The Book-Bag

W. Somerset Maugham

SOME people read for instruction, which is praiseworthy, and some for pleasure, which is innocent, but not a few read from habit, and I suppose that this is neither innocent nor praiseworthy. Of that lamentable company am I. Conversation after a time bores me, games tire me, and my own thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resource of a sensible man, have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my book as the opium-smoker to his pipe. I would sooner read the catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores or Bradshaw’s Guide than nothing at all, and indeed I have spent many delightful hours over both these works. At one time I never went out without a second-hand bookseller’s list in my pocket. I know no reading more fruity. Of course to read in this way is as reprehensible as doping, and I never cease to wonder at the impertinence of great readers who, because they are such, look down on the illiterate. From the standpoint of what eternity is it better to have read a thousand books than to have ploughed a million furrows? Let us admit that reading with us is just a drug that we cannot do without-who of this band does not know the restlessness that attacks him when he has been severed from reading too long, the apprehension and irritability, and the sigh of relief which the sight of a printed page extracts from him?-and so let us be no more vainglorious than the poor slaves of the hypodermic needle or the pint-pot.

And like the dope-fiend who cannot move from place to place without taking with him a plentiful supply of his deadly balm I never venture far without a sufficiency of reading matter. Books are so necessary to me that when in a railway train I have become aware that fellow-travellers have come away without a single one I have been seized with a veritable dismay. But when I am starting on a long journey the problem is formidable. I have learnt my lesson.

Once, imprisoned by illness for three months in a hill-town in Java, I came to the end of all the books I had brought with me, and knowing no Dutch was obliged to buy the schoolbooks from which intelligent Javanese, I suppose, acquired knowledge of French and German. So I read again after five-and-twenty years the frigid plays of Goethe, the fables of La Fontaine, and the tragedies of the tender and exact Racine. I have the greatest admiration for Racine, but I admit that to read his plays one after the other requires a certain effort in a person who is suffering from colitis. Since then I have made a point of travelling with the largest sack made for carrying soiled linen and filling it to the brim with books to suit every possible occasion and every mood. It weighs a ton and strong porters reel under its weight. Custom-house officials look at it askance, but recoil from it with consternation when I give them my word that it contains nothing but books. Its inconvenience is that the particular work I suddenly hanker to read is always at the bottom and it is impossible for me to get it without emptying the book-bag’s entire contents upon the floor. Except for this, however, I should perhaps never have heard the singular history of Olive Hardy.

I was wandering about Malaya, staying here and there, a week or two if there was a rest-house or a hotel, and a day or so if I was obliged to inflict myself on a planter or a District Officer whose hospitality I had no wish to abuse; and at the moment I happened to be at Penang. It is a pleasant little town, with a hotel that has always seemed to me very agreeable, but the stranger finds little to do there and time hung a trifle heavily on my hands. One morning I received a letter from a man I knew only by name. This was Mark Featherstone. He was Acting Resident, in the absence on leave of the Resident, at a place called Tenggarah. There was a sultan there and it appeared that a water festival of some sort was to take place which Featherstone thought would interest me. He said that he would be glad if I would come and stay with him for a few days. I wired to tell him that I should be delighted and next day took the train to Tenggarah. Featherstone met me at the station. He was a man of about thirty-five, I should think, tall and handsome, with fine eyes and a strong, stern face. He had a wiry black moustache and bushy eyebrows. He looked more like a soldier than a government official. He was very smart in white ducks, with a white topee, and he wore his clothes with elegance. He was a little shy, which seemed odd in a strapping fellow of resolute mien, but I surmised that this was only because he was unused to the society of that strange fish, a writer, and I hoped in a little to put him at his ease.

“My boys’ll look after your barang,” he said. “We’ll go down to the club. Give them your keys and they’ll unpack before we get back.”

I told him that I had a good deal of luggage and thought it better to leave everything at the station but what I particularly wanted. He would not hear of it.

“It doesn’t matter a bit. It’ll be safer at my house. It’s always better to have one’s barang with one.”

“All right.”

I gave my keys and the ticket for my trunk and my book-bag to a Chinese boy who stood at my host’s elbow. Outside the station a car was waiting for us and we stepped in.

“Do you play bridge?” asked Featherstone.

“I do.”

“I thought most writers didn’t.”

“They don’t,” I said. “It’s generally considered among authors a sign of deficient intelligence to play cards.”

The club was a bungalow, pleasing but unpretentious; it had a large reading-room, a billiard-room with one table, and a small card-room. When we arrived it was empty but for one or two persons reading the English weeklies, and we walked through to the tennis courts, where a couple of sets were being played. A number of people were sitting on the veranda, looking on, smoking, and sipping long drinks. I was introduced to one or two of them. But the light was failing and soon the players could hardly see the ball. Featherstone asked one of the men I had been introduced to if he would like a rubber. He said he would. Featherstone looked about for a fourth. He caught sight of a man sitting a little by himself, paused for a second, and went up to him. The two exchanged a few words and then came towards us. We strolled in to the card-room. We had a very nice game. I did not pay much attention to the two men who made up the four. They stood me drinks and I, a temporary member of the club, returned the compliment. The drinks were very small, quarter whiskies, and in the two hours we played each of us was able to show his open-handedness without an excessive consumption of alcohol. When the advancing hour suggested that the next rubber must be the last we changed from whisky to gin pahits. The rubber came to an end. Featherstone called for the book and the winnings and losings of each one of us were set down. One of the men got up.

“Well, I must be going,” he said.

“Going back to the estate?” asked Featherstone.

“Yes,” he nodded. He turned to me. “Shall you be here tomorrow?”

“I hope so.”

He went out of the room.

“I’ll collect my mem and get along home to dinner,” said the other.

“We might be going too,” said Featherstone.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” I replied.

We got into the car and drove to his house. It was a longish drive. In the darkness I could see nothing much, but presently I realized that we were going up a rather steep hill. We reached the Residency.

It had been an evening like any other, pleasant, but not at all exciting, and I had spent I don’t know how many just like it. I did not expect it to leave any sort of impression on me.

Featherstone led me into his sitting-room. It looked comfortable, but it was a trifle ordinary. It had large basket arm-chairs covered with cretonne and on the walls were a great many framed photographs; the tables were littered with papers, magazines, and official reports, with pipes, yellow tins of straight-cut cigarettes, and pink tins of tobacco. In a row of shelves were untidily stacked a good many books, their bindings stained with damp and the ravages of white ants. Featherstone showed me my room and left me with the words:

“Shall you be ready for a gin pahit in ten minutes?”

“Easily,” I said.

I had a bath and changed and went downstairs. Featherstone, ready before me, mixed our drinks as he heard me clatter down the wooden staircase. We dined. We talked. The festival which I had been invited to see was the next day but one, but Featherstone told me he had arranged for me before that to be received by the Sultan.

“He’s a jolly old boy,” he said. “And the palace is a sight for sore eyes.”

After dinner we talked a little more, Featherstone put on the gramophone, and we looked at the latest illustrated papers that had arrived from England. Then we went to bed. Featherstone came to my room to see that I had everything I wanted.

“I suppose you haven’t any books with you,” he said. “I haven’t got a thing to read.”

“Books?” I cried.

I pointed to my book-bag. It stood upright, bulging oddly, so that it looked like a humpbacked gnome somewhat the worse for liquor.

“Have you got books in there? I thought that was your dirty linen or a camp-bed or something. Is there anything you can lend me?”

“Look for yourself.”

Featherstone’s boys had unlocked the bag, but quailing before the sight that then discovered itself had done no more. I knew from long experience how to unpack it. I threw it over on its side, seized its leather bottom and, walking backwards, dragged the sack away from its contents. A river of books poured on to the floor. A look of stupefaction came upon Featherstone’s face.

“You don’t mean to say you travel with as many books as that? By George, what a snip!”

He bent down and turning over rapidly looked at the titles. There were books of all kinds. Volumes of verse, novels, philosophical works, critical studies (they say books about books are profitless, but they certainly make very pleasant reading), biographies, history; there were books to read when you were ill and books to read when your brain, all alert, craved for something to grapple with; there were books that you had always wanted to read, but in the hurry of life at home had never found time to; there were books to read at sea when you were meandering through narrow waters on a tramp steamer, and there were books for bad weather when your whole cabin creaked and you had to wedge yourself in your bunk in order not to fall out; there were books chosen solely for their length, which you took with you when on some expedition you had to travel light, and there were the books you could read when you could read nothing else. Finally Featherstone picked out a life of Byron that had recently appeared.

“Hullo, what’s this?” he said. “I read a review of it some time ago.”

“I believe it’s very good,” I replied. “I haven’t read it yet.”

“May I take it? It’ll do me for tonight at all events.”

“Of course. Take anything you like.”

“No, that’s enough. Well, good night. Breakfast at eight-thirty.”

When I came down next morning the head boy told me that Featherstone, who had been at work since six, would be in shortly. While I waited for him I glanced at his shelves.

“I see you’ve got a grand library of books on bridge,” I remarked as we sat down to breakfast.

“Yes, I get every one that comes out. I’m very keen on it.”

“That fellow we were playing with yesterday plays a good game.”

“Which? Hardy?”

“I don’t know. Not the one who said he was going to collect his wife. The other.”

“Yes, that was Hardy. That was why I asked him to play. He doesn’t come to the club very often.”

“I hope he will tonight.”

“I wouldn’t bank on it. He has an estate about thirty miles away. It’s a longish ride to come just for a rubber of bridge.”

“Is he married?”

“No. Well, yes. But his wife is in England.”

“It must be awfully lonely for those men who live by themselves on those estates,” I said.

“Oh, he’s not so badly off as some. I don’t think he much cares about seeing people. I think he’d be just as lonely in London.”

There was something in the way Featherstone spoke that struck me as a little strange. His voice had what I can only describe as a shuttered tone. He seemed suddenly to have moved away from me. It was as though one were passing along a street at night and paused for a second to look in at a lighted window that showed a comfortable room and suddenly an invisible hand pulled down a blind. His eyes, which habitually met those of the person he was talking to with frankness, now avoided mine, and I had a notion that it was not only my fancy that read in his face an expression of pain. It was drawn for a moment as it might be by a twinge of neuralgia. I could not think of anything to say and Featherstone did not speak. I was conscious that his thoughts, withdrawn from me and what we were about, were turned upon a subject unknown to me. Presently he gave a little sigh, very slight, but unmistakable, and seemed with a deliberate effort to pull himself together.

“I’m going down to the office immediately after breakfast,” he said. “What are you going to do with yourself?”

“Oh, don’t bother about me. I shall slack around. I’ll stroll down and look at the town.”

“There’s not much to see.”

“All the better. I’m fed up with sights.”

I found that Featherstone’s veranda gave me sufficient entertainment for the morning. It had one of the most enchanting views I had seen in the F.M.S. The Residency was built on the top of a hill and the garden was large and well cared for. Great trees gave it almost the look of an English park. It had vast lawns and there Tamils, black and emaciated, were scything with deliberate and beautiful gestures. Beyond and below, the jungle grew thickly to the bank of a broad, winding, and swiftly flowing river, and on the other side of this, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the wooded hills of Tenggarah. The contrast between the trim lawns, so strangely English, and the savage growth of the jungle beyond pleasantly titillated the fancy. I sat and read and smoked. It is my business to be curious about people and I asked myself how the peace of this scene, charged nevertheless with a tremulous and dark significance, affected Featherstone who lived with it. He knew it under every aspect: at dawn when the mist rising from the river shrouded it with a ghostly pall; in the splendour of noon; and at last when the shadowy gloaming crept softly out of the jungle, like an army making its way with caution in unknown country, and presently enveloped the green lawns and the great flowering trees and the flaunting cassias in the silent night. I wondered whether, unbeknownst to him, the tender and yet strangely sinister aspect of the scene, acting on his nerves and his loneliness, imbued him with some mystical quality so that the life he led, the life of the capable administrator, the sportsman, and the good fellow, on occasion seemed to him not quite real. I smiled at my own fancies, for certainly the conversation we had had the night before had not indicated in him any stirrings of the soul. I had thought him quite nice. He had been at Oxford and was a member of a good

London club. He seemed to attach a good deal of importance to social things. He was a gentleman and slightly conscious of the fact that he belonged to a better class than most of the Englishmen his life had brought him in contact with. I gathered from the various silver pots that adorned his dining-room that he excelled in games. He played tennis and billiards. When he went on leave he hunted and, anxious to keep his weight down, he dieted carefully. He talked a good deal of what he would do when he retired. He hankered after the life of a country gentleman. A little house in Leicestershire, a couple of hunters, and neighbours to play bridge with. He would have his pension and he had a little money of his own. But meanwhile he worked hard and did his work, if not brilliantly, certainly with competence. I have no doubt that he was looked upon by his superiors as a reliable officer. He was cut upon a pattern that I knew too well to find very interesting. He was like a novel that is careful, honest, and efficient, yet a little ordinary, so that you seem to have read it all before, and you turn the pages listlessly, knowing that it will never afford you a surprise or move you to excitement.

But human beings are incalculable and he is a fool who tells himself that he knows what a man is capable of.

In the afternoon Featherstone took me to see the Sultan. We were received by one of his sons, a shy, smiling youth who acted as his A.D.C. He was dressed in a neat blue suit, but round his waist he wore a sarong, white flowers on a yellow ground, on his head a red fez, and on his feet knobby American shoes. The palace, built in the Moorish style, was like a very big doll’s house and it was painted bright yellow, which is the royal colour. We were led into a spacious room, furnished with the sort of furniture you would find in an English lodging-house at the seaside, but the chairs were covered with yellow silk. On the floor was a Brussels carpet and on the walls photographs in very grand gilt frames of the Sultan at various state functions. In a cabinet was a large collection of all kinds of fruit done entirely in crochet work. The Sultan came in with several attendants. He was a man of fifty, perhaps, short and stout, dressed in trousers and tunic of a large white-and-yellow check; round his middle he wore a very beautiful yellow sarong and on his head a white fez. He had large handsome friendly eyes. He gave us coffee to drink, sweet cakes to eat, and cheroots to smoke. Conversation was not difficult, for he was affable, and he told me that he had never been to a theatre or played cards, for he was very religious, and he had four wives and twenty-four children. The only bar to the happiness of his life seemed to be that common decency obliged him to divide his time equally between his four wives. He said than an hour with one was a month and with another five minutes. I remarked that Professor Einstein-or was it Bergson?-had made similar observations upon time and indeed on this question had given the world much to ponder over. Presently we took our leave and the Sultan presented me with some beautiful white Malaccas.

In the evening we went to the club. One of the men we had played with the day before got up from his chair as we entered.

“Ready for a rubber?” he said.

“Where’s our fourth?” I asked.

“Oh, there are several fellows here who’ll be glad to play.”

“What about that man we played with yesterday?” I had forgotten his name.

“Hardy? He’s not here.”

“It’s not worth while waiting for him,” said Featherstone.

“He very seldom comes to the club. I was surprised to see him last night.”

I did not know why I had the impression that behind the very ordinary words of these two men there was an odd sense of embarrassment. Hardy had made no impression on me and I did not even remember what he looked like. He was just a fourth at the bridge table. I had a feeling that they had something against him. It was no business of mine and I was quite content to play with a man who at that moment joined us. We certainly had a more cheerful game than before. A good deal of chaff passed from one side of the table to the other. We played less serious bridge. We laughed. I wondered if it was only that they were less shy of the stranger who had happened in upon them or if the presence of Hardy had caused in the other two a certain constraint. At half past eight we broke up and Featherstone and I went back to dine at his house.

After dinner we lounged in arm-chairs and smoked cheroots. For some reason our conversation did not flow easily. I tried topic after topic, but could not get Featherstone to interest himself in any of them. I began to think that in the last twenty-four hours he had said all he had to say. I fell somewhat discouraged into silence. It prolonged itself, and again, I did not know why, I had a faint sensation that it was charged with a significance that escaped me. I felt slightly uncomfortable. I had that queer feeling that one sometimes has when sitting in an empty room that one is not by oneself. Presently I was conscious that Featherstone was steadily looking at me. I was sitting by a lamp, but he was in shadow so that the play of his features was hidden from me. But he had very large brilliant eyes and in the half darkness they seemed to shine dimly. They were like new boot-buttons that caught reflected light. I wondered why he looked at me like that. I gave him a glance and catching his eyes insistently fixed upon me faintly smiled.

“Interesting book that one you lent me last night,” he said suddenly, and I could not help thinking his voice did not sound quite natural. The words issued from his lips as though they were pushed from behind.

“Oh, the Life of Byron?” I said breezily. “Have you read it already?”

“A good deal of it. I read till three.”

“I’ve heard it’s very well done. I’m not sure that Byron interests me so much as all that. There was so much in him that was so frightfully second-rate. It makes one rather uncomfortable.”

“What do you think is the real truth of that story about him and his sister?”

“Augusta Leigh? I don’t know very much about it. I’ve never read Astarte.”

“Do you think they were really in love with one another?”

“I suppose so. Isn’t it generally believed that she was the only woman he ever genuinely loved?”

“Can you understand it?”

“I can’t really. It doesn’t particularly shock me. It just seems to me very unnatural. Perhaps ‘unnatural’ isn’t the right word. It’s incomprehensible to me. I can’t throw myself into the state of feeling in which such a thing seems possible. You know, that’s how a writer gets to know the people he writes about, by standing himself in their shoes and feeling with their hearts.”

I know I did not make myself very clear, but I was trying to describe a sensation, an action of the subconscious, which from experience was perfectly familiar to me, but which no words I knew could precisely indicate. I went on:

“Of course she was only his half-sister, but just as habit kills love I should have thought habit would prevent its arising. When two persons have known one another all their lives and lived together in close contact I can’t imagine how or why that sudden spark should flash that results in love. The probabilities are that they would be joined by mutual affection and I don’t know anything that is more contrary to love than affection.”

I could just see in the dimness the outline of a smile flicker for a moment on my host’s heavy, and it seemed to me then, somewhat saturnine face.

“You only believe in love at first sight?”

“Well, I suppose I do, but with the proviso that people may have met twenty times before seeing one another. ‘Seeing’ has an active side and a passive one. Most people we run across mean so little to us that we never bestir ourselves to look at them. We just suffer the impression they make on us.”

“Oh, but one’s often heard of couples who’ve known one another for years and it’s never occurred to one they cared two straws for each other and suddenly they go and get married. How do you explain that?”

“Well, if you’re going to bully me into being logical and consistent, I should suggest that their love is of a different kind. After all, passion isn’t the only reason for marriage. It may not even be the best one. Two people may marry because they’re lonely or because they’re good friends or for convenience sake. Though I said that affection was the greatest enemy of love, I would never deny that it’s a very good substitute. I’m not sure that a marriage founded on it isn’t the happiest.”

“What did you think of Tim Hardy?”

I was a little surprised at the sudden question, which seemed to have nothing to do with the subject of our conversation.

“I didn’t think of him very much. He seemed quite nice. Why?”

“Did he seem to you just like everybody else?”

“Yes. Is there anything peculiar about him? If you’d told me that, I’d have paid more attention to him.”

“He’s very quiet, isn’t he? I suppose no one who knew nothing about him would give him a second thought.”

I tried to remember what he looked like. The only thing that had struck me when we were playing cards was that he had fine hands. It passed idly through my mind that they were not the sort of hands I should have expected a planter to have. But why a planter should have different hands from anybody else I did not trouble to ask myself. His were somewhat large, but very well formed with peculiarly long fingers, and the nails were of an admirable shape. They were virile and yet oddly sensitive hands. I noticed this and thought no more about it. But if you are a writer instinct and the habit of years enable you to store up impressions that you are not aware of. Sometimes of course they do not correspond with the facts and a woman for example may remain in your subconsciousness as a dark, massive, and ox-eyed creature when she is indeed rather small and of a nondescript colouring. But that is of no consequence. The impression may very well be more exact than the sober truth. And now, seeking to call up from the depths of me a picture of this man I had a feeling of some ambiguity. He was clean-shaven and his face, oval but not thin, seemed strangely pale under the tan of long exposure to the tropical sun. His features were vague. I did not know whether I remembered it or only imagined now that his rounded chin gave one the impression of a certain weakness. He had thick brown hair, just turning grey, and a long wisp fell down constantly over his forehead. He pushed it back with a gesture that had become habitual. His brown eyes were rather large and gentle, but perhaps a little sad; they had a melting softness which, I could imagine, might be very appealing.

After a pause Featherstone continued:

“It’s rather strange that I should run across Tim Hardy here after all these years. But that’s the way of the F.M.S. People move about and you find yourself in the same place as a man you’d known years before in another part of the country. I first knew Tim when he had an estate near Sibuku. Have you ever been there?”

“No. Where is it?”

“Oh, it’s up north. Towards Siam. It wouldn’t be worth your while to go. It’s just like every other place in the F.M.S. But it was rather nice. It had a very jolly little club and there were some quite decent people. There was the schoolmaster and the head of the police, the doctor, the padre, and the government engineer. The usual lot, you know. A few planters. Three or four women. I was A.D.O. It was one of my first jobs. Tim Hardy had an estate about twenty-five miles away. He lived there with his sister. They had a bit of money of their own and he’d bought the place. Rubber was pretty good then and he wasn’t doing at all badly. We rather cottoned on to one another. Of course it’s a toss-up with planters. Some of them are very good fellows, but they’re not exactly …” he sought for a word or a phrase that did not sound snobbish. “Well, they’re not the sort of people you’d be likely to meet at home. Tim and Olive were of one’s own class, if you understand what I mean.”

“Olive was the sister?”

“Yes. They’d had a rather unfortunate past. Their parents had separated when they were quite small, seven or eight, and the mother had taken Olive and the father had kept Tim. Tim went to Clifton, they were West Country people, and only came home for the holidays. His father was a retired naval man who lived at Fowey. But Olive went with her mother to Italy. She was educated in Florence; she spoke Italian perfectly and French too. For all those years Tim and Olive never saw one another once, but they used to write to one another regularly. They’d been very much attached when they were children. As far as I could understand, life when their people were living together had been rather stormy with all sorts of scenes and upsets, you know the sort of thing that happens when two people who are married don’t get on together, and that had thrown them on their own resources. They were left a good deal to themselves. Then Mrs Hardy died and Olive came home to England and went back to her father. She was eighteen then and Tim was seventeen. A year later the war broke out. Tim joined up and his father, who was over fifty, got some job at Portsmouth. I take it he had been a hard liver and a heavy drinker. He broke down before the end of the war and died shortly after a lingering illness. They don’t seem to have had any relations. They were the last of a rather old family; they had a fine old house in Dorsetshire that had belonged to them for a good many generations, but they had never been able to afford to live in it and it was always let. I remember seeing photographs of it. It was very much a gentleman’s house, of grey stone and rather stately, with a coat of arms carved over the front door, and mullioned windows. Their great ambition was to make enough money to be able to live in it. They used to talk about it a lot. They never spoke as though either of them would marry, but always as though it were a settled thing that they would remain together. It was rather funny considering how young they were.”

“How old were they then?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose he was twenty-five or twenty-six and she was a year older. They were awfully kind to me when I first went up to Sibuku. They took a fancy to me at once. You see, we had more in common than most of the people there. I think they were glad of my company. They weren’t particularly popular.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“They were rather reserved and you couldn’t help seeing that they liked their own society better than other people’s. I don’t know if you’ve noticed it, but that always seems to put people’s backs up. They resent it somehow if they have a feeling that you can get along very well without them.”

“It’s tiresome, isn’t it?” I said.

“It was rather a grievance to the other planters that Tim was his own master and had private means. They had to put up with an old Ford to get about in, but Tim had a real car. Tim and Olive were very nice when they came to the club and they played in the tennis tournaments and all that sort of thing, but you had an impression that they were always glad to get away again. They’d dine out with people and make themselves very pleasant, but it was pretty obvious that they’d just as soon have stayed at home. If you had any sense you couldn’t blame them. I don’t know if you’ve been much to planters’ houses. They’re a bit dreary. A lot of gimcrack furniture and silver ornaments and tiger skins. And the food’s uneatable. But the Hardys had made their bungalow rather nice. There was nothing very grand in it; it was just easy and homelike and comfortable. Their living-room was like a drawing-room in an English country house. You felt that their things meant something to them and that they had had them a long time. It was a very jolly house to stay at. The bungalow was in the middle of the estate, but it was on the brow of a little hill and you looked right over the rubber trees to the sea in the distance. Olive took a lot of trouble with her garden and it was really topping. I never saw such a show of cannas. I used to go there for weekends. It was only about half an hour’s drive to the sea and we’d take our lunch with us and bathe and sail. Tim kept a small boat there. Those days were grand. I never knew one could enjoy oneself so much. It’s a beautiful bit of coast and it was really extraordinarily romantic. Then in the evenings we’d play patience and chess or turn on the gramophone. The cooking was damned good too. It was a change from what one generally got. Olive had taught their cook to make all sorts of Italian dishes and we used to have great wallops of macaroni and risotto and gnocchi and things like that. I couldn’t help envying them their life, it was so jolly and peaceful, and when they talked of what they’d do when they went back to England for good I used to tell them they’d always regret what they’d left.

“‘We’ve been very happy here,’ said Olive.

“She had a way of looking at Tim, with a slow, sidelong glance from under her long eyelashes, that was rather engaging.

“In their own house they were quite different from what they were when they went out. They were so easy and cordial. Everybody admitted that and I’m bound to say that people enjoyed going there. They often asked people over. They had the gift of making you feel at home. It was a very happy house, if you know what I mean. Of course no one could help seeing how attached they were to one another. And whatever people said about their being stand-offish and self-centred, they were bound to be rather touched by the affection they had for one another. People said they couldn’t have been more united if they had been married, and when you saw how some couples got on you couldn’t help thinking they made most marriages look rather like a wash-out. They seemed to think the same things at the same time. They had little private jokes that made them laugh like children. They were so charming with one another, so gay and happy, that really to stay with them was, well, a spiritual refreshment. I don’t know what else you could call it. When you left them, after a couple of days at the bungalow, you felt you’d absorbed some of their peace and their sober gaiety. It was as though your soul had been sluiced with cool clear water. You felt strangely purified.”

It was singular to hear Featherstone talking in this exalted strain. He looked so spruce in his smart white coat, technically known as a bum-freezer, his moustache was so trim, his thick curly hair so carefully brushed, that his high-flown language made me a trifle uncomfortable. But I realized that he was trying to express in his clumsy way a very sincerely felt emotion.

“What was Olive Hardy like?” I asked.

“I’ll show you. I’ve got quite a lot of snapshots.”

He got up from his chair and going to a shelf brought me a large album. It was the usual thing, indifferent photographs of people in groups and unflattering likenesses of single figures. They were in bathing dress or in shorts or tennis things, generally with their faces screwed up because the sun blinded them, or puckered by the distortion of laughter. I recognized Hardy, not much changed after ten years, with his wisp of hair hanging across his forehead. I remembered him better now that I saw the snapshots. In them he looked nice and fresh and young. He had an alertness of expression that was attractive and that I certainly had not noticed when I saw him. In his eyes was a sort of eagerness for life that danced and sparkled through the fading print. I glanced at the photographs of his sister. Her bathing dress showed that she had a good figure, well-developed, but slender; and her legs were long and slim.

“They look rather alike,” I said.

“Yes, although she was a year older they might have been twins, they were so much alike. They both had the same oval face and that pale skin without any colour in the cheeks, and they both had those soft brown eyes, very liquid and appealing, so that you felt whatever they did you could never be angry with them. And they both had a sort of careless elegance that made them look charming whatever they wore and however untidy they were. He’s lost that now, I suppose, but he certainly had it when I first knew him. They always rather reminded me of the brother and sister in Twelfth Night. You know whom I mean.”

“Viola and Sebastian.”

“They never seemed to belong quite to the present. There was something Elizabethan about them. I don’t think it was only because I was very young then that I couldn’t help feeling they were strangely romantic somehow. I could see them living in Illyria.”

I gave one of the snapshots another glance.

“The girl looks as though she had a good deal more character than her brother,” I remarked.

“She had. I don’t know if you’d have called Olive beautiful, but she was awfully attractive. There was something poetic in her, a sort of lyrical quality, as it were, that coloured her movements, her acts, and everything about her. It seemed to exalt her above common cares. There was something so candid in her expression, so courageous and independent in her bearing, that-oh, I don’t know, it made mere beauty just fall flat and dull.”

“You speak as if you’d been in love with her,” I interrupted.

“Of course I was. I should have thought you’d guessed that at once. I was frightfully in love with her.”

“Was it love at first sight?” I smiled.

“Yes, I think it was, but I didn’t know it for a month or so. When it suddenly struck me that what I felt for her-I don’t know how to explain it, it was a sort of shattering turmoil that affected every bit of me-that that was love, I knew I’d felt it all along. It was not only her looks, though they were awfully alluring, the smoothness of her pale skin and the way her hair fell over her forehead and the grave sweetness of her brown eyes, it was more than that; you had a sensation of well-being when you were with her, as though you could relax and be quite natural and needn’t pretend to be anything you weren’t. You felt she was incapable of meanness. It was impossible to think of her as envious of other people or catty. She seemed to have a natural generosity of soul. One could be silent with her for an hour at a time and yet feel that one had had a good time.”

“A rare gift,” I said.

“She was a wonderful companion. If you made a suggestion to do something she was always glad to fall in with it. She was the least exacting girl I ever knew. You could throw her over at the last minute and however disappointed she was it made no difference. Next time you saw her she was just as cordial and serene as ever.”

“Why didn’t you marry her?”

Featherstone’s cheroot had gone out. He threw the stub away and deliberately lit another. He did not answer for a while. It may seem strange to persons who live in a highly civilized state that he should confide these intimate things to a stranger; it did not seem strange to me. I was used to it. People who live so desperately alone, in the remote places of the earth, find it a relief to tell someone whom in all probability they will never meet again the story that has burdened perhaps for years their waking thoughts and their dreams at night. And I have an inkling that the fact of your being a writer attracts their confidence. They feel that what they tell you will excite your interest in an impersonal way that makes it easier for them to discharge their souls. Besides, as we all know from our own experience, it is never unpleasant to talk about oneself.

“Why didn’t you marry her?” I had asked him.

“I wanted to badly enough,” Featherstone answered at length. “But I hesitated to ask her. Although she was always so nice to me and so easy to get on with, and we were such good friends, I always felt that there was something a little mysterious in her. Although she was so simple, so frank and natural, you never quite got over the feeling of an inner kernel of aloofness, as if deep in her heart she guarded, not a secret, but a sort of privacy of the soul that not a living person would ever be allowed to know. I don’t know if I make myself clear.”

“I think so.”

“I put it down to her upbringing. They never talked of their mother, but somehow I got the impression that she was one of those neurotic, emotional women who wreck their own happiness and are a pest to everyone connected with them. I had a suspicion that she’d led rather a hectic life in Florence and it struck me that Olive owed her beautiful serenity to a disciplined effort of her own will, and that her aloofness was a sort of citadel she’d built to protect herself from the knowledge of all sorts of shameful things. But of course that aloofness was awfully captivating. It was strangely exciting to think that if she loved you, and you were married to her, you would at last pierce right into the hidden heart of that mystery; and you felt that if you could share that with her it would be as it were a consummation of all you’d ever desired in your life. Heaven wouldn’t be in it. You know, I felt about it just like Bluebeard’s wife about the forbidden chamber in the castle. Every room was open to me, but I should never rest till I had gone into that last one that was locked against me.”

My eye was caught by a chik-chak, a little brown house lizard with a large head, high up on the wall. It is a friendly little beast and it is good to see it in a house. It watched a fly. It was quite still. On a sudden it made a dart and then as the fly flew away fell back with a sort of jerk into a strange immobility.

“And there was another thing that made me hesitate. I couldn’t bear the thought that if I proposed to her and she refused me she wouldn’t let me come to the bungalow in the same old way. I should have hated that, I enjoyed going there so awfully. It made me so happy to be with her. But you know, sometimes one can’t help oneself. I did ask her at last, but it was almost by accident. One evening, after dinner, when we were sitting on the veranda by ourselves, I took her hand. She withdrew it at once.

“‘Why did you do that?’ I asked her.

“‘I don’t very much like being touched,’ she said. She turned her head a little and smiled. ‘Are you hurt? You mustn’t mind, it’s just a funny feeling I have. I can’t help it.’

“‘I wonder if it’s ever occurred to you that I’m frightfully fond of you,’ I said.

“I expect I was terribly awkward about it, but I’d never proposed to anyone before.” Featherstone gave a little sound that was not quite a chuckle and not quite a sigh. “For the matter of that, I’ve never proposed to anyone since. She didn’t say anything for a minute. Then she said:

“‘I’m very glad, but I don’t think I want you to be anything more than that.’

“‘Why not?’ I asked.

“‘I could never leave Tim.’

“‘But supposing he marries?’

“‘He never will.’

“I’d gone so far then that I thought I’d better go on. But my throat was so dry that I could hardly speak. I was shaking with nervousness.

“‘I’m frightfully in love with you, Olive. I want to marry you more than anything in the world.’

“She put her hand very gently on my arm. It was like a flower falling to the ground.

“‘No, dear, I can’t,’ she said.

“I was silent. It was difficult for me to say what I wanted to. I’m naturally rather shy. She was a girl. I couldn’t very well tell her that it wasn’t quite the same thing living with a husband and living with a brother. She was normal and healthy; she must want to have babies; it wasn’t reasonable to starve her natural instincts. It was such a waste of her youth. But it was she who spoke first.

“‘Don’t let’s talk about this any more,’ she said. ‘D’you mind? It did strike me once or twice that perhaps you cared for me. Tim noticed it. I was sorry because I was afraid it would break up our friendship. I don’t want it to do that, Mark. We do get on so well together, the three of us, and we have such jolly times. I don’t know what we should do without you now.’

“‘I thought of that too,’ I said.

“‘D’you think it need?’ she asked me.

“‘My dear, I don’t want it to,’ I said. ‘You must know how much I love coming here. I’ve never been so happy anywhere before!’

“‘You’re not angry with me?’

“‘Why should I be? It’s not your fault. It only means that you’re not in love with me. If you were you wouldn’t care a hang about Tim.’

“‘You are rather sweet,’ she said.

“She put her arm around my neck and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I had a notion that in her mind it settled our relation. She adopted me as a second brother.

“A few weeks later Tim went back to England. The tenant of their house in Dorset was leaving and though there was another in the offing, he thought he ought to be on the spot to conduct negotiations. And he wanted some new machinery for the estate. He thought he’d get it at the same time. He didn’t expect to be gone more than three months and Olive made up her mind not to go. She knew hardly anyone in England, and it was practically a foreign country to her, she didn’t mind being left alone, and she wanted to look after the estate. Of course they could have put a manager in charge, but that wasn’t the same thing. Rubber was falling and in case of accidents it was just as well that one or other of them should be there. I promised Tim I’d look after her and if she wanted me she could always call me up. My proposal hadn’t changed anything. We carried on as though nothing had happened. I don’t know whether she’d told Tim. He made no sign that he knew. Of course I loved her as much as ever, but I kept it to myself. I have a good deal of self-control, you know. I had a sort of feeling I hadn’t a chance. I hoped eventually my love would change into something else and we could just be wonderful friends. It’s funny, it never has, you know. I suppose I was hit too badly ever to get quite over it.

“She went down to Penang to see Tim off and when she came back I met her at the station and drove her home. I couldn’t very well stay at the bungalow while Tim was away, but I went over every Sunday and had tiffin and we’d go down to the sea and have a bathe. People tried to be kind to her and asked her to stay with them, but she wouldn’t. She seldom left the estate. She had plenty to do. She read a lot. She was never bored. She seemed quite happy in her own company, and when she had visitors it was only from a sense of duty. She didn’t want them to think her ungracious. But it was an effort and she told me she heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the last of them and could again enjoy without disturbance the peaceful loneliness of the bungalow. She was a very curious girl. It was strange that at her age she should be so indifferent to parties and the other small gaieties the station afforded. Spiritually, if you know what I mean, she was entirely self-supporting. I don’t know how people found out that I was in love with her; I thought I’d never given myself away in anything, but I had hints here and there that they knew. I gathered they thought Olive hadn’t gone home with her brother on my account. One woman, a Mrs Sergison, the policeman’s wife, actually asked me when they were going to be able to congratulate me. Of course I pretended I didn’t know what she was talking about, but it didn’t go down very well. I couldn’t help being amused. I meant so little to Olive in that way that I really believe she’d entirely forgotten that I’d asked her to marry me. I can’t say she was unkind to me, I don’t think she could have been unkind to anyone; but she treated me with just the casualness with which a sister might treat a younger brother. She was two or three years older than I. She was always terribly glad to see me, but it never occurred to her to put herself out for me; she was almost amazingly intimate with me, but unconsciously, you know, as you might be with a person you’d known so well all your life that you never thought of putting on frills with him. I might not have been a man at all, but an old coat that she wore all the time because it was easy and comfortable and she didn’t mind what she did in it. I should have been crazy not to see that she was a thousand miles away from loving me.

“Then one day, three or four weeks before Tim was due back, when I went to the bungalow I saw she’d been crying. I was startled. She was always so composed. I’d never seen her upset over anything.

“‘Hullo, what’s the matter?’ I said.

“‘Nothing.’

“‘Come off it, darling,’ I said. ‘What have you been crying about?’

“She tried to smile.

“‘I wish you hadn’t got such sharp eyes,’ she said. ‘I think I’m being silly. I’ve just had a cable from Tim to say he’s postponed his sailing.’

“‘Oh, my dear, I am sorry,’ I said. ‘You must be awfully disappointed.’

“‘I’ve been counting the days. I want him back so badly.’

“‘Does he say why he’s postponing?’ I asked.

“‘No, he says he’s writing. I’ll show you the cable.’

“I saw that she was very nervous. Her slow quiet eyes were filled with apprehension and there was a little frown of anxiety between her brows. She went into her bedroom and in a moment came back with the cable. I felt she was watching me anxiously as I read. So far as I remember it ran:

Darling, I cannot sail on the seventh after all. Please forgive me. Am writing fully. Fondest love. Tim.

“‘Well, perhaps the machinery he wanted isn’t ready and he can’t bring himself to sail without it,’ I said.

“‘What could it matter if it came by a later ship? Anyhow, it’ll be hung up at Penang.’

“‘It may be something about the house.’

“‘If it is why doesn’t he say so? He must know how frightfully anxious I am.’

“‘It wouldn’t occur to him,’ I said. ‘After all, when you’re away you don’t realize that the people you’ve left behind don’t know something that you take as a matter of course.’

“She smiled again, but now more happily.

“‘I dare say you’re right. In point of fact Tim is a little like that. He’s always been rather slack and casual. I dare say I’ve been making a mountain out of a molehill. I must just wait patiently for his letter.’

“Olive was a girl with a lot of self-control and I saw her by an effort of will pull herself together. The little line between her eyebrows vanished and she was once more her serene, smiling, and kindly self. She was always gentle: that day she had a mildness so heavenly that it was shattering. But for the rest of the time I could see that she kept her restlessness in check only by the deliberate exercise of her common sense. It was as though she had a foreboding of ill. I was with her the day before the mail was due. Her anxiety was all the more pitiful to see because she took such pains to hide it. I was always busy on mail day, but I promised to get up to the estate later on and hear the news. I was just thinking of starting when Hardy’s seis came along in the car with a message from the amah asking me to go at once to her mistress. The amah was a decent, elderly woman to whom I had given a dollar or two and said that if anything went wrong on the estate she was to let me know at once. I jumped into my car. When I arrived I found the amah waiting for me on the steps.

“‘A letter came this morning,’ she said.

“I interrupted her. I ran up the steps. The sitting-room was empty.

“‘Olive,’ I called.

“I went into the passage and suddenly I heard a sound that froze my heart. The amah had followed me and now she opened the door of Olive’s room. The sound I had heard was the sound of Olive crying. I went in. She was lying on her bed, on her face, and her sobs shook her from head to foot. I put my hand on her shoulder.

“‘Olive, what is it?’ I asked.

“‘Who’s that?’ she cried. She sprang to her feet suddenly, as though she were scared out of her wits. And then: ‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said. She stood in front of me, with her head thrown back and her eyes closed, and the tears streamed from them. It was dreadful. ‘Tim’s married,’ she gasped, and her face screwed up in a sort of grimace of pain.

“I must admit that for one moment I had a thrill of exultation, it was like a little electric shock tingling through my heart; it struck me that now I had a chance, she might be willing to marry me; I know it was terribly selfish of me; you see, the news had taken me by surprise; but it was only for a moment, after that I was melted by her awful distress and the only thing I felt was deep sorrow because she was unhappy. I put my arm round her waist.

“‘Oh, my dear, I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘Don’t stay here. Come into the sitting-room and sit down and we’ll talk about it. Let me give you something to drink.’

“She let me lead her into the next room and we sat down on the sofa. I told the amah to fetch the whisky and syphon and I mixed her a good strong stengah and made her drink a little. I took her in my arms and rested her head on my shoulder. She let me do what I liked with her. The great tears streamed down her poor face.

“‘How could he?’ she moaned. ‘How could he?’

“‘My darling,’ I said, ‘it was bound to happen sooner or later. He’s a young man. How could you expect him never to marry? It’s only natural.’

“‘No, no, no,’ she gasped.

“Tight-clenched in her hand I saw that she had a letter and I guessed that it was Tim’s.

“‘What does he say?’ I asked.

“She gave a frightened movement and clutched the letter to her heart as though she thought I would take it from her.

“‘He says he couldn’t help himself. He says he had to. What does it mean?’

“‘Well, you know, in his way he’s just as attractive as you are. He has so much charm. I suppose he just fell madly in love with some girl and she with him.’

“‘He’s so weak,’ she moaned.

“‘Are they coming out?’ I asked.

“‘They sailed yesterday. He says it won’t make any difference. He’s insane. How can I stay here?’

“She began to cry hysterically. It was torture to see that girl, usually so calm, utterly shattered by her emotion. I had always felt that her lovely serenity masked a capacity for deep feeling. But the abandon of her distress simply broke me up. I held her in my arms and kissed her, her eyes and her wet cheek and her hair. I don’t think she knew what I was doing. I was hardly conscious of it myself. I was so deeply moved.

“‘What shall I do?’ she wailed.

“‘Why won’t you marry me?’ I said.

“She tried to withdraw herself from me, but I wouldn’t let her go.

“‘After all, it would be a way out,’ I said.

“‘How can I marry you?’ she moaned. ‘I’m years older than you are.’

“‘Oh, what nonsense, two or three. What do I care?’ “‘No, no.’

“‘Why not?’ I said.

“‘I don’t love you,’ she said.

“‘What does that matter? I love you.’

“I don’t know what I said. I told her that I’d try to make her happy. I said I’d never ask anything from her but what she was prepared to give me. I talked and talked. I tried to make her see reason. I felt that she didn’t want to stay there, in the same place as Tim, and I told her that I’d be moved soon to some other district. I thought that might tempt her. She couldn’t deny that we’d always got on awfully well together. After a time she did seem to grow a little quieter. I had a feeling that she was listening to me. I had even a sort of feeling that she knew that she was lying in my arms and that it comforted her. I made her drink a drop more whisky. I gave her a cigarette. At last I thought I might be just mildly facetious.

“‘You know, I’m not a bad sort really,’ I said. ‘You might do worse.’

“‘You don’t know me,’ she said. ‘You know nothing whatever about me.’

“‘I’m capable of learning,’ I said.

“She smiled a little.

“‘You’re awfully kind, Mark,’ she said.

“‘Say yes, Olive,’ I begged.

“She gave a deep sigh. For a long time she stared at the ground. But she did not move and I felt the softness of her body in my arms. I waited. I was frightfully nervous and the minutes seemed endless.

“‘All right,’ she said at last, as though she were not conscious that any time had passed between my prayer and her answer.

“I was so moved that I had nothing to say. But when I wanted to kiss her lips, she turned her face away, and wouldn’t let me. I wanted us to be married at once, but she was quite firm that she wouldn’t. She insisted on waiting till Tim came back. You know how sometimes you see so clearly into people’s thoughts that you’re more certain of them than if they’d spoken them; I saw that she couldn’t quite believe that what Tim had written was true and that she had a sort of miserable hope that it was all a mistake and he wasn’t married after all. It gave me a pang, but I loved her so much, I just bore it. I was willing to bear anything. I adored her. She wouldn’t even let me tell anyone that we were engaged. She made me promise not to say a word till Tim’s return. She said she couldn’t bear the thought of the congratulations and all that. She wouldn’t even let me make any announcement of Tim’s marriage. She was obstinate about it. I had a notion that she felt if the fact were spread about it gave it a certainty that she didn’t want it to have.

“But the matter was taken out of her hands. News travels mysteriously in the East. I don’t know what Olive had said in the amah’s hearing when first she received the news of Tim’s marriage; anyhow, the Hardys’ seis told the Sergisons and Mrs Sergison attacked me the next time I went into the club.

“‘I hear Tim Hardy’s married,’ she said.

“‘Oh?’ I answered, unwilling to commit myself.

“She smiled at my blank face, and told me that her amah having told her the rumour she had rung up Olive and asked her if it was true. Olive’s answer had been rather odd. She had not exactly confirmed it, but said that she had received a letter from Tim telling her he was married.

“‘She’s a strange girl,’ said Mrs Sergison. When I asked her for details she said she had none to give and when I said: ‘Aren’t you thrilled?’ she didn’t answer.

“‘Olive’s devoted to Tim, Mrs Sergison,’ I said. ‘His marriage has naturally been a shock to her. She knows nothing about Tim’s wife. She’s nervous about her.’

“‘And when are you two going to be married?’ she asked me abruptly.

“‘What an embarrassing question!’ I said, trying to laugh it off.

“She looked at me shrewdly.

“‘Will you give me your word of honour that you’re not engaged to her?’

“I didn’t like to tell her a deliberate lie, nor to ask her to mind her own business, and I’d promised Olive faithfully that I would say nothing till Tim got back. I hedged.

“‘Mrs Sergison,’ I said, ‘when there’s anything to tell I promise that you’ll be the first person to hear it. All I can say to you now is that I do want to marry Olive more than anything in the world.’

“‘I’m very glad that Tim’s married,’ she answered. ‘And I hope she’ll marry you very soon. It was a morbid and unhealthy life that they led up there, those two, they kept far too much to themselves and they were far too much absorbed in one another.’

“I saw Olive practically every day. I felt that she didn’t want me to make love to her, and I contented myself with kissing her when I came and when I went. She was very nice to me, kindly and thoughtful; I knew she was glad to see me and sorry when it was time for me to go. Ordinarily, she was apt to fall into silence but during this time she talked more than I had ever heard her talk before. But never of the future and never of Tim and his wife. She told me a lot about her life in Florence and her mother. She had led a strange lonely life, mostly with servants and governesses, while her mother, I suspected, engaged in one affair after another with vague Italian counts and Russian princes. I guessed that by the time she was fourteen there wasn’t much she didn’t know. It was natural for her to be quite unconventional: in the only world she knew till she was eighteen conventions weren’t mentioned because they didn’t exist. Gradually, Olive seemed to regain her serenity and I should have thought that she was beginning to accustom herself to the thought of Tim’s marriage if it hadn’t been that I couldn’t but notice how pale and tired she looked. I made up my mind that the moment he arrived I’d press her to marry me at once. I could get short leave whenever I asked for it, and by the time that was up I thought I could manage a transfer to some other post. What she wanted was change of air and fresh scenes.

“We knew, of course, within a day when Tim’s ship would reach Penang, but it was a question whether she’d get in soon enough for him to catch the train and I wrote to the P. & O. agent asking him to telegraph as soon as he had definite news. When I got the wire and took it up to Olive I found that she’d just received one from Tim. The ship had docked early and he was arriving next day. The train was supposed to get in at eight o’clock in the morning, but it was liable to be anything from one to six hours late, and I bore with me an invitation from Mrs Sergison asking Olive to come back with me to stay the night with her so that she would be on the spot and need not go to the station till the news came through that the train was coming.

“I was immensely relieved. I thought that when the blow at last fell Olive wouldn’t feel it so much. She had worked herself up into such a state that I couldn’t help thinking that she must have a reaction now. She might take a fancy to her sister-in-law. There was no reason why they shouldn’t all three get on very well together. To my surprise Olive said she wasn’t coming down to the station to meet him.

“‘They’ll be awfully disappointed,’ I said.

“‘I’d rather wait here,’ she answered. She smiled a little. ‘Don’t argue with me, Mark, I’ve quite made up my mind.’

“‘I’ve ordered breakfast in my house,’ I said.

“‘That’s all right. You meet them and take them to your house and give them breakfast, and then they can come along here afterwards. Of course I’ll send the car down.’

“‘I don’t suppose they’ll want to breakfast if you’re not there,’ I said.

“‘Oh, I’m sure they will. If the train gets in on time they wouldn’t have thought of breakfasting before it arrived and they’ll be hungry. They won’t want to take this long drive without anything to eat.’

“I was puzzled. She had been looking forward so intensely to Tim’s coming, it seemed strange that she should want to wait all by herself while the rest of us were having a jolly breakfast. I supposed she was nervous and wanted to delay as long as possible meeting the strange woman who had come to take her place. It seemed unreasonable, I couldn’t see that an hour sooner or an hour later could make any difference, but I knew women were funny, and anyhow I felt Olive wasn’t in the mood for me to press it.

“‘Telephone when you’re starting so that I shall know when to expect you,’ she said.

“‘All right,’ I said, ‘but you know I shan’t be able to come with them. It’s my day for going to Lahad.’

“This was a town that I had to go to once a week to take cases. It was a good way off and one had to ferry across a river, which took some time, so that I never got back till late. There were a few Europeans there and a club. I generally had to go on there for a bit to be sociable and see that things were getting along all right.

“‘Besides,’ I added, ‘with Tim bringing his wife home for the first time I don’t suppose he’ll want me about. But if you’d like to ask me to dinner I’ll be glad to come to that.’

“Olive smiled.

“‘I don’t think it’ll be my place to issue any more invitations, will it?’ she said. ‘You must ask the bride.’

“She said this so lightly that my heart leaped. I had a feeling that at last she had made up her mind to accept the altered circumstances and, what was more, was accepting them with cheerfulness. She asked me to stay to dinner. Generally I left about eight and dined at home. She was very sweet, almost tender, and I was happier than I’d been for weeks. I had never been more desperately in love with her. I had a couple of gin pahits and I think I was in rather good form at dinner. I know I made her laugh. I felt that at last she was casting away the load of misery that had oppressed her. That was why I didn’t let myself be very much disturbed by what happened at the end.

“‘Don’t you think it’s about time you were leaving a presumably maiden lady?’ she said.

“She spoke in a manner that was so quietly gay that I answered without hesitation:

“‘Oh, my dear, if you think you’ve got a shred of reputation left you deceive yourself. You’re surely not under the impression that the ladies of Sibuku don’t know that I’ve been coming to see you every day for a month. The general feeling is that if we’re not married it’s high time we were. Don’t you think it would be just as well if I broke it to them that we’re engaged?’ “‘Oh, Mark, you mustn’t take our engagement very seriously,’ she said.

“I laughed.

“‘How else do you expect me to take it? It is serious.’ “She shook her head a little.

“‘No. I was upset and hysterical that day. You were being very sweet to me. I said yes because I was too miserable to say no. But now I’ve had time to collect myself. Don’t think me unkind. I made a mistake. I’ve been very much to blame. You must forgive me.’

“‘Oh, darling, you’re talking nonsense. You’ve got nothing against me.’

“She looked at me steadily. She was quite calm. She had even a little smile at the back of her eyes.

“‘I can’t marry you. I can’t marry anyone. It was absurd of me ever to think I could.’

“I didn’t answer at once. She was in a queer state and I thought it better not to insist.

“‘I suppose I can’t drag you to the altar by main force,’ I said.

“I held out my hand and she gave me hers. I put my arm round her, and she made no attempt to withdraw. She suffered me to kiss her as usual on her cheek.

“Next morning I met the train. For once in a way it was punctual. Tim waved to me as his carriage passed the place where I was standing, and by the time I had walked up he had already jumped out and was handing down his wife. He grasped my hand warmly.

“‘Where’s Olive?’ he said, with a glance along the platform. ‘This is Sally.’

“I shook hands with her and at the same time explained why Olive was not there.

“‘It was frightfully early, wasn’t it?’ said Mrs Hardy. “I told them that the plan was for them to come and have a bit of breakfast at my house and then drive home.

“‘I’d love a bath,’ said Mrs Hardy.

“‘You shall have one,’ I said.

“She was really an extremely pretty little thing, very fair, with enormous blue eyes and a lovely little straight nose. Her skin, all milk and roses, was exquisite. A little of the chorus girl type, of course, and you may happen to think that rather namby-pamby, but in that style she was enchanting. We drove to my house, they both had a bath and Tim a shave; I just had two minutes alone with him. He asked me how Olive had taken his marriage. I told him she’d been upset.

“‘I was afraid so,’ he said, frowning a little. He gave a short sigh. ‘I couldn’t do anything else.’

“I didn’t understand what he meant. At that moment Mrs Hardy joined us and slipped her arm through her husband’s. He took her hand in his and gently pressed it. He gave her a look that had in it something pleased and humorously affectionate, as though he didn’t take her quite seriously, but enjoyed his sense of proprietorship and was proud of her beauty. She really was lovely. She was not at all shy, she asked me to call her Sally before we’d known one another ten minutes, and she was quick in the uptake. Of course, just then she was excited at arriving. She’d never been East and everything thrilled her. It was quite obvious that she was head over heels in love with Tim. Her eyes never left him and she hung on his words. We had a jolly breakfast and then we parted. They got into their car to go home and I into mine to go to Lahad. I promised to go straight to the estate from there and in point of fact it was out of my way to pass by my house. I took a change with me. I didn’t see why Olive shouldn’t like Sally very much, she was frank and gay, and ingenuous; she was extremely young, she couldn’t have been more than nineteen, and her wonderful prettiness couldn’t fail to appeal to Olive. I was just as glad to have had a reasonable excuse to leave the three of them by themselves for the day, but as I started out from Lahad I had a notion that by the time I arrived they would all be pleased to see me. I drove up to the bungalow and blew my horn two or three times, expecting someone to appear. Not a soul. The place was in total darkness. I was surprised. It was absolutely silent. I couldn’t make it out. They must be in. Very odd, I thought. I waited a moment, then got out of the car and walked up the steps. At the top of them I stumbled over something. I swore and bent down to see what it was; it had felt like a body. There was a cry and I saw it was the amah. She shrank back cowering as I touched her and broke into loud wails.

“‘What the hell’s the matter?’ I cried, and then I felt a hand on my arm and heard a voice: Tuan, Tuan. I turned and in the darkness recognized Tim’s head boy. He began to speak in little frightened gasps. I listened to him with horror. What he told me was unspeakable. I pushed him aside and rushed into the house. The sitting-room was dark. I turned on the light. The first thing I saw was Sally huddled up in an arm-chair. She was startled by my sudden appearance and cried out. I could hardly speak. I asked her if it was true. When she told me it was I felt the room suddenly going round and round me. I had to sit down. As the car that bore Tim and Sally drove up the road that led to the house and Tim sounded the klaxon to announce their arrival and the boys and the amah ran out to greet them there was the sound of a shot. They ran to Olive’s room and found her lying in front of the looking-glass in a pool of blood. She had shot herself with Tim’s revolver.

“‘Is she dead?’ I said.

“‘No, they sent for the doctor, and he took her to the hospital.’

“I hardly knew what I was doing. I didn’t even trouble to tell Sally where I was going. I got up and staggered to the door. I got into the car and told my seis to drive like hell to the hospital. I rushed in. I asked where she was. They tried to bar my way, but I pushed them aside. I knew where the private rooms were. Someone clung to my arm, but I shook him off. I vaguely understood that the doctor had given instructions that no one was to go into the room. I didn’t care about that. There was an orderly at the door; he put out his arm to prevent me from passing. I swore at him and told him to get out of my way. I suppose I made a row, I was beside myself; the door opened and the doctor came out.

“‘Who’s making all this noise?’ he said. ‘Oh, it’s you. What do you want?’

“‘Is she dead?’ I asked.

“‘No. But she’s unconscious. She never regained consciousness. It’s only a matter of an hour or two.’

“‘I want to see her.’

“‘You can’t.’

“‘I’m engaged to her.’

“‘You?’ he cried, and even at that moment I was aware that he looked at me strangely. ‘That’s all the more reason.’ “I didn’t know what he meant. I was stupid with horror.

“‘Surely you can do something to save her,’ I cried.

“He shook his head.

“‘If you saw her you wouldn’t wish it,’ he said.

“I stared at him aghast. In the silence I heard a man’s convulsive sobbing.

“‘Who’s that?’ I asked.

“‘Her brother.’

“Then I felt a hand on my arm. I looked round and saw it was Mrs Sergison.

“‘My poor boy,’ she said, ‘I’m so sorry for you.’

“‘What on earth made her do it?’ I groaned.

“‘Come away, my dear,’ said Mrs Sergison. ‘You can do no good here.’

“‘No, I must stay,’ I said.

“‘Well, go and sit in my room,’ said the doctor.

“I was so broken that I let Mrs Sergison take me by the arm and lead me into the doctor’s private room. She made me sit down. I couldn’t bring myself to realize that it was true. I thought it was a horrible nightmare from which I must awake. I don’t know how long we sat there. Three hours. Four hours. At last the doctor came in.

“‘It’s all over,’ he said.

“Then I couldn’t help myself, I began to cry. I didn’t care what they thought of me. I was so frightfully unhappy.

“We buried her next day.

“Mrs Sergison came back to my house and sat with me for a while. She wanted me to go to the club with her. I hadn’t the heart. She was very kind, but I was glad when she left me by myself. I tried to read, but the words meant nothing to me. I felt dead inside. My boy came in and turned on the lights. My head was aching like mad. Then he came back and said that a lady wished to see me. I asked who it was. He wasn’t quite sure, but he thought it must be the new wife of the tuan at Putatan. I couldn’t imagine what she wanted. I got up and went to the door. He was right. It was Sally. I asked her to come in. I noticed that she was deathly white. I felt sorry for her. It was a frightful experience for a girl of that age and for a bride a miserable homecoming. She sat down. She was very nervous. I tried to put her at her ease by saying conventional things. She made me very uncomfortable because she stared at me with those enormous blue eyes of hers, and they were simply ghastly with horror. She interrupted me suddenly.

“‘You’re the only person here I know,’ she said. ‘I had to come to you. I want you to get me away from here.’

“I was dumbfounded.

“‘What do you mean?’ I said.

“‘I don’t want you to ask me any questions. I just want you to get me away. At once. I want to go back to England!’

“‘But you can’t leave Tim like that just now,’ I said. ‘My dear, you must pull yourself together. I know it’s been awful for you. But think of Tim. If you have any love for him the least you can do is try and make him a little less unhappy.’

“‘Oh, you don’t know,’ she cried. ‘I can’t tell you. It’s too horrible. I beseech you to help me. If there’s a train tonight let me get on it. If I can only get to Penang I can get a ship. I can’t stay in this place another night. I shall go mad.’

“I was absolutely bewildered.

“‘Does Tim know?’ I asked her.

“‘I haven’t seen Tim since last night. I’ll never see him again. I’d rather die.’

“I wanted to gain a little time.

“‘But how can you go without your things? Have you got any luggage?’

“‘What does that matter?’ she cried impatiently. ‘I’ve got what I want for the journey.’

“‘Have you any money?’

“‘Enough. Is there a train tonight?’

“‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It’s due just after midnight.’

“‘Thank God. Will you arrange everything? Can I stay here till then?’

“‘You’re putting me in a frightful position,’ I said. ‘I don’t know what to do for the best. You know, it’s an awfully serious step you’re taking.’

“‘If you knew everything you’d know it was the only possible thing to do.’

“‘It’ll create an awful scandal here. I don’t know what people’ll say. Have you thought of the effect on Tim?’ I was worried and unhappy. ‘God knows I don’t want to interfere in what isn’t my business. But if you want me to help you I ought to know enough to feel justified in doing so. You must tell me what’s happened.’

“‘I can’t. I can only tell you that I know everything.’

“She hid her face with her hands and shuddered. Then she gave herself a shake as though she were recoiling from some frightful sight.

“‘He had no right to marry me. It was monstrous.’

“And as she spoke her voice rose shrill and piercing. I was afraid she was going to have an attack of hysterics. Her pretty doll-like face was terrified and her eyes stared as though she could never close them again.

“‘Don’t you love him any more?’ I asked.

“‘After that?’

“‘What will you do if I refuse to help you?’ I said.

“‘I suppose there’s a clergyman here or a doctor. You can’t refuse to take me to one of them.’

“‘How did you get here?’

“‘The head boy drove me. He got a car from somewhere.’

“‘Does Tim know you’ve gone?’

“‘I left a letter for him.’

“‘He’ll know you’re here.’

“‘He won’t try to stop me. I promise you that. He daren’t. For God’s sake don’t you try either. I tell you I shall go mad if I stay here another night.’

“I sighed. After all she was of an age to decide for herself.”

I, the writer of this, hadn’t spoken for a long time.

“Did you know what she meant?” I asked Featherstone.

He gave me a long, haggard look.

“There was only one thing she could mean. It was unspeakable. Yes, I knew all right. It explained everything. Poor Olive. Poor sweet. I suppose it was unreasonable of me, at that moment I only felt a horror of that little pretty fair-haired thing with her terrified eyes. I hated her. I didn’t say anything for a while. Then I told her I’d do as she wished. She didn’t even say thank you. I think she knew what I felt about her. When it was dinner-time I made her eat something and then she asked me if there was a room she could go and lie down in till it was time to go to the station. I showed her into my spare room and left her. I sat in the sitting-room and waited. My God, I don’t think the time has ever passed so slowly for me. I thought twelve would never strike.

I rang up the station and was told the train wouldn’t be in till nearly two. At midnight she came back to the sitting-room and we sat there for an hour and a half. We had nothing to say to one another and we didn’t speak. Then I took her to the station and put her on the train.”

“Was there an awful scandal?”

Featherstone frowned.

“I don’t know. I applied for short leave. After that I was moved to another post. I heard that Tim had sold his estate and bought another. But I didn’t know where. It was a shock to me at first when I found him here.”

Featherstone, getting up, went over to a table and mixed himself a whisky and soda. In the silence that fell now I heard the monotonous chorus of the croaking frogs. And suddenly the bird that is known as the fever-bird, perched in a tree close to the house, began to call. First, three notes in a descending, chromatic scale, then five, then four. The varying notes of the scale succeeded one another with maddening persistence. One was compelled to listen and to count them, and because one did not know how many there would be it tortured one’s nerves.

“Blast that bird,” said Featherstone. “That means no sleep for me tonight.”