

Concluding (1948)

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Henry Green

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Mr Rock rose with a groan. Crossing to the open bedroom window he shone his torch out on fog. His white head was gray, and white the reflected torch light on the thick spectacles he wore. He shone it up and down. It will be a fine day, a fine day in the end, he decided.

He looked down. He clicked his light out. He found there was just enough filtering through the mist which hung eighteen foot up and which did not descend to the ground, to make out Ted, his goose about already, a dirty pallor, almost the same colour as Alice, the Persian cat, that kept herself dry where every blade of grass bore its dark, mist laden string of water. Old and deaf, half blind, Mr Rock said about himself, the air raw in his throat. Nevertheless he saw plain how Ted was not ringed in by fog. For the goose posed staring, head to one side, with a single eye, straight past the house, up into the fog bank which had made all daylight deaf beneath, and beyond which, at some clear height, Mr Rock knew now there must be a flight of birds fast winging, Ted knows where, he thought.

The old and famous man groaned again, shut the window. He began to dress. He put working clothes over the yellow woollen nightshirt. The bedroom smelled stale, packed with books not one of which he had read in years. He groaned a third time. Early morning comes hard on a man my age, he told himself for comfort, comes hard. How hard? Oh, heavy.

When he put the kettle on downstairs he did not lay out his granddaughter Elizabeth a cup because Sebastian Birt might be with her still, in the other bedroom across the landing.

Five minutes more saw him off to fetch Daisy's swill. It was lighter already, but with pockets of mist that reached to the ground. Over his shoulders he wore a yoke. The hanging buckets clanked. He wondered if he should have brought his torch, but it seemed the sun must come through any minute.

He went slowly and was overtaken by George Adams, the woodman, going up for orders.

They did not speak at once, went on together down the ride in silence, between these still invisible tops of trees beneath which loomed colourlessly one mass of flowering rhododendron after another and then the azaleas, which, without scent, pale in the fresh of early morning, had not yet begun, they would later, to sway their sweetness forwards, back, in silent church bells to the morning.

The man spoke. "It'll turn out a fine day yet," he said.

"Yes, Adams," said the other.

They walked on in silence.

"How's your wife, Adams?" Mr Rock then asked.

"Why I lost her, sir, the winter just gone."

Mr Rock said not a word to this at first. "I'm getting an old dodderer," he ventured in the end, sorry for himself at the slip.

"You're a ripe age now," George Adams agreed.

He never offered to help carry those buckets, the man reminded himself, because whatever the position Mr Rock had once held, this long-toothed gentleman did his own work now, which was to his credit.

"Yet I feel not a day older," Mr Rock boasted.

"It's my legs," the sage added, when he had no reply.

There was another silence. It was too early yet for the birds, or too thick above, because these were still.

"Nothing anyone can do for the bends," Adams said at last, out of an empty head.

At this instant, like a woman letting down her mass of hair from a white towel in which she had bound it, the sun came through for a moment, and lit the azaleas on either side before fading and redescending, blanketed these off again; as it might be white curtains, drawn by someone out of sight over a palace bedroom window, to shut behind them a blonde princess undressing.

"It's not fair on one to grow old," Mr Rock said.

Adams made no comment.

"And how's Miss Elizabeth?" the man asked, after a time.

"Better, thank you," Mr Rock replied.

"She overtaxed her head where you put her out to work?" Adams hazarded.

"Don't they all?" the old man countered. He adored his granddaughter and, if it had not been for Birt, could have talked readily about her. "Same as those children up at the house." She was thirty-five and they between twelve and seventeen. "Breakdown from overstrain," he ended, cursing Sebastian Birt for his mind, because, although she was not working now, she would never get well while she could meet that man, he knew.

"You'll find her a blessing to have at home. Somebody by you," Adams said in self pity.

A blessing and a curse, the old man thought, then repented this last so violently that he could not be sure he had not spoken out loud.

"Why, that's strange," Adams said. "Did you hear summat?"

The sage looked blank at his companion. But it was too dark with sudden mist to read the expression on his face.

"I heard a call," Adams volunteered.

"I'm a mite deaf," Mr Rock answered.

"And I caught the echo," Adams insisted.

Which reminded Mr Rock of the argument he had had with Sebastian on this very point, not long since. "It would be from the house, then," he said in a determined voice, referring to the great sickle-shaped sweep of mansion towards which they moved like slow, suiciding moles in the half light.

"It's the trees throw back the sound, sir."

"Yet if you face about, Adams, call away from the place down this ride behind, you won't get a whisper in return."

"I never heard that," the woodman said, politely disbelieving.

They walked on. Then the old man took the buckets off his yoke.

"I'll have an easy now," he announced, laying the heavy object by, to one side. He put the buckets bottom upwards, and they sat on these.

"You don't want to rush it when they're full," Adams said.

I do this for Elizabeth, Mr Rock told himself, but out loud he exclaimed, "I hope I have more sense than you." His glasses were misted, fog still hung about, but the sun coming through once more, made it for a second so that he might have been inside a pearl strung next the skin of his beloved.

"It's what them younger ones haven't got, sense," Adams said. Elizabeth, Eliza, Liz, Mr Rock thought.

"And what age would you be, sir?"

"Seventy-six come March."

"That's a tidy sum to be still carrying swill around," the man complimented him, and noticed it a second time.

"What would that be, again?" he asked.

Mr Rock did not answer.

"I thought I caught what I heard before, twice over," Adams insisted.

"Was there an echo?" Mr Rock asked, his mind adrift.

"Not that I reckon."

"They must have faced away from the house, then," the old man said, and let his love for Elizabeth and fear that he might lose the cottage, sap what ability was left him. Then he tried not to start on the subject, but could not help it.

"Adams," he began, "how d'you hold your house?"

The woodman stopped listening to the woods or to Mr Rock. He took in what was being said, but he had heard it so often these last ten years that he barely paid attention. From habit he answered, "The same as the rest. It goes along with the job to the estate."

"They'd like to have me away," the old man said.

"Well, I heard tell that you were goin' on your own, sir?"

"How's that?" Mr Rock demanded, turning his eyes full on Adams, with such a glare of alarm that the man was startled.

"Why it might be just talk up at the house, like."

"What was?"

"Some up at the house has made out there was likely an honour for you," the woodman offered.

"Yes, and I don't doubt," Mr Rock exclaimed, with violence. "The paltry intriguers," he said. "But they didn't tell you, did they, about the other?"

"I don't follow, Mr Rock, sir."

"It's the Academy of Sciences," the sage elaborated, boasting but frantic. "There's an election yesterday or today. If they elect me, I can spend the rest of my time in their Institute, or scientific poor law sanatorium, but I can't take my girl. Otherwise I may have some money, thank you. And then, of course, I can refuse. Would you hesitate in my place?"

"How's that, sir?"

"What's to happen to Miss Elizabeth?" he asked, talking as if to a servant in the days of his youth.

"She's sick with her mind, Adams. Anyone can tell it."

"So you'll have the money, sir?"

"What do you think?"

"And good luck to you I say, Mr Rock."

"They'd like to have me out, this lot would, Adams," he said, calmer now. "It wasn't Mr Birt saying about me, was it?"

"Why never in the world," the woodman answered. "Likely enough one of the girls only caught the word Miss Baker or Miss Edge let drop."

"Those two won't be sorry when my time comes," Mr Rock announced. "But I'll tell you. So long as she remains single I'll see they let her keep on at my cottage, the State I mean. I've some friends still in high places haven't forgotten the services I rendered. Why, when the State took over from the owner, and founded this Institute to train State Servants, it was even in the Directive that I was to stay in my little place."

"That's right, so you've often said," Adams hastily agreed.

"Well then," Mr Rock muttered, and fell silent.

"There's gratitude," he added after a moment, "Throw him out in the street."

"That's the way things are," Adams agreed, glad to let the matter drop.

"But are you safe, man?" Mr Rock demanded.

"Houses are that short there's no-one safe," Adams replied. Mr Rock was silent, for an entirely fresh idea had struck him. ~~This woodman was a widower, living alone, and his was a five-roomed cottage.~~ This had never occurred to Mr Rock before. Perhaps because he never could remember Mrs Adams was dead. And as long as Elizabeth was alive he would not let her be turned out, not if he had to hang for it.

Then the cry came a third time, much clearer, so that even Mr Rock heard, and the double echo.

"Ma-ree," a girl's voice shrilled, then a moment later the house volleyed back "Ma-ree, Ma-ree," but in so far deeper a note that it might have been a man calling.

"There's one been out on the tiles," George Adams remarked to make a jest, because he was relieved to hear just a girl hollering. But the sage made no comment. He had been struck by a second notion. What he asked himself now was, could Miss Edge and Miss Baker, in order to get him out of the house, have set Birt onto Elizabeth, be in league with the man to break a poor old fellow down by simply driving his sad girl out of her wits? To have her straitjacketed even, muffled in a padded room?

Up at the great house Miss Edge switched on lights in the sanctum to which she had risen in the State Service, hand in hand with Miss Baker. It did not surprise her to find this lady not yet down.

Edge was short and thin. Baker, who hardly cared for early rising, fat and short.

Both, at this time, were also on separate Commissions in London, sitting Wednesdays each week which necessitated a start that day very much in advance of the usual hour. On such mornings the breakfast was taken in this seventeenth-century, grey-panelled room, under a chandelier, on furniture which included two great desks set side by side, and equal to the authority these two whiteheaded women shared.

The panelling was remarkable in that it boasted a dado designed to continue the black and white tiled floor in perspective, as though to lower the ceiling. But Miss Edge had found marble tiles too cold to her toes, had had the stone covered in parquet blocks, on which were spread State imitation Chinese Kidderminster rugs. As a result, this receding vista of white and black lozenges set from the rugs to four feet up the walls, in precise and radiating perspective, seemed altogether out of place next British dragons in green and yellow; while the gay panelling above, shallow carved, was genuine, the work of a master, giving Cupid over and over in a thousand poses, a shock, a sad surprise in such a room.

In spite of summer and that it was dawn, there was already a log fire alight as Edge moved across to draw one pair of curtains, merely to look at the weather, or to lower a window perhaps, she did not know, but the room influenced her to act on graceful impulse. She took hold on velvet, which had red lilies over a deeper red, and paused, as she gently parted the twin halves, to admire her hand's whiteness against the heavy pile. Delicately, then, she proceeded to reveal window panes, because the shutters had not been used the night before, to disclose glass frosted to flat arches by condensation, so that the Sanctum was reflected all dark sapphire blue from electric light at her back because it was not yet morning. She could even see, round her head's inky shade, no other than a swarm of aquamarine drops which, pictured on the dark sapphire panes, were each drop of the chandelier that she had lit with the lamps switched on in entering.

She also caught a glimpse of matter whisk across behind, then dart back to hide. She turned. He took her breath, or she might have screamed. And it was, as she had feared, a horrid bat.

She made one dive for the wicker basket and put that on her.

The anonymous letter she had torn into little pieces the night before, now lay like flakes of frost on her white head.

She crouched down in case this new thing could nicker up her skirts. And Miss Baker entered.

"My dear," Baker said, cutting the lamps off at the switch, going across to the window which she opened. A light came through, so grey it was doomed, together with a wisp of mist. The bat flew outside at once. Whereupon Miss Baker turned lamps on again. Edge rose, delicately took off the basket.

"If we could as easily rid ourselves of Rock," she said. Over one eyebrow, caught in a mesh of hair, was a torn piece of paper with, printed on it, the word "FURNICATES".

"You have something on your head," Baker calmly told her. Without a word Edge removed it, reread, and let the word drop from her fingers to spiral to destruction on the flames.

"What's for breakfast?" Baker asked. Edge looked at a wristwatch. "They have five minutes," she said, referring to the ten girl students whose turn it was to do orderly duties, that is to wait on the two Principals. Then she slightly yawned. She began, "Each Wednesday that you and I go up to Town," she said, "the weather we have here, Baker, is exquisite, truly exquisite. There may be black frost outside, just now, this minute, but we shall be cheated, dear. The sun will shine."

"I dread Wednesdays for that reason," Baker untruthfully agreed.

"And the day of the Dance on top of all," Edge mused aloud.

"Oh well," the other said.

"So much still to be done," Edge insisted.

"Least said soonest mended," Baker gave a hint. She moved over to warm her fingers at the blaze.

"If the whole routine is not upset already," Miss Edge complained, fidgetting with tableware. "The girls we even have to go hungry up to our labours in London because they are going to Dance." There was no reply.

"And such a day of it altogether, with the tamasha this evening," Edge continued. "Particularly now when at any minute we ought to hear about that dreadful Rock's election."

"Well Edge," Miss Baker objected. "I warned you, you know, last night. Didn't I? Don't lay too much store. It may not eventuate."

"I cannot believe Providence will not provide the key after all that you and I have done," Edge argued. "You know what this means. Why, I have literally set my heart on it. And such a happy way out, dear. To go where he will be properly looked after, and we shan't have to see that granddaughter trail herself around."

"They won't take her, Edge," Miss Baker said. "Whatever happens."

Before Edge could answer, the door was opened by a tall girl with long golden hair, and who had been in tears. She was followed by another student bearing breakfast dishes and the toast.

"Why, Marion, where's Mary?" Edge broke off, for Mary had been so punctual in her attentions that these two ladies had let her wait on them out of turn, in fact almost without a break, so that she was readily missed.

"She's to go to Matron, ma'am."

"What's the matter with the child?"

"It's nothing, ma'am, I think."

"Will you tell Miss Birks from me I shall want to hear when I get back. We cannot have Mary away, can we?"

"What's for breakfast," Baker said again, getting with difficulty off a low footstool over by the fire.

"You have your especial favourite this morning," Miss Edge told her, after she had lifted the silver cover off a dish. "Kedgerie, my dear."

"And scrambled eggs to follow if you will just touch the bell, ma'am," the girl who had been crying

said, as, with her companion, she left the room, and the door gently, gently closed.

"Well, if it is scrambled I trust the bacon's crisp," Baker hoped, and spooned her kedgeree onto plate. Miss Edge, however, did not seem able to settle down. She went over to the curtains, shaping, though to open these once more. But her dread of bats returned, so, lest there should be another nest within the heavy pelmet, she barely disturbed those folds with a forefinger, but peeped at the day as by stealth.

"We are going to have such a wonderful morning," she announced.

"Come and take breakfast, Edge," Miss Baker said.

"I told you it would be, just the one day in the week we must go to Town. Oh, how real aggravating," Edge went on. "Baker, I wonder if you would mind? But it does seem rather stuffy here now they've lit our fire. Could I trouble you to help with this window?"

While Baker came to lend a hand without a word, Miss Edge put long fingers up to her hair, as if ward off another fluttering animal about to be let loose. However the two ladies soon had the window open, and Baker went back to her place at table. But Miss Edge could not at once leave the scene spread out afresh. Because, with the coming of light, the mist was rolling back, even below her Terrace, all the way to her ring of beechwoods planted in line with the crescent of her House, although, off to the left, where beech trees and azaleas came down over water, her Lake still held its still fog folded in a shroud.

"I love this Great Place," she announced.

"You have your breakfast or you'll regret it, Edge."

But Miss Edge would not budge. She was moved. Then she thought she heard something.

"What was that?" she asked. Baker plucked a fishbone from her mouth.

"I thought someone called," Miss Edge explained.

"Shall I ring for our eggs now?" Baker wanted to be told.

"Just as you please," Edge murmured. They did not command sufficient labour to mow the lawn which, in the dew, over long grass, all down the three descending Terraces, had strings of brilliant garlanded now between the blades and which flashed prism colours at her from the sun, against background of mist. "I love it," she repeated.

Fresh morning air flowed gently, coolly down from the window. She was about to move away, out of danger, when she was halted.

"There," she exclaimed. "Did you not hear this time?"

"I didn't," Baker said.

"I wonder," Edge murmured, hesitating. But Miss Baker cut her short. She insisted that her colleague must take breakfast, in view of the long day they both had before them. And at last Edge sat down remarking that she would wait for her dish of egg.

"As I lay in bed last night," she went on, "I was going over the whole Rock imbroglio in my mind. You know, Baker, we are altogether crippled here without a proper furnaceman, while at the same time you and I are agreed that we shall never find a man before we can offer a cottage. And that means none other than this curious creature Rock."

There was a knock. A nervous Marion came in with scrambled eggs. Now that Edge was away on her pet topic she did not think to ask after Mary a second time, although she did break off so as not to speak of Institute affairs before one of the students. The moment the door was closed again, however, Miss Edge continued, still on the perennial subject, "In the summer, when he no longer had his furnaces, the man could cut some of the grass. We might even get a few of the girls to try their hands at making up hay in their free hours to help the farms. In any case he could assist generally about the

place, and, if we chose well, I do not doubt we could get some real assistance out of his wife, for the man must be well married. And that house of Rock's was built by the life tenant," which was their way of referring to the private owner of this estate, from whom the State had lifted everything.

"Was actually built to that very purpose. It is a worker's cottage, Baker."

"After you brought this up the other day I had a look at our original Directive," Baker said deliberately putting some egg on a plate which she laid in front of Miss Edge. "There," she said, "No eat that up. And it lays down in black and white how, while Mr Rock's still living, he's to enjoy the house which the life tenant put him into. The State recognises a right in view of the past services."

"Ah yes," Edge answered, toying with a fork. "But yesterday I fetched through that Directive for myself, and there is precisely nothing in it about the granddaughter."

"Elizabeth Rock? She's in the Service," Baker objected. "She's on sick leave after a breakdown through overwork. You can't mean that a man's own granddaughter mustn't come home when she's ill." Edge sipped at her tea.

"It's Sebastian Birt," she said, in what was now a dangerous mood, over the edge of a cup, "the precious economics tutor. What doubtless goes on between those two can be a menace, dear, to our girls."

"Yes," Baker said, "that's as may be. But we're back to where we started ten years ago when we first came, Edge. The moment we're not allowed to choose our own staff, as under the present system we never can, we're in a dilemma over men like Mr Birt."

"But are you content? After all, there are ways and means?"

"Edge," Baker replied, "you are simply not to allow this to serve as a pretext to eat absolutely nothing when we have a long day before us. Do take your food now. The car will be round in half an hour. The last time we discussed the matter, and you went into methods to get rid of Sebastian, you had to agree with me that it would be difficult, while I considered it might be downright dangerous. Now you bring the whole thing back to the granddaughter. If you want to know what I think, then I tell you. First, if we do get rid of him they'll send us someone who may be worse and, second, I have a feeling we could burn our fingers over Master Birt."

"But it does so aggravate one, Baker; there is the cottage sitting up begging at me and I have set my heart on it."

"Well, Mr Rock won't live for ever, will he?" Baker asked, while she took a great bite off her toast heaped with marmalade and butter.

"I want action," Edge demanded.

"I don't know how you're going to get it, then," Miss Baker said. "And there's this about Sebastian. There's never come even a hint of trouble, the five years he's been here, between him and one of our girls."

"I am eating my heart out for that cottage, Baker."

"And all the while your stomach's crying aloud for sustenance. Look. I shall see Pensilby of the Secretariat of New Buildings at my Commission today, and I'll ask him if his Department would support a licence for an entirely new cottage."

"But new building does not come under that Ministry," Edge elegantly wailed.

Miss Baker then explained the acute approach to the official which had suggested itself.

"I see," Edge exclaimed. "My dear, you are splendid," she said, which was praise indeed. But she was not the sort to let anyone rest for any length of time on such a note. She had been looking at the other curtains, and now she rose from her place to walk daintily across. She paused an instant, the courage in both hands, she swept these back as dramatically as the scene disclosed shone on her nose.



smiling eyes. Because, except for what still hung over the water, the mist was evaporating fast, the first beech trees away to the right were quite freed, her Park itself was brilliantly clear, the sun up, lovely day had opened and, as she watched, a cloud of starlings rose from the nearest of her Wood they ascended in a spiral up into blue sky; a thousand dots revolving on a wave, the shape of a vast black seashell pointed to the morning; and she was about to exclaim in delight when, throughout the dormitories upstairs, with a sound of bees in this distant Sanctum, buzzers called her girls to rise: that two hundred and eighty nine turned over to that sound, stretched and yawned, opened blue eyes on their white sheets to this new day which would stretch on, clinging to its light, until at length, when night should fall at last, would be time for the violins and the dance.

But Edge had caught sight of two specks. She looked again. Two men had come out from under her Trees. One was carrying a yoke with buckets, so she knew him. She cried out, in shocked vexation "Rock flaunts himself."

"What?" Baker demanded, jolted by the tone used into looking sharply from her plate.

"Why cannot the man take the back way?" Edge asked in a calmer voice. "Must he trail across our beautiful front, even with his swill?"

"He's rather a favourite outside this room, you know," Miss Baker said, to moderate her colleague.

"Tomorrow I shall speak about it."

"Well, I shouldn't give a hint in the kitchen, Edge."

"Stumbling over our grass," Edge protested, when there was a knock. "Come in," she invited triumphantly suddenly. The girl Marion entered. She stood just inside the door.

"Ma'am," she said, and swallowed.

"Yes, Marion?"

"Ma'am," she said, once more swallowing.

"Well?"

"It's Mary and Merode," and the child brought out everything, which was little enough, in a rush.

"They're not there, and the beds not slept in."

Half an hour later, punctual to the minute, Baker left with Edge in the car for Town. They had a number of reasons why they should carry on as though nothing had occurred. What they had decided was, that the police must be casually informed, yet be instructed, at the same time, not to make a search.

Meanwhile Miss Marchbanks could question other girls in the dormitory.

There was no point in losing one's head. The Dance must go on of course.

Mary was such a steady girl, in fact they would not even consider it (although Merode had no parents), Edge had said speaking for Miss Baker, and that it was all a mistake, as they would find when, after their hard day, they themselves returned. In any case, the two girls must be together, which made for safety. Baker had not been so sure.

But, as Edge pointed out, if they were to draw attention by staying down here to miss the Wednesday Commissions, they would look, when everything was cleared up by luncheon, as it would surely be, like nothing so much as old fools, or worse, yes, like a couple of old fools.

So they went. And two thirds of the students knew nothing whatever, at first, about the disappearance of these children.

Mr Rock left his yoke. When he came in alone by the outside kitchen door, he could just see Maggie Blain seated, in charge, at her kitchen table and beyond her, barely a part of one of the cooks. This was by reason of a great shaft of early sunlight which, as it entered one of the windows, shone so low

already that it bisected the kitchen, to show him air on the rise in its dust, like soda-water through transparent milk. It hid the line of girls beyond, fetching their own breakfasts at the other counter. They were no more to him than light blue shadows, and their low voices, to his deafness, just a female murmuring, a susurration of feathers.

"The swill man," he called in a high cracked voice, bringing out the joke he had plied for ten years, anxious about his breakfast, because that depended upon Mrs Blain's present health and temper.

He felt it would be all right because she said, "Marion, a cup of tea for Mr Rock."

The girl and the old man came together over this, in the megaphone of light. When he was seated she whispered at him, "You didn't catch sight of Mary and Merode?"

He could not hear.

"You'll have to speak up, my dear," he said, "if you want me to understand."

"As you came along?" she said louder, at a loss.

"There'll be time and to spare for secrets when the music's playin'," Maggie Blain told her. "Will you come along tonight?" she enquired of Mr Rock. He decided that she sounded hospitable.

"I'm past it," he said.

"Might do you good," she said grimly. He did not like that tone so well.

"And you?" he asked, then felt faint for lack of food, so that he had to close his eyes behind the winking spectacles.

"Me?" she said. "I'll be so rushed all day with work I shan't seek to be on my toes when the hooves strike." He took this to be a bad sign. And he had only had the cup of tea.

"Oh, you'll come to our dance surely, won't you Mr Rock?" a girl's voice called from the shadows. But he was not even going to consider now that the Principals had not invited him. It was breakfast time, was after.

"You shouldn't trouble about me," he said, with the one purpose in view. "This lady here's the one who will have to bear the brunt," he said. But it drew no response out of Mrs Blain. So he kept silent for some time. The whispering began once more. If he could have heard, past the glow from that hot tea which flooded his senses, he would have caught these sentiments, "You didn't?"

"I did."

"Oh, but you shouldn't have."

"Why, whatever else was I to do?"

"But they'll turn up, directly."

"Mary and Merode?"

"I know, but all the same."

"There you are, you feel like me, like me, you see." And all the while a line of girls fetched their breakfasts, served themselves, the sleep from which they had just come a rosy moss upon the lips, the heavy tide of dreams on each in a flow of her eighteen summers, and which would ebb now only with their first cup they were fetching, as his tea made his old blood run again, in this morning's second miracle for Mr Rock.

"It'll be a smashing day," the cook said, heavily ironic. And why shouldn't I come along, Mr Rock? He asked himself in an aside, because I could keep out of sight, and there will be a buffet.

"Not that I'll see much even if it does keep fine," the cook said. While I sit still, Mr Rock argued inside him, I shan't have to worry that I shall come upon Elizabeth and him round every corner, behind every palm; no, of course, there will be no palms. But he was famished.

"A holiday?" he asked out loud because, in that case, there might, at the moment, be less chance of food. Several sang out together in answer.

"Why, this is Founder's Day," they announced. He had forgotten.

"Yes, I expect we spoiled the peace and quiet for you when they stuck us down in this damp den, ten years ago to a week," the cook pronounced.

"Pooled the diet?" he asked, not hearing.

One or two giggles came from the girls as they moved with their trays. But he was well-liked, and respected.

"I shouldn't wonder you thought they'd let you live your life out in peace and quiet," Maggie went on, in a louder voice.

"How's that?" he said, catching it. "Plenty of go about me yet," he bragged.

"Come on, hurry now," Maggie called to the queue. She could not see this because it was beyond the sunlight. "Or I shall never get started," she explained.

"Yes, Mrs Blain," they dutifully answered.

"Heavy on you, too, with your girl sick?" the cook added, condescending.

The old man wondered if she thought Elizabeth was a slavey, but what he jovially said was, "Well, haven't three hundred of 'em, have I?"

"Oh I don't let those be a bother, my goodness me," the cook replied. "No, all I meant was that a man your age doesn't want to be saddled to fetch and carry for others," she explained.

"I never permit a woman to be a worry," Mr Rock said, with decision.

"I don't suppose," Mrs Blain replied, sparing a glance inside her at the picture she imagined of the late Mrs Rock. "And then your granddaughter will wed and the place'll seem empty," she said, without malice.

"She's not there more often than not," he objected, in the sense that she was always off somewhere to meet Sebastian.

"But then she's not been so well," Maggie Blain agreed to defend Miss Rock, having misunderstood him.

"They overdo things at their age," Mr Rock explained, as though Liz were still a child, with all the time in the world before her for work, love, and marriage.

"Ah, there you are," the cook said.

"I wouldn't have your family, nevertheless," the old man put in. He usually plied the one jest until he won his meal.

"They're good girls," Mrs Blain answered. She was in great ignorance. "Have you got the staff breakfasts up?" she called after the orderlies. At this half promise of food he felt his stomach gush digestive juices.

"We've taken them, Mrs Blain, and there's one over," Marion insinuated. "Mr Birt's had a night off." Mr Rock waited for the spare to be offered. He waited. Then, to his vague, wondering surprise, beyond the cone of light in which he sat and warmed his cold hollow bones, he gradually felt a tide of female curiosity flow up over him, so strong it was like the smell of a fox that has just slunk by, back of some bushes. He could not understand. If he had only known, this bit of news had been put forward, and some of the girls hung on the answer, to discover whether it was official and above board, the absence of Sebastian Birt under the particular circumstances.

"That's right," Mrs Blain said. "His name's struck off my list," and there was a sort of sigh came from outside the sunlight. The whispering began again. But it had given Mr Rock an uneasiness. Because he was certain Sebastian had been round to the cottage after dark. And now the snake was not even in next morning. Drat Mrs Blain, why couldn't she hurry his breakfast. How right, earlier on, not to carry the tea up to Liz, Mr Rock told himself, the fellow could only have been there all night, and

somehow or other these girls knew, which must be one reason they did not propose to give him a bit of anything. He could go hungry now.

"But there's some don't trouble," Mrs Blain said, with so much suggested in her voice that Mr Rock instantly apprehensive, decided in his own best interests that he would do better to ignore what was on the way, until he knew how grave it was.

"But there's some don't give themselves the trouble," she repeated, directly at him. He realised he would have to respond. He turned to her like a blind man.

"Going off up to London as usual this day of all days," she explained herself.

"Oh, Mrs Blain, it's the date the Commissions sit," said one of the embryo State Servants.

"I tell you I'm right sorry this minute for Miss Marchbanks," the cook continued. "All that goes away will be laid to her door, and no argument," she ended, in a sort of hush about.

Most of the children were hanging on her words. She was aware, but in ignorance. She sought to improve on this. "God help her, poor woman, if she hasn't the decorations just so in quick time," she said.

The whispers began again.

"Is that the last of breakfast?" she called out, and the old man's heart beat wet in his mouth.

"I should be getting on," he said, to force matters.

"Don't disturb yourself, Mr Rock," the cook told him. "You're one who's never in the light, is he? Girls? You'd better get your own now," she gave them leave. And with a sort of chorus of welcome and pleasure because they were hungry too, nine came with their spoons and plates of porridge, and the lovely, sleepy, but rather pimply skins, to sit alongside the famished, sweet old sage. None dared remind Mrs Blain of him. She was a terror for her rights.

"But you are coming tonight, Mrs Blain?" one asked.

"Me?" the cook demanded. "After I've finished the knick knacks for the buffet, which'll take me a day on my stoves?"

"You know you've got the best lot of orderlies on the whole rota to help you," they said.

"I'd never have agreed without," Mrs Blain retorted. "I told Miss Marchbanks. Give me Mary and the girls on her rota, I said, or you'll have a dead woman on your hands."

This statement had a greater effect than she could have expected. There was a sort of gasp round the kitchen, and at least three children, while Mr Rock blindly watched, pushed their porridge plates away. One or two even put what they felt into words.

"I don't think I'll come either, tonight I mean," the youngest said.

"How's that Maisy?" the cook asked. "Are you shy even of a bit of fun at your time of life?"

The girl would not admit it was Mary and Merode she had on her mind, that she feared the worst. But she blushed.

"To cook when the weather's hot turns my stomach," she explained, because Mr Rock's unseeing spectacles were on her. The old man still did not know if he was altogether forsaken, whether, upon this, the dawn of their great day, he was just to get the bare cup of tea.

"Now don't give me that, not at your age," the cook coarsely insinuated.

"Oh Mrs Blain," they all cried out, while Maisy went red.

"Because that's when you can say so," Mrs Blain elaborated with gusto. "Getting your man home Sunday dinner, oh dear, openin' the oven door when you're in that condition, and the hot smell of the roast comes."

"I can smell it now," Mr Rock suggested in great ignorance, and smacked his lips. They all laughed.

"There's expectant fathers' kitchens now," Marion announced, while the old man tried to reconci-

himself to the idea that he must go hungry. But the girls tittered, for this that Marion had just put forward was one of Miss Inglefield's more modern jokes in class.

"And I know how my fellow would have said, when he was still alive, if I'd told him that, while my little Enid was on the way," Mrs Blain announced, delighted. "Yet what are you girls thinkin'?" she demanded. "Where's Mr Rock's bit of breakfast, may I ask?"

"Oh Mr Rock," several cried out, got up, and at long last hurried this over.

"It was just. . ." Maisy began to excuse herself, with intent to explain how upset she was about Marion and Merode, but the cook would not allow her.

"It was simply you forgot," Mrs Blain interrupted. Mr Rock, who deeply felt his position, begging as it seemed he had to, for this one meal per diem, next tried not to have it.

"No thank you," he said. "This day I don't fancy . . ." and began to get out of his chair.

"Sit you down, don't be awkward," the cook cried. "I can't have my place treated cavalier fashion," she said. "You either eat a good breakfast or you mayn't move out of here in daylight. Then what would your Daisy say without her swill? There's a bit of bran as well, for Ted. You won't have that either if you can't do justice."

"And yourself, Mrs Blain?" he asked, then subsided in his place, mouth watering, glad.

"Me? I mentioned to my girls before you came. I'd rather not refer to that once more," she said with finality. Her stomach was upset. He nodded, old and solemn over the plate, with no idea of what she meant.

He ate.

He was greedy.

They watched in approving silence.

"I can't imagine what you'll think, Mr Rock, to forget you like we did," a girl lied, to cover her tracks.

"I don't," he replied, rather abrupt, but his feelings, at the moment, were directed to his stomach. Some of them feared he had been offended.

So they began to make up to him. They uttered little comforting remarks. He sat silent. With an old man's gluttony he had eaten too fast and he was, one might say, listening to the food settle in his cavernous, wrinkled belly.

"We all feel the same when we're on orderly duties, Mr Rock. We'd really miss you if you didn't drop in of a morning."

"I think Daisy's sweet," Margot said.

"Will you ask me for a dance, Mr Rock?"

"They only played waltzes, too, when you were young, Mr Rock, didn't they?"

"I think they might let us have something else besides," one of them put forward.

"Like a tango," she said. "They still have those in the smaller halls."

"Enough's enough," the sage announced. Several of the girls began to giggle. They were not to know this, but he was referring to his digestion.

"I think it a shame," Mrs Blain brought out, in a warning voice. But the younger ones could not stop behind hands they had over their mouths.

"I don't know what's so comical, I'm sure," Mrs Blain said in reproof, and then the old man realised from their flushed faces that they were laughing at him.

"I shouldn't pay attention," Mr Rock commented.

"Oh we don't," they answered, still giggling.

"To me," he said. They stopped. "I'm only on sufferance here, you know," he said, with a satisfied

bitterness.

"Oh Mr Rock," they cried.

"I think it a shame," Mrs Blain announced, brightly. "Now then," she called out. "Let's get going!" And in a moment the old and famous man was left alone at table, altogether blinded by increasing brightness, before an empty plate and a cup that was warm, behind a rumbling stomach, left to dread the journey back with full buckets.

When Sebastian Birt came into the staff breakfast parlour he found he was first. He did not look on the bright daylight but under the dish cover on a hot plate. He took no scrambled egg.

He poured himself a cup of tea. He was sitting down to this when Miss Winstanley entered. He did not rise. He said to her, in what he imagined to be the manner of a State executive, for he was always in a part, "Well, well," he said, rubbed hands together.

"Morning, Sebastian," she said. "It'll be a lovely day."

"So it is, so it is."

"But I thought you'd got off for the night," she went on, and helped herself at the side table, paying attention to how he acted.

"Couldn't fit it in, unexpectedly detained, these trade delegations from the North," he answered, keep up the pretence. But he did not look away from his cup. As he was fat, and very short, he seemed a small boy. It was not at this that Miss Winstanley tenderly laughed.

"And is the gov'nor to let you come to the dance tonight?"

"There are, or rather were, two governors," he replied, this time, all at once, in the part of the sort of lecturer he was not. "The Governor of the Bank of England, abolished as such long since, then the governor of the local poor law institution, or poor house, known to each one of you, if not from personal experience, then at least by report, and a factor in our civilization that we have yet to eradicate." He raised his voice in mockery while he watched his cup. "To pull out by the roots," he ended.

"Edge?" Miss Winstanley prompted.

"The functions are so similar," he replied. "They may readily be confused. The best mind can fail to distinguish between Edge and the common or garden workmaster. Where similar functions are operated in dissimilar environments which may yet have factors common to both . . ." and here he paused, at a loss perhaps. This gave her time to put over, "I know all that, but are you coming?"

"I should really see my secretary, let me just glance at my book," he replied, in the character of a State executive once more. "I cannot be rushed willy nilly into appointments." A silence fell. Then she thought of something.

"Look here," she said, "you put yourself down as not to want breakfast."

"Tchk, tchk," he answered, still the State manager. "What has my girl been about?" For the first time he looked slyly at Miss Winstanley. But she reached for the butter, and did not notice. When he went on, as he did at once, it was with lowered eyes once more.

"They will allow themselves to be pressed. Not in a trouser press, ha, ha, I should hope not indeed. But they will lose their pretty heads over the telephone. When calls really begin coming in, they won't simply lay the receivers down off the hooks to have time to think, they will persist with answers till they get more and more flurried. Then the harm's done, the mistake is made, and I'm landed for an engagement I can't possibly . . ."

"But there isn't a breakfast for you, Sebastian," she interrupted.

"I shall decline to take one of theirs, even if pressed," he answered, perhaps in reference to his

colleagues who, this holiday morn, must be enjoying a long lie abed. "I know better than to get the wrong side of Mrs Blain," he explained, rather more soberly. Then he went on, back in the part one more.

"I always say, as a matter of fact I insist in the office, that we are all members of a team, helping others to help themselves."

"It's all very well, but there'll be a cup and saucer short, Sebastian."

"Well I can wash mine, can't I?" he demanded, falsetto now. "And my lipstick's lovely. It never comes off."

"You'd better," she said. "I don't use any, as you could tell if you looked."

At this moment, when Sebastian might not have known how to reply, for he was a shy fellow Dakers, the law tutor, came in.

"Morning all," the man said.

"Hullo Sebastian. I thought we were not to have the honour this forenoon. D'you know I almost fancy it may eventually turn out to be rather a fine day."

"It's like this, Dakers," Winstanley said. "The lad here was detained. Calls on his time have been heavy of late," she explained, with malice. Mr Birt pettishly frowned into his cup at this open allusion to the hours he spent with Elizabeth.

"The gov'nor consulted me last night," Dakers said. He had not missed the implications Winstanley's last remark. He had a particular sort of loyalty towards the young woman. He wished to warn them both.

"Edge? Consulted you? What on earth about?" Winstanley asked.

"Oh, she wanted me to run through the original Directive from the Ministry, which relates to the cottage held by our fabulous pensioner, Rock," Mr Dakers explained. Seated up to the table, he was now engaged in rather nervously rearranging the knives and forks on each side of a porridge plate.

"And which shelters his granddaughter Elizabeth," Mr Birt added, still with his highest falsetto, but which had an edge to it, a squeal of unease.

"The unremunerated opinion of a lawyer is not worth a rap," Dakers assured them, raising the spoon at last. "But I had to tell her, and, since no-one else is here, I'll pass it on." Then he broke off to put some porridge in his mouth. "I don't think we have a leg to stand on. It's his for life," he said.

"How Machiavellian," Birt exclaimed shrilly. "You mean he can defy each and every one, the gov'nor included? Well, everything's perfect then, isn't it?"

"What I mean, and why I chose this moment, is that she'll cast about her to find some other way out, my dear fellow."

A grey line of milk escaped from a corner of his mouth. He dabbed at it, as though he had caught himself shaving.

They prudently joined together to change the topic, did not refer to it again.

When Mr Rock got back to his cottage from the house he was tired and out of breath, because the swill buckets had been particularly heavy this fine morning. He noticed the postman had called and bent down with a groan to pick some envelopes off the mat. He always paid his small bills in cash with the result that his correspondence, which came to about half a dozen letters every day, was made up of complimentary resolutions passed by various scientific societies, letters from students, madmen and so on; at least that is what Mr Rock believed, because, for some years now, the distinguished man had not opened a single one of the communications he received. Instead he always put them unexamined into a travelling trunk which was on the floor just inside the living room, and

which he used for nothing else. He sat down on it today, looked at each envelope back and forth because he expected to hear the result of the election. But there was no trace of an O.M.S. (O.M.S. Majesty's Service; they had left out the His, long since, as being unworthy of the times). On the other hand there was a private letter which might be from young Hargreaves. But then, Mr Rock asked himself, what point could there be in finding out, it would not advantage him in what he termed his battle for the place, the roof here; and wouldn't it rather weaken his resolve if he knew which way the election went? After all, his attitude was sound. More than that, it was straightforward, which could not be said of the cruel posturing taken up by those two Babylonian harlots, Baker and Edge up there who schemed day and night, never actually to come out in the open because they knew very well they would never venture, but who, with a tireless industry, neglected their trivial duties to machinate against him, to play with his girl's reason even, and who fell so low as to work on her sentiments with truly Byzantine malice by the use of a tutor they had no wish to retain, or other pretext to expel, the lout.

No, it would be folly on his part to break the rule of years, to open his correspondence just to satisfy a moment's panic. What he had done for the country was his monument, no-one could steal that, even if they voted him tomorrow into the hunt kennels for broken down scientists. Because he wasn't going on a chain. Because he'd take the money instead, or refuse it. Besides he injured no-one in the blameless life he led here. And an individual still had some rights under the State. And if he opened this letter now, learned whether or no he had been elected, he could tell the turn their conversation would take when he met Miss Edge at the dance tonight. By the way, was he going?

Well, Mr Rock, she'd say, and am I to congratulate you, or some such phrase, the smarming harlot, after which, if he knew he had been elected, he would have to smirk thank you, yes, they've put me in I'm delivered over to their charity now all right. Or, on the other hand, if they had not elected him, would he to eat humble pie, tell her that young men whose work he despised had not thought him worth the candle, after all he'd done. Never, he told himself, never, he'd take the money, and then found he was actually opening the letter he had assumed to be from young Hargreaves, and which wasn't from the man after all.

"Dear Sir," it read.

"Although I have not the honour of your acquaintance, yet due to the pride of place which science occupies in the State, thereby she can work for the good of all, I write to enquire . . ." and the old man who was breathing easier for his rest, thrust the thing back into its envelope, got off the trunk, opened this, and put the day's post onto a mass of other unopened letters. Muttering, he stumped off to his outhouse to boil the swill. He found he had no paper with which to light a fire, came back, raised the lid, took a fistful of letters at random, and used these. He employed the daily newspaper, which he never read, only in the outside lavatory.

The fire was lit when he half heard a remark behind. He turned round, saw his granddaughter, Lillian. She was a distracted looking woman and wore his winter overcoat over red cotton pyjamas, with rubber boots.

"Morning Gapa," she said, as always to him, in an exaggeratedly loud voice, "I think, you know, it's going to be a lovely day."

"There you are, dear," he replied, and his sour old face cracked into a grave smile. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Took me rather a long time to sink off and then it was so tiresome, you know how things are, I awoke, I don't know what time it was, oh about four in the morning, and couldn't drop off again."

"Hadn't you better go back to bed then, dear," he said. "I would if I were you. And I'll bring you up



bite, directly I've done Daisy's swill."

"Oh but I had to come down at once, soon as ever I heard the postman, I mean I'm so excited for you Gapa dear, today of all days this must mean such a great deal . . ." and, as so often, her mind fell away in a wail while she looked at him out of big empty eyes.

"Now what are you getting at?" he enquired, like she were a child. His tone was good-humoured although he knew very well what she had tried to express.

"Well, it's the dawn of the day after, isn't it?" she said. "When they had their meeting? I thought that's to say I expected, well, I do think Mr Hargreaves might have written, just to tell, I mean. I'm so keen about this for you, there, of course."

"Why, so it is, I hadn't given a thought," he lied, and turned his back to stir what was in the pot.

"You mean to say you've put your letters away like you always do, this morning out of all, because it's important, you see, they might have had to write specially and you ought to answer. Oh Gapa," she ended. "Don't you understand?"

"Liz dear," he said, "there's little enough to upset anyone. They know me better than to write. And whatever the thing is won't make any difference. I've told you. Surely you remember?"

"You stand there and say that after all I poured out to you last night, what you want to tell me is that not a word, I mean absolutely water off a pig's back, no difference at all, that you didn't even listen yesterday? Oh, you can be stubborn."

"Now Liz," he said. Tears came into his eyes, but she could not see because he stood averted.

"Look," the woman said, and meant it so much that she actually managed a connected sentence. "Would you allow me to get this morning's post out of your box?"

"You'd not find much, dear," he said. "I used them to light the fire."

"That's that, then," she said, not displeased. She liked decisions postponed.

"I should run along, dear, and have your rest out," he said, disappointed.

Liz did not move.

"About tonight," she said. If he had watched, he would have seen an expression of satisfied guilt pass across her face. "What are you, I mean, had you thought, will you go?"

"In the circumstances, yes, I think we'd better."

"What circumstances?" she asked sharply, for it would be too absurd if he imagined he must chaperon her with Sebastian.

"Why nothing," he said. "Only they might be curious, just now, if we did not put in an appearance. Though I'm too old for that sort of idiot jollification," he said.

"Oh, Gapa I am glad, that's splendid, because I was so keen, you see I'm so proud, proud to ... you know, and I was afraid . . ."

"We're only on sufferance here, you understand," he pointed out, glad to ignore her genuine enthusiasm. He was aware of her desire to show him off, and, if he had remembered this in time, might easily have prevented him coming to the dance.

"Dear Gapa," she said. "If you could only understand, I do so wish you'd realise why there's no-one there couldn't be, and here of all places, why they'd never dare, what, after all you've done, oh it's too absurd?"

He did not reply.

"Did you see Sebastian already?" she asked.

"No. He had the night off," he replied, as though to keep up a polite fiction.

"He didn't," Liz said. It was noticeable when she spoke of this young man, and even more so when his presence, that she was fairly collected in her talk. "He slept over there, after all. He thought

would look strange to be away, you see, well not there, the day of the dance."

Mr Rock's jealousy and disbelief choked him before he could answer.

"He said he'd come over early," she explained.

"You get back into the house, then," he told Liz, all the more certain she had only come out to leave the way free for Master Birt to get off. "I'll see if I can't fetch you breakfast presently."

"But how about, I mean you've been up all this time, have you had some, oh, now Gapa, you can really try one so, what about you?"

"I'm all right. It's never hurt me to do without," he said, his self pity allowing him to forget what Mrs Blain had provided. "But you've been ill," he generously added, and felt tired.

"Hullo," she then exclaimed, in such a well known accent of pure gaiety that Mr Rock knew, before he could turn round. It was Sebastian Birt, in a neat brown suit.

"Hullo Sebastian," he said.

"And the light of their camp fires went out to meet the dawn," this young man announced, pretending to quote Herodotus, in a reference to the fire under the copper in which Daisy's swill was being cooked.

"You're up then," Mr Rock said, looked shortsightedly to see whether Sebastian was shaved and when he found that the young man had done so, having to admit to himself, with a gloating reluctance that the prating idler could not have spent the night in her bed unless, as was just possible, he had been so sloppy enough to bring his razor or depilatory with him. The worthless fellow would have had to do with cold water though, which was very unusual in such a quarter, Mr Rock thought.

Meanwhile Elizabeth Rock, who had realised how unattractive she must look in her state of undress, was off back to the cottage.

"Wait for me, now," she called, "I won't be a moment, really." And Sebastian, who did not answer, just stood there in a daze at the chance which bound him to these two strange people by the love which he had for the granddaughter, the love, he thought, of his life.

"Well?" Mr Rock enquired, not for lack of more he might have said. Sebastian brought himself out of himself with a jerk.

"They've mislaid one of their girls," he mentioned as casual as could be, speaking in his own voice as he almost always did to the old man.

"Who have?"

"Miss Edge and Mistress Baker," Sebastian replied, about to break into eighteenth-century speech but he checked himself. "In fact they're looking everywhere for a couple, a brace," he added.

"Bless my soul," Mr Rock commented, his eye on the swill. The news did not at once disturb him.

"And they've left Ma Marchbanks to hold the baby."

"How's that?"

"They've gone up to Town as per usual. Our misguided rulers have put both on separate Commissions which sit Wednesdays. Of course, they can't miss those."

"Good," Mr Rock said.

Sebastian barked a laugh. "What in general is good about it, sir?" he asked. "There's hell to pay up the house."

"I always feel easier when those two State parrots are safe off the premises," Mr Rock said. "I don't know what they put in the food now, but these last few weeks I can't seem able to boil your swill."

"Preservative," Sebastian promptly replied. "For what we are about to receive may it be ever fresh," he misquoted in his falsetto, then immediately controlled himself. "Tell me, does she do well

on it, sir?" he enquired with deference, as though Mr Rock might suppose the question to be

sarcastic.

"So long as I'm allowed to keep the animal," Mr Rock nervously answered, "and I think I've a reasonable prospect. But if I were a younger man there's one thing I'd do." And he looked with savagery at Birt. He was in earnest. "I'd have a shot at this filth of a swine fever," he said. "Next to the system we live under each one of us nowadays, it's the curse of our time," he ended, stirring the swill once more.

There was a silence.

"You haven't seen Merode and Mary, then?" the younger man asked. He was anxious again.

"Me? No. Why should I?"

"They're the pair of students we can't find."

"So you said," Mr Rock admitted, horrified.

There was another silence.

"It's going to be a magnificent day," Sebastian suggested.

"When you get to my age you'll appreciate it."

"You mean the weather?" Sebastian asked, respectfully.

"Did you say 'end of her tether,'" Mr Rock demanded in a wild voice, thinking of Mary and turned to face the younger man who explained, "I spoke indistinctly again. No, I mentioned the weather."

"Oh I see," Mr Rock commented. "It's my ears," he said.

At this moment the swill began to boil with mustard bursting bubbles and, as a result, a stench rose from the copper harsh enough to turn the proudest stomach. Birt would have gone off at once but did not like to leave at a moment of awkwardness and incomprehension. Because, also, of his love for Elizabeth, he did not wish to antagonise the old man, so put up with the smell. Besides, he had promised to wait.

"At last," Mr Rock said, and came to Sebastian's rescue by moving away on his own. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Oh yes, thanks all the same, I had mine up at the Institute," Birt lied, so as not to saddle the swill with the need to prepare an extra portion. For his part Mr Rock showed no sign of what he felt as, with simplicity, he waited by the kitchen entrance for Sebastian to pass first. Even in this room Sebastian imagined he could taste the stink of swill. But just then Elizabeth entered, and the young man forgot anxiously watching to find how she might be. Much could, as a rule, be told from the clothes she wore from her manner when she set out.

"What's it to be?" Mr Rock asked, as he took a saucepan off a nail.

"Why Gapa," she said, eyes smiling upon Sebastian. "How sweet you are to us, but you mustn't bother, not on a day like this. I couldn't now," she said.

"Sebastian, you talk to her," Mr Rock suggested. The young man looked gravely at him.

"Don't think there's anything I can do, sir," he said with a sort of adolescent's smiling courtesy, out of place in a beak.

"Now Elizabeth . . ." Mr Rock began at once, but she interrupted.

"No," she said. "It's no use, I won't listen, either of you. Come on Seb, the weather's too good to waste inside." She took his hand, led him out. "Don't you ever smell anything besides your pretentious students?" she asked in a low voice. "I believe you don't, and that's what makes you lucky," she said as they turned into the ride by which Mr Rock had gained the big house earlier. It was noticeable how when with her love, she no longer hesitated with her spoken feelings. "Darling, you're the luckiest man," she said, and sniffed fresh air.

"You're looking so much better," he told Elizabeth as they dawdled up the ride, holding hands. She was not tall like Winstanley, yet came head and shoulders above him.

"Oh Seb, I don't know that you'll ever forgive me; all my stupid hesitations," she said.

The sun, which was not high yet, came aslant between trees with a smoky light, much as it had through Mrs Blain's great window, and struck their blue shadows sideways.

"Most of it's my fault, I do know that." He spoke sincerely.

"Why no," she murmured back. "You're perfect."

"If we hadn't met," he said, "you'd never've had your breakdown, would you?"

"I might. You can't tell. Now I've had one, I know," she said. "Actually, I believe you saved me, for the reason I mean."

"Oh Liz, it was hardly as bad, come now."

"That's how it felt," she answered. "And I've been such a fool all this time not realising my own mind."

He did not dare ask whether he was to understand she had at last decided what she wanted of him. His experience with her had taught Birt that she took refuge in a vast quagmire of vagueness when all pressed. So, heart beating, because it was genuinely important how she would put it, he waited.

"Sometimes I wonder if you'll ever forgive," she began again. "Oh I can't imagine why you picked me out," she said. "I get frightened sometimes you won't ever see me the way I really am. But one thing I'm sure now. I worried so at the start. D'you think I'd better tell? Well, I will. It was about Gapa. He's very famous. You see, I thought it might all be because of him."

He again felt he must at all costs make her right.

"What d'you mean?" he asked patiently.

"When you first showed an interest," she said. "Last Christmas. The time you began coming across the park to see us. Oh, for quite a long while I was sure you only did it to be by Gapa."

"Did you?" he said, indulgently.

She bridled, rather, at his tone. "Well, if you do want to understand I'm not so entirely certain even now, sometimes," she said.

"You're jealous," he said, trying to make it into a joke.

"Of my own grandfather?" she asked, and laughed. "No, but I might be if he had a great granddaughter. That would be different, right enough."

"Liz, don't be absurd."

"Oh but I'm so much older'n you."

"Liz darling, we've been into this before."

"A whole eight years, Seb. It's not fair. When you're forty I'll have a Gapa head. Think of that."

"I have," he said, and sighed.

"There you are you see, you sigh, which is just what I mean," she pointed out. "And, if you're like you are now, what will it be when our time really comes. Isn't it extraordinary? One starts out light as a feather, then everything gets difficult." Her voice was despairing.

"If you care to know, I can't abide him."

"Who?" she asked, for, in her distress, she had lost track of the conversation.

"Your grandfather."

"Don't be so ridiculous," she said in a most friendly way. "You know you dote on Gapa."

"What makes you say?"

"Why, it's in everything you do when you're together. Even if you're both just chatting, hard at it, your own voice drops you respect him so much and, poor dear, he's got to such a state of deafness I

doesn't catch what's said."

"Do I?" he asked, guardedly.

"No-one has any idea of how they are," she explained. "And he adores you."

"Are you sure?" the young man enquired, not at all convinced.

"There you go, you see. The moment I tell, I can judge from your voice you're delighted. Oh darling, am I being very difficult, again?"

"Of course not, Liz, but I would like to get this untangled."

"Sometimes I can't imagine how you put up with me," she said, putting his arm in hers to press it to her side. "And who am I to be jealous of my own dear, dear Gapa if he is, even in part, the reason why you come over so often? Because I've a lot more to be grateful to him about than, haven't I? Oh why? I'm well again I shall make things up to him, you've no notion how much, and should everything go right, when I come through this, I'll make it up to you too, my darling, even if it takes me the rest of my life, and all my breath."

He kissed her as they walked on. "Don't take this so hard, Liz," he said.

"You're such a brute," she said tenderly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"To make me love you like I do," she said.

"That's my whole point," he took her up. "We can't help ourselves, can we? Things happen. When two people fall in love it's not their fault, surely? They can't help it."

"It must be the fault of one of them."

"How can you say that, dear?"

"When the girl is so much older, then she's to blame."

"You know I'm a fatalist," he said with an effort. "I don't know any serious economist who isn't. It's an occupational risk with economists." He used a sort of bantering tone with which to speak of his profession. The trick he had with a conversation whereby he would bring it to what he considered to be the level of the person he addressed, was more highly developed when with Elizabeth than it was when he spoke to Mr Rock; in other company, it was the impulse which led him to do his imitations. She was aware of this. She did not approve.

"You say that just for me," she told him.

"I don't. Why should I?"

"But you can't pretend about us, and that we know each other, was just luck," she complained. "With all we might mean," she added. "You cheapen it."

"Well to go on as we do is cheap," he said, apologetically.

"Oh you'll never forgive once all this is over, I know you won't," she cried out, then stopped so as to face him. He turned away in distress. "Well?" she said. "You see, you can't even look. My darling, I'm so beastly." But she stood on there, and did not kiss him. Misery paralysed her.

"I'm so worried for you," he said at last, bringing out the truth.

"Because you're an economist, or why? Because you think if it wasn't me then it might just as well be another girl?"

"Now Liz," he said. "There was nothing further from my mind."

"What in particular are you worried about, then?"

"About your grandfather and you," he said, weakly.

"Why, what d'you mean," she demanded. "He's everything, I worship the very ground he treads. He works his poor old fingers to the bone for me. Without him I don't think I could go on." She, in her turn, swung round to show her back to Sebastian.

"Look," he said, "please be sensible," and his voice grated. "I can't imagine what you suppose I'm trying to make out. It's Miss Edge and Miss Baker's the trouble."

"Oh?" she asked, faced the man once more, with an expression of great vagueness.

"You're both of you a brace of innocents where those two women are concerned."

"My dear," she said. "You don't know Gapa very well if you think it. He's a match for two of our spinsters!"

"He's not of this world, Liz," Sebastian objected.

"He's forgotten more of her twists and turns than you'll ever learn," she said. "There."

"I know, but so rash."

"Careful Seb, you can go too far, you know."

"I'm worried about this election. You understand what he is. He'll refuse what they offer, he'll simply disdain the whole thing."

"After what he's done for everyone in this country, I'd say he had a right to do as he liked," she announced, for her own purposes ignoring the fact that she had pressed her grandfather to a certain course only the night before.

"And I insist you can't, my dear girl. No-one can, these days."

"Don't be so absurd."

"But it's the State, Liz," he said. "What the old man will do is to wait till he's elected, then he'll refuse whatever they offer. And offend the powers that be very seriously. You know how he never even opens his correspondence."

"Oh but he does over important things," she lied, to reassure herself. "Besides they would never dare with men like Mr Hargreaves in the inner circles to protect the three of us."

"It's his age, Liz. Any man as old stretches back to the bad times. He's suspect just because of the years he's lived. They won't like it."

"Then they'll have to swallow their silliness," she said. "Why, he's famous, he's one of the ornaments of the State."

"Look," he explained. "In the class of work your grandfather did they're just lyric poets. After twenty-five they're burned right out. He made his proof of his great theory when he was twenty-one. And he's seventy-six now."

"All the more wonderful then, isn't he?"

"Yes, but don't you realise his idea is poison to the younger men, who think they've exploded it?"

"That's only jealousy."

"I still maintain it would be very dangerous for him to go on as if everything was just plain sailing."

"Oh, if you're going to lose your nerve now, my dear, what on earth, I mean can you imagine, of all the beastly things to happen ... oh what will become of you and me?"

"There," he said, genuinely disturbed, "I've upset you and that was the last I intended, the very last," he added. But she was not done yet.

"And what's all this to do with Miss Baker and Miss Edge?" she demanded, recollecting the way she had opened the conversation. She caught him out. He could not even remember how he had brought these ladies in. So he kissed her.

Miss Marchbanks, with Mr Rock's Persian on her lap, sat waiting in the sanctum for one of the senior students, Moira. Extremely shortsighted, she had taken off her spectacles and put these on Miss Edge's desk as though, in the crisis, at a time when she had been left in charge, she wished to look inwards, to draw on her reserves, and thus to meet the drain on her resolution which this absence

the two girls had opened like an ulcer high under the ribs, where it fluttered, a blood stained dove with tearing claws.

So that when Moira entered, and did not shut the door but stood leant against it, half in, half out the room, dressed in a pink overall (this colour being her badge of responsibility over others), her bare legs a gold haze to Miss Marchbanks' weak eyes, her figure, as the older woman thought, a rounded mass softly merged into the exaggeration of a grown woman's, her neck and face the colour ripening apricots from sun with strong eyes that were an alive blue, shapeless to Miss Marchbanks' dull poached eggs of vision, but a child so alive, at some trick of summer light outside, that the older woman marvelled again how it could ever be that the State should send these girls, who were real women, to be treated like children; she marvelled as Moira stood respectfully flaunting maturity, even her short, curly hair strong about the face with the youth of her body, that the State (which had just raised the age of consent by two whole years) should lay down how this woman was to be treated as if she were a child, like a child that could scarcely blow its own nose.

"About the decorations, Moira," she began, dismissing certain uncertainties with a sigh, only to find she was unsure even of what she was about to say. "A thought came to me," she said, then forced herself on, "a thought for the alcove. Fir trees, Moira," she improvised. "And you know all that sawdust they delivered by mistake, well we could lay that for snow on the branches. It's what they used to do in the films. So cool for dancing. Because it will be hot today, I think."

"That would be lovely," the girl agreed with a low, lazy voice, the opposite to her looks.

"Then you do think so, Moira?"

"Oh, I wish you had the arrangements for everything, Miss Marchbanks. Only Miss Edge said there must be rhododendrons and azaleas. She wants huge swags, she said. What are swags, Miss Marchbanks?"

"Great masses, child." Marchbanks for some reason began to feel reassured. "Loot, you see," she went on. "Well, that's that then. So you'd better take forty seniors to make a start."

"We have. And we won't cut the flowers, ever, not where they can see."

"It was just a thought," the older woman said. "Fir trees and waltzes. The snow for all of your white frocks as you go round."

Rather a pity, don't you think? But come in or out child, do. Don't stand there neither one thing nor the other." The girl laughed comfortably.

"You sent for me," she said.

"We're so busy. We've been started ages. But please come and look, oh please. We want your advice particularly." At this she shut the door, came up to the desk. They're incalculable, Marchbanks told herself. And up to yesterday I was so confident I knew their ways. Then her heart missed a beat as she wondered whether the child could be hinting.

"It's the fireplace," Moira said. "Very big." She stood close and absolutely still, to give the older woman, whose body age had withered, a full, wonderful, firm round smile.

"Well, we don't want to root up a whole rhododendron bush, and put that in," the woman gently said.

Then the girl leaned right over, stroked that white cat. She smelled warm to the older lady.

"Why it's Alice, Mr Rock's," she said.

"Every morning," Marchbanks agreed. "Every single day You couldn't do without, could you?" she said to the puss, which Moira could now at last hear purr, which she could tell was in a cat's swoon.

"Isn't it awful," the girl casually said.

"What d'you mean, dear?"

"Why, about Mary and Merode."

Marchbanks swallowed a gulp of the morning.

"Now don't be so silly," she said, in a bright voice. "But I do wish you'd each of you come to see me before you decide on some of your little foolishnesses." She looked in a dazzled way at the large brilliant, smooth face bent over the cat. She began to drum the fingers of her left hand on Edge's table.

"What mightn't Alice be able to tell?" the child remarked.

"Now Moira, you know as well as I, they've simply gone off somewhere and the car's broken down most probably," Marchbanks said. "Besides we rely on you senior girls, you realise, before the birds are flown, so to speak, you know."

The younger woman did not reply. She went on stroking puss, which had opened huge blue eyes.

"Of course Miss Edge will be very cross with them when they get back properly ashamed of themselves," Marchbanks continued. "But I'll have a word with Miss Baker first. Why child, you don't know anything, do you?" she asked, with an uneasiness as shrill as Sebastian's in her voice.

"Oh Miss Marchbanks, we always tell you all," the girl replied.

"Then what did you mean about Mr Rock's cat?" the older woman said, and put on her spectacles.

"She might have seen them when she was coming over," Moira explained. Now that she could watch the girl in detail Miss Marchbanks no longer approved, and was even half irritated with the creature's blankness. You could admire children when you were not in a position properly to focus them, she thought, because, soon as you had your glasses on, they were merely fat, or null, unless of course they were babies.

"You've a smut on your nose, child," she said.

"Oh have I? Thank you," the girl said, rubbing with a hand.

"Well I must get along at once or we'll never get finished," she excused herself. "I know they'll be disappointed over the fir trees," she said, and backed away with a look of complicity about her nose. "It would have been too lovely. But some people, I mean . . . well . . . you know," she finished on a adorable smile of pure respect, then was gone.

There was a knock at the door. Upon being bidden to do so, Winstanley entered.

"Why come in, my dear, sit down," Miss Marchbanks said, and took the spectacles off again.

"I wouldn't have bothered you, ma'am, today of all days, but I wanted to know if there was any sort of help at all I could give."

"My dear," Marchbanks said. "And less of this ma'am to me. I hold the position only for twelve hours, if I last those," she said. "No, I've just had Moira along, to find whether I could arrive at anything."

"Why Moira particularly?"

"It was just a thought. Such a pretty child."

"I suppose I mustn't ask, but. . . ?"

"Not a word," this lady answered. "We're as we were except that I'm very kindly left in charge, and no-one's to know lest it gets out. But I'm to use my discretion continuously, thank you."

"I wouldn't put up with it," Winstanley said.

How can the lovesick make such sweeping statements, Marchbanks wondered.

"Especially with the Inspector of Police," she went on without a sign of what she thought. "He's come over because I'm not to tell him on the telephone. 'We must be discreet'," she quoted with irony. "I mustn't say to his face."

"But I know both girls well," Winstanley protested. "I can't imagine ..."

"My dear," Marchbanks said, "what do either of us know?"

"Yes, quite. But. . ."



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