I have no right to question you. Daphne! Daphne, darling! It shall be as YOU wish, between us. Shall it? Shall it be as you wish?'

'You are the husband, Basil,' she said sadly.

'Yes, darling. But'—he went on his knees beside her—'perhaps, darling, something has changed in us. I feel as if I ought never to touch you again—as if I never WANTED to touch you—in that way. I feel it was wrong, darling. Tell me what you think.'

'Basil, don't be angry with me.'

'It isn't anger; it's pure love, darling—it is.'

'Let us not come any nearer to one another than this, Basil— physically—shall we?' she said. 'And don't be angry with me, will you?'

'Why,' he said. 'I think myself the sexual part has been a mistake. I had rather love you—as I love now. I KNOW that this is true love. The other was always a bit whipped up. I KNOW I love you now, darling: now I'm free from that other. But what if it comes upon me, that other, Daphne?'

'I am always your wife,' she said quietly. 'I am always your wife. I want always to obey you, Basil: what you wish.'

'Give me your hand, dear.'

She gave him her hand. But the look in her eyes at the same time warned him and frightened him. He kissed her hand and left her.

It was to the Count she belonged. This had decided itself in her down to the depths of her soul. If she could not marry him and be his wife in the world, it had nevertheless happened to her for ever. She could no more question it. Question had gone out of her.

Strange how different she had become—a strange new quiescence. The last days were slipping past. He would be going away—Dionys: he with the still remote face, the man she belonged to in the dark and in the light, for ever. He would be going away. He said it must be so. And she acquiesced. The grief was deep, deep inside her. He must go away. Their lives could not be one life, in this world's day. Even in her anguish she knew it was so. She knew he was right. He was for her infallible. He spoke the deepest soul in her.

She never SAW him as a lover. When she saw him, he was the little officer, a prisoner, quiet, claiming nothing in all the world. And when she went to him as his lover, his wife, it was always dark. She only knew his voice and his contact in darkness. ‘My wife in darkness,’ he said to her. And in this too she believed him. She would not have contradicted him, no, not for anything on earth: lest contradicting him she should lose the dark treasures of stillness and bliss which she kept in her breast even when her heart was wrung with the agony of knowing he must go.

No, she had found this wonderful thing after she had heard him singing: she had suddenly collapsed away from her old self into this darkness, this peace, this quiescence that was like a full dark river flowing eternally in her soul. She had gone to sleep from the nuit blanche of her days. And Basil, wonderful, had changed almost at once. She feared him, lest he might change back again. She would always have him to fear. But deep inside her she only feared for this love of hers for the Count: this dark, everlasting love that was like a full river flowing for ever inside her. Ah, let that not be broken.

She was so still inside her. She could sit so still, and feel the day slowly, richly changing to night. And she wanted nothing, she was short of nothing. If only Dionys need not go away! If only he need not go away!

But he said to her, the last morning:

‘Don’t forget me. Always remember me. I leave my soul in your hands and your womb. Nothing can ever separate us, unless we betray one another. If you have to give yourself to your husband, do so, and obey him. If you are true to me, innerly, innerly true, he will not hurt us. He is generous, be generous to him. And never fail to believe in me. Because even on the other side of death I shall be watching for you. I shall be king in Hades when I am dead. And you will be at my side. You will never leave me any more, in the after–death. So don’t be afraid in life. Don’t be afraid. If you have to cry tears, cry them. But in your heart of hearts know that I shall come again, and that I have taken you for ever. And so, in your heart of hearts be still, be still, since you are the wife of the ladybird.’ He laughed as he left her, with his own beautiful, fearless laugh. But they were strange eyes that looked after him.

He went in the car with Basil back to Voynich Hall.

‘I believe Daphne will miss you,’ said Basil.

The Count did not reply for some moments.

‘Well, if she does,’ he said, ‘there will be no bitterness in it.’

‘Are you sure?’ smiled Basil.

‘Why—if we are sure of anything,’ smiled the Count.

‘She’s changed, isn’t she?’

‘Is she?’

‘Yes, she’s quite changed since you came, Count.’

‘She does not seem to me so very different from the girl of seventeen whom I knew.’

‘No—perhaps not. I didn’t know her then. But she’s very different from the wife I have known.’

‘A regrettable difference?’

‘Well—no, not as far as she goes. She is much quieter inside herself. You know, Count, something of me died in the war. I feel it will take me an eternity to sit and think about it all.’

‘I hope you may think it out to your satisfaction, Major.’

‘Yes, I hope so too. But that is how it has left me—feeling as if I needed eternity now to brood about it all, you know. Without the need to act—or even to love, really. I suppose love is action.’

‘Intense action,’ said the Count.

‘Quite so. I know really how I feel. I only ask of life to spare me from further effort of action of any sort—even love. And then to fulfil myself, brooding through eternity. Of course, I don’t mind WORK, mechanical action. That in itself is a form of inaction.’

‘A man can only be happy following his own inmost need,’ said the Count.

‘Exactly!’ said Basil. ‘I will lay down the law for nobody, not even for myself. And live my day—’

‘Then you will be happy in your own way. I find it so difficult to keep from laying the law down for myself,’ said the Count. ‘Only the thought of death and the after life saves me from doing it any more.’

‘As the thought of eternity helps me,’ said Basil. ‘I suppose it amounts to the same thing.’

THE END