The Back of Beyond

W. Somerset Maugham

GEORGE MOON was sitting in his office. His work was finished, and he lingered there because he hadn’t the heart to go down to the club. It was getting on towards tiffin time, and there would be a good many fellows hanging about the bar. Two or three of them would offer him a drink. He could not face their heartiness. Some he had known for thirty years. They had bored him, and on the whole he disliked them, but now that he was seeing them for the last time it gave him a pang. Tonight they were giving him a farewell dinner. Everyone would be there and they were presenting him with a silver tea-service that he did not in the least want. They would make speeches in which they would refer eulogistically to his work in the colony, express their regret at his departure, and wish him long life to enjoy his well-earned leisure. He would reply suitably. He had prepared a speech in which he surveyed the changes that had taken place in the F.M.S. since first, a raw cadet, he had landed at Singapore. He would thank them for their loyal cooperation with him during the term which it had been his privilege to serve as Resident at Timbang Belud, and draw a glowing picture of the future that awaited the country as a whole and Timbang Belud in particular. He would remind them that he had known it as a poverty-stricken village with a few Chinese shops and left it now a prosperous town with paved streets down which ran trams, with stone houses, a rich Chinese settlement, and a clubhouse second in splendour only to that of Singapore. They would sing “For he’s a jolly good fellow’ and “Auld Lang Syne’. Then they would dance and a good many of the younger men would get drunk. The Malays had already given him a farewell party and the Chinese an interminable feast. Tomorrow a vast concourse would see him off at the station and that would be the end of him. He wondered what they would say of him. The Malays and the Chinese would say he had been stern, but acknowledge that he had been just. The planters had not liked him. They thought him hard because he would not let them ride roughshod over their labour. His subordinates had feared him. He drove them. He had no patience with slackness or inefficiency. He had never spared himself and saw no reason why he should spare others. They thought him inhuman. It was true that there was nothing come-hither in him. He could not throw off his official position when he went to the club and laugh at bawdy stories, chaff and be chaffed. He was conscious that his arrival cast a gloom, and to play bridge with him (he liked to play every day from six to eight) was looked upon as a privilege rather than an entertainment. When at some other table a young man’s four as the evening wore on grew hilarious, he caught glances thrown in his direction and sometimes an older member would stroll up to the noisy ones and in an undertone advise them to be quiet. George Moon sighed a little. From an official standpoint his career had been a success, he had been the youngest Resident ever appointed in the F.M.S., and for exceptional services a C.M.G. had been conferred upon him; but from the human it had perhaps been otherwise. He had earned respect, respect for his ability, industry, and trustworthiness, but he was too clear-sighted to think for a moment that he had inspired affection. No one would regret him. In a few months he would be forgotten.

He smiled grimly. He was not sentimental He had enjoyed his authority, and it gave him an austere satisfaction to know that he had kept everyone up to the mark. It did not displease him to think that he had been feared rather than loved. He saw his life as a problem in higher mathematics, the working-out of which had required intense application of all his powers, but of which the result had not the least practical consequence. Its interest lay in its intricacy and its beauty in its solution. But like pure beauty it led nowhither. His future was blank. He was fifty-five, and full of energy, and to himself his mind seemed as alert as ever, his experience of men and affairs was wide: all that remained to him was to settle down in a country town in England or in a cheap part of the Riviera and play bridge with elderly ladies and golf with retired colonels. He had met, when on leave, old chiefs of his, and had observed with what difficulty they adapted themselves to the change in their circumstances. They had looked forward to the freedom that would be theirs when they retired and had pictured the charming uses to which they would put their leisure. Mirage. It was not very pleasant to be obscure after having dwelt in a spacious Residency, to make do with a couple of maids when you had been accustomed to the service of half a dozen Chinese boys and, above all, it was not pleasant to realize that you did hot matter a row of beans to anyone when you had grown used to the delicate flattery of knowing that a word of praise could delight and a frown humiliate all sorts and conditions of men.

George Moon stretched out his hand and helped himself to a cigarette from the box on his desk. As he did so he noticed all the little lines on the back of his hand and the thinness of his shrivelled fingers. He frowned with distaste. It was the hand of an old man. There was in his office a Chinese mirror-picture that he had bought long ago and that he was leaving behind. He got up and looked at himself in it. He saw a thin yellow face, wrinkled and tight-lipped, thin grey hair, and grey tired eyes. He was tallish, very spare, with narrow shoulders, and he held himself erect. He had always played polo and even now could beat most of the younger men at tennis. When you talked to him he kept his eyes fixed on your face, listening attentively, but his expression did not change, and you had no notion what effect your words had on him. Perhaps he did not realize how disconcerting this was. He seldom smiled.

An orderly came in with a name written on a chit. George Moon looked at it and told him to show the visitor in. He sat down once more in his chair and looked with his cold eyes at the door through which in a moment the visitor would come. It was Tom Saffary, and he wondered what he wanted. Presumably something to do with the festivity that night. It had amused him to hear that Tom Saffary was the head of the committee that had organized it, for their relations during the last year had been far from cordial. Saffary was a planter and one of his Tamil overseers had lodged a complaint against him for assault. The Tamil had been grossly insolent to him and Saffary had given him a thrashing. George Moon realized that the provocation was great, but he had always set his face against the planters taking the law in their own hands, and when the case was tried he sentenced Saffary to a fine. But when the court rose, to show that there was no ill feeling he asked Saffary to luncheon: Saffary, resentful of what he thought an unmerited affront, curtly refused and since then had declined to have any social relations with the Resident. He answered when George Moon, casually, but resolved not to be affronted, spoke to him; but would neither play bridge nor tennis with him. He was manager of the largest rubber estate in the district, and George Moon asked himself sardonically whether he had arranged the dinner and collected subscriptions for the presentation because he thought his dignity required it or whether, now that his Resident was leaving, it appealed to his sentimentality to make a noble gesture. It tickled George Moon’s frigid sense of humour to think that it would fall to Tom Saffary to make the principal speech of the evening, in which he would enlarge upon the departing Resident’s admirable qualities and voice the community’s regret at their irreparable loss.

Tom Saffary was ushered in. The Resident rose from his chair, shook hands with him and thinly smiled.

“How do you do? Sit down. Won’t you have a cigarette?”

“How do you do?”

Saffary took the chair to which the Resident motioned him, and the Resident waited for him to state his business. He had a notion that his visitor was embarrassed. He was a big, burly, stout fellow, with a red face and a double chin, curly black hair, and blue eyes. He was a fine figure of a man, strong as a horse, but it was plain he did himself too well. He drank a good deal and ate too heartily. But he was a good business man and a hard worker. He ran his estate efficiently. He was popular in the community. He was generally known as a good chap. He was free with his money and ready to lend a helping hand to anyone in distress. It occurred to the Resident that Saffary had come in order before the dinner to compose the difference between them. The emotion that might have occasioned such a desire excited in the Resident’s sensibility a very faint, good-humoured contempt. He had no enemies because individuals did not mean enough to him for him to hate any of them, but if he had, he thought, he would have hated them to the end.

“I dare say you’re a bit surprised to see me here this morning, and I expect, as it’s your last day and all that, you’re pretty busy.”

George Moon did not answer, and the other went on.

“I’ve come on rather an awkward business. The fact is that my wife and I won’t be able to come to the dinner tonight, and after that unpleasantness we had together last year I thought it only right to come and tell you that it has nothing to do with that. I think you treated me very harshly; it’s not the money I minded, it was the indignity, but bygones are bygones. Now that you’re leaving I don’t want you to think that I bear any more ill-feeling towards you.”

“I realized that when I heard that you were chiefly responsible for the send-off you’re giving me,” answered the Resident civilly. “I’m sorry that you won’t be able to come tonight.”

“I’m sorry, too. It’s on account of Knobby Clarke’s death,” Saffary hesitated for a moment. “My wife and I were very much upset by it.”

“It was very sad. He was a great friend of yours, wasn’t he?”

“He was the greatest friend I had in the colony.”

Tears shone in Tom Saffary’s eyes. Fat men were very emotional, thought George Moon.

“I quite understand that in that case you should have no heart for what looks like being a rather uproarious party,” he said kindly. “Have you heard anything of the circumstances?”

“No, nothing but what appeared in the paper.”

“He seemed all right when he left here.”

“As far as I know he’d never had a day’s illness in his life.”

“Heart, I suppose. How old was he?”

“Same age as me. Thirty-eight.”

“That’s young to die.”

Knobby Clarke was a planter and the estate he managed was next door to Saffary’s. George Moon had liked him. He was a rather ugly man, sandy, with high cheek-bones and hollow temples, large pale eyes in deep sockets and a big mouth. But he had an attractive smile and an easy manner. He was amusing and could tell a good story. He had a careless good-humour that people found pleasing. He played games well. He was no fool. George Moon would have said he was somewhat colourless. In the course of his career he had known a good many men like him. They came and went. A fortnight before, he had left for England on leave and the Resident knew that the Saffarys had given a large dinner-party on his last night. He was married and his wife of course went with him.

“I’m sorry for her,” said George Moon. “It must have been a terrible blow. He was buried at sea, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. That’s what it said in the paper.”

The news had reached Timbang the night before. The Singapore papers arrived at six, just as people were getting to the club, and a good many men waited to play bridge or billiards till they had had a glance at them. Suddenly one fellow had called out:

“I say, do you see this? Knobby’s dead.”

“Knobby who? Not Knobby Clarke?”

There was a three-line paragraph in a column of general intelligence:

Messrs Star, Mosley and Co. have received a cable informing them that Mr Harold Clarke of Timbang Batu died suddenly on his way home and was buried at sea.

A man came up and took the paper from the speaker’s hand, and incredulously read the note for himself. Another peered over his shoulder. Such as happened to be reading the paper turned to the page in question and read the three indifferent lines.

“By George,” cried one.

“I say, what tough luck,” said another.

“He was as fit as a fiddle when he left here.”

A shiver of dismay pierced those hearty, jovial, careless men, and each one for a moment remembered that he too was mortal. Other members came in and as they entered, braced by the thought of the six o’clock drink, and eager to meet their friends, they were met by the grim tidings.

“I say, have you heard? Poor Knobby Clarke’s dead.”

“No? I say, how awful!”

“Rotten luck, isn’t it?”

“Rotten.”

“Damned good sort.”

“One of the best.”

“It gave me quite a turn when I saw it in the paper just by chance.”

“I don’t wonder.”

One man with the paper in his hand went into the billiard-room to break the news. They were playing off the handicap for the Prince of Wales’s Cup. That august personage had presented it to the club on the occasion of his visit to Timbang Belud. Tom Saffary was playing against a man called Douglas, and the Resident, who had been beaten in the previous round, was seated with about a dozen others watching the game. The marker was monotonously calling out the score. The newcomer waited for Saffary to finish his break and then he called out to him.

“I say, Tom, Knobby’s dead.”

“Knobby? It’s not true.”

The other handed him the paper. Three or four gathered round to read with him.

“Good God!”

There was a moment’s awed silence. The paper was passed from hand to hand. It was odd that none seemed willing to believe till he saw it for himself in black and white.

“Oh, I am sorry.”

“I say, it’s awful for his wife,” said Tom Saffary. “She was going to have a baby. My poor missus’ll be upset.”

“Why, it’s only a fortnight since he left here.”

“He was all right then.”

“In the pink.”

Saffary, his fat red face sagging a little, went over to a table and, seizing his glass, drank deeply.

“Look here, Tom,” said his opponent, “would you like to call the game off?”

“Can’t very well do that.” Saffary’s eye sought the score board and he saw that he was ahead. “No, let’s finish. Then I’ll go home and break it to Violet.”

Douglas had his shot and made fourteen. Tom Saffary missed an easy in-off, but left nothing. Douglas played again, but did not score and again Saffary missed a shot that ordinarily he could have been sure of. He frowned a little. He knew his friends had betted on him pretty heavily and he did not like the idea of failing them. Douglas made twenty-two. Saffary emptied his glass and by an effort of will that was quite patent to the sympathetic onlookers settled down to concentrate on the game. He made a break of eighteen and when he just failed to do a long Jenny they gave him a round of applause. He was sure of himself now and began to score quickly. Douglas was playing well too, and the match grew exciting to watch. The few minutes during which Saffary’s attention wandered had allowed his opponent to catch up with him, and now it was anybody’s game.

“Spot two hundred and thirty-five,” called the Malay, in his queer clipped English. “Plain two hundred and twenty-eight. Spot to play.”

Douglas made eight, and then Saffary, who was plain, drew up to two hundred and forty. He left his opponent a double balk. Douglas hit neither ball, and so gave Saffary another point.

“Spot two hundred and forty-three,” called the marker. “Plain two hundred and forty-one. Plain to play.”

Saffary played three beautiful shots off the red and finished the game.

“A popular victory,” the bystanders cried.

“Congratulations, old man,” said Douglas.

“Boy,” called Saffary, “ask these gentlemen what they’ll have. Poor old-Knobby.”

He sighed heavily. The drinks were brought and Saffary signed the chit. Then he said he’d be getting along. Two others had already begun to play.

“Sporting of him to go on like that,” said someone when the door was closed on Saffary.

“Yes, it shows grit.”

“For a while I thought his game had gone all to pieces.”

“He pulled himself together in grand style. He knew there were a lot of bets on him. He didn’t want to let his backers down.”

“Of course it’s a shock, a thing like that.”

“They were great pals. I wonder what he died of.”

“Good shot, sir.”

George Moon, remembering this scene, thought it strange that Tom Saffary, who on hearing of his friend’s death had shown such self-control, should now apparently take it so hard. It might be that just as in the war a man when hit often did not know it till some time afterwards, Saffary had not realized how great a blow to him Harold Clarke’s death was till he had had time to think it over. It seemed to him, however, more probable that Saffary, left to himself, would have carried on as usual, seeking sympathy for his loss in the company of his fellows, but that his wife’s conventional sense of propriety had insisted that it would be bad form to go to a party when the grief they were suffering from made it only decent for them to eschew for a little festive gatherings. Violet Saffary was a nice little woman, three or four years younger than her husband; not very pretty, but pleasant to look at and always becomingly dressed; amiable, ladylike, and unassuming. In the days when he had been on friendly terms with the Saffarys the Resident had from time to time dined with them. He had found her agreeable, but not very amusing. They had never talked but of commonplace things. Of late he had seen little of her. When they chanced to meet she always gave him a friendly smile, and on occasion he said one or two civil words to her. But it was only by an effort of memory that he distinguished her from half a dozen of the other ladies in the community whom his official position brought him in contact with.

Saffary had presumably said what he had come to say and the Resident wondered why he did not get up and go. He sat heaped up in his chair oddly, so that it gave you the feeling that his skeleton had ceased to support him and his considerable mass of flesh was falling in on him. He looked dully at the desk that separated him from the Resident. He sighed deeply.

“You must try not to take it too hard, Saffary,” said George Moon. “You know how uncertain life is in the East. One has to resign oneself to losing people one’s fond of.”

Saffary’s eyes slowly moved from the desk, and he fixed them on George Moon’s. They stared unwinking. George Moon liked people to look him in the eyes. Perhaps he felt that when he thus held their vision he held them in his power. Presently two tears formed themselves in Saffary’s blue eyes and slowly ran down his cheeks. He had a strangely puzzled look. Something had frightened him. Was it death? No. Something that he thought worse. He looked cowed. His mien was cringing so that he made you think of a dog unjustly beaten.

“It’s not that,” he faltered. “I could have borne that.”

George Moon did not answer. He held that big, powerful man with his cold level gaze and waited. He was pleasantly conscious of his absolute indifference. Saffary gave a harassed glance at the papers on the desk.

“I’m afraid I’m taking up too much of your time.”

“No, I have nothing to do at the moment.”

Saffary looked out of the window. A little shudder passed between his shoulders. He seemed to hesitate.

“I wonder if I might ask your advice,” he said at last.

“Of course,” said the Resident, with the shadow of a smile, “that’s one of the things I’m here for.”

“It’s a purely private matter.”

“You may be quite sure that I shan’t betray any confidence you place in me.”

“No, I know you wouldn’t do that, but it’s rather an awkward thing to speak about, and I shouldn’t feel very comfortable meeting you afterwards. But you’re going away tomorrow, and that makes it easier, if you understand what I mean.”

“Quite.”

Saffary began to speak, in a low voice, sulkily, as though he were ashamed, and he spoke with the awkwardness of a man unused to words. He went back and said the same thing over again. He got mixed up. He started a long, elaborate sentence and then broke off abruptly because he did not know how to finish it. George Moon listened in silence, his face a mask, smoking, and he only took his eyes off Saffary’s face to reach for another cigarette from the box in front of him and light it from the stub of that which he was just finishing. And while he listened he saw, as it were a background, the monotonous round of the planter’s life. It was like an accompaniment of muted strings that threw into sharper relief the calculated dissonances of an unexpected melody.

With rubber at so low a price every economy had to be exercised and Tom Saffary, notwithstanding the size of the estate, had to do work which in better times he had had an assistant for. He rose before dawn and went down to the lines where the coolies were assembled. When there was just enough light to see he read out the names, ticking them off according to the answers, and assigned the various squads to their work. Some tapped, some weeded, and others tended the ditches. Saffary went back to his solid breakfast, lit his pipe, and sallied forth again to inspect the coolies’ quarters. Children were playing and babies sprawling here and there. On the sidewalks Tamil women cooked their rice. Their black skins shone with oil. They were draped about in dull red cotton and wore gold ornaments in their hair. There were handsome creatures among them, upright of carriage, with delicate features and small, exquisite hands; but Saffary looked upon them only with distaste. He set out on his rounds. On his well-grown estate the trees planted in rows gave one a charming feeling of the prim forest of a German fairy-tale. The ground was thick with dead leaves. He was accompanied by a Tamil overseer, his long black hair done in a chignon, barefooted, in sarong and baju, with a showy ring on his finger. Saffary walked hard, jumping the ditches when he came to them, and soon he dripped with sweat. He examined the trees to see that they were properly tapped, and when he came across a coolie at work looked at the shavings and if they were too thick swore at him and docked him half a day’s pay. When a tree was not to be tapped any more he told the overseer to take away the cup and the wire that held it to the trunk. The weeders worked in gangs.

At noon Saffary returned to the bungalow and had a drink of beer which, because there was no ice, was hike-warm. He stripped off the khaki shorts, the flannel shirt, the heavy boots and stockings in which he had been walking, and shaved and bathed. He lunched in a sarong and baju. He lay off for half an hour, and then went down to his office and worked till five; he had tea and went to the club. About eight he started back for the bungalow, dined, and half an hour after went to bed.

But last night he went home immediately he had finished his match. Violet had not accompanied him that day. When the Clarkes were there they had met at the club every afternoon, but now they had gone home she came less often. She said there was no one there who much amused her and she had heard everything everyone had to say till she was fed to the teeth. She did not play bridge and it was dull for her to wait about while he played. She told Tom he need not mind leaving her alone. She had plenty of things to do in the house.

As soon as she saw him back so early she guessed that he had come to tell her that he had won his match. He was like a child in his self-satisfaction over one of these small triumphs. He was a kindly, simple creature and she knew that his pleasure at winning was not only on his own account, but because he thought it must give her pleasure too. It was rather sweet of him to hurry home in order to tell her all about it without delay.

“Well, how did your match go?” she said as soon as he came lumbering into the sitting-room.

“I won.”

“Easily?”

“Well, not as easily as I should have. I was a bit ahead, and then I stuck, I couldn’t do a thing, and you know what Douglas is, not at all showy, but steady, and he pulled up with me. Then I said to myself, well, if I don’t buck up I shall get a licking. I had a bit of luck here and there, and then, to cut a long story short, I beat him by seven.”

“Isn’t that splendid? You ought to win the cup now, oughtn’t you?”

“Well, I’ve got three matches more. If I can get into the semi-finals I ought to have a chance.”

Violet smiled. She was anxious to show him that she was as much interested as he expected her to be.

“What made you go to pieces when you did?”

His face sagged.

“That’s why I came back at once. I’d have scratched only I thought it wasn’t fair on the fellows who’d backed me. I don’t know how to tell you, Violet.”

She gave him a questioning look.

“Why, what’s the matter? Not bad news?”

“Rotten. Knobby’s dead.”

For a full minute she stared at him, and her face, her neat friendly little face, grew haggard with horror. At first it seemed as though she could not understand.

“What do you mean?” she cried.

“It was in the paper. He died on board. They buried him at sea.”

Suddenly she gave a piercing cry and fell headlong to the floor. She had fainted dead away.

“Violet,” he cried, and threw himself down on his knees and took her head in his arms. “Boy, boy.”

A boy, startled by the terror in his master’s voice, rushed in, and Saffary shouted him to bring brandy. He forced a little between Violet’s lips. She opened her eyes, and as she remembered they grew dark with anguish. Her face was screwed up like a little child’s when it is just going to burst into tears. He lifted her up in his arms and laid her on the sofa. She turned her head away.

“Oh, Tom, it isn’t true. It can’t be true.”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“No, no, no.”

She burst into tears. She wept convulsively. It was dreadful to hear her. Saffary did not know what to do. He knelt beside her and tried to soothe her. He sought to take her in his arms, but with a sudden gesture she repelled him.

“Don’t touch me,” she cried, and she said it so sharply that he was startled.

He rose to his feet.

“Try not to take it too hard, sweetie,” he said. “I know it’s been an awful shock. He was one of the best.”

She buried her face in the cushions and wept despairingly. It tortured him to see her body shaken by those uncontrollable sobs. She was beside herself. He put his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Darling, don’t give way like that. It’s so bad for you.”

She shook herself free from his hand.

“For God’s sake leave me alone,” she cried. “Oh, Hal, Hal.” He had never heard her call the dead man that before. Of course his name was Harold, but everyone called him Knobby. “What shall I do?” she wailed. “I can’t bear it. I can’t bear it.”

Saffary began to grow a trifle impatient. So much grief did seem to him exaggerated. Violet was not normally so emotional. He supposed it was the damned climate. It made women nervous and high-strung. Violet hadn’t been home for four years. She was not hiding her face now. She lay, almost falling off the sofa, her mouth open in the extremity of her pain, and the tears streamed from her staring eyes. She was distraught.

“Have a little more brandy,” he said. “Try to pull yourself together, darling. You can’t do Knobby any good by getting in such a state.”

With a sudden gesture she sprang to her feet and pushed him aside. She gave him a look of hatred.

“Go away, Tom. I don’t want your sympathy. I want to be left alone.”

She walked swiftly over to an arm-chair and threw herself down in it. She flung back her head and her poor white face was wrenched into a grimace of agony.

“Oh, it’s not fair,” she moaned. “What’s to become of me now? Oh, God, I wish I were dead.”

“Violet.”

His voice quavered with pain. He was very nearly crying too. She stamped her foot impatiently.

“Go away, I tell you. Go away.”

He started. He stared at her and suddenly gasped. A shudder passed through his great bulk. He took a step towards her and stopped, but his eyes never left her white, tortured face; he stared as though he saw in it something that appalled him. Then he dropped his head and without a word walked out of the room. He went into a little sitting-room they had at the back, but seldom used, and sank heavily into a chair. He thought. Presently the gong sounded for dinner. He had not had his bath. He gave his hands a glance. He could not be bothered to wash them. He walked slowly into the dining-room. He told the boy to go and tell Violet that dinner was ready. The boy came back and said she did not want any.

“All right. Let me have mine then,” said Saffary.

He sent Violet in a plate of soup and a piece of toast, and when the fish was served he put some on a plate for her and gave it to the boy. But the boy came back with it at once.

“Mem, she say no wantchee,” he said.

Saffary ate his dinner alone. He ate from habit, solidly, through the familiar courses. He drank a bottle of beer. When he had finished the boy brought him a cup of coffee and he lit a cheroot. Saffary sat still till he had finished it. He thought. At last he got up and went back into the large veranda which was where they always sat. Violet was still huddled in the chair in which he had left her. Her eyes were closed, but she opened them when she heard him come. He took a light chair and sat down in front of her.

“What was Knobby to you, Violet?” he said.

She gave a slight start. She turned away her eyes, but did not speak.

“I can’t quite make out why you should have been so frightfully upset by the news of his death.”

“It was an awful shock.”

“Of course. But it seems very strange that anyone should go simply to pieces over the death of a friend.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she said.

She could hardly speak the words and he saw that her lips were trembling.

“I’ve never heard you call him Hal. Even his wife called him Knobby.”

She did not say anything. Her eyes, heavy with grief, were fixed on vacancy.

“Look at me, Violet.”

She turned her head slightly and listlessly gazed at him.

“Was he your lover?”

She closed her eyes and tears flowed from them. Her mouth was strangely twisted.

“Haven’t you got anything to say at all?”

She shook her head.

“You must answer me, Violet.”

“I’m not fit to talk to you now,” she moaned. “How can you be so heartless?”

“I’m afraid I don’t feel very sympathetic at the moment. We must get this straight now. Would you like a drink of water?”

“I don’t want anything.”

“Then answer my question.”

“You have no right to ask it. It’s insulting.”

“Do you ask me to believe that a woman like you who hears of the death of someone she knew is going to faint dead away and then, when she comes to, is going to cry like that? Why, one wouldn’t be so upset over the death of one’s only child. When we heard of your mother’s death you cried of course, anyone would, and I know you were utterly miserable, but you came to me for comfort and you said you didn’t know what you’d have done without me.”

“This was so frightfully sudden.”

“Your mother’s death was sudden, too.”

“Naturally I was very fond of Knobby.”

“How fond? So fond that when you heard he was dead you didn’t know and you didn’t care what you said? Why did you say it wasn’t fair? Why did you say, ‘What’s going to become of me now?’?”

She sighed deeply. She turned her head this way and that like a sheep trying to avoid the hands of the butcher.

“You musn’t take me for an utter fool, Violet. I tell you it’s impossible that you should be so shattered by the blow if there hadn’t been something between you.”

“Well, if you think that, why do you torture me with questions?”

“My dear, it’s no good shilly-shallying. We can’t go on like this. What d’you think I’m feeling?”

She looked at him when he said this. She hadn’t thought of him at all. She had been too much absorbed in her own misery to be concerned with his.

“I’m so tired,” she sighed.

He leaned forward and roughly seized her wrist.

“Speak,” he cried.

“You’re hurting me.”

“And what about me? D’you think you’re not hurting me? How can you have the heart to let me suffer like this?”

He let go of her arm and sprang to his feet. He walked to the end of the room and back again. It looked as though the movement had suddenly roused him to fury. He caught her by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet. He shook her.

“If you don’t tell me the truth I’ll kill you,” he cried.

“I wish you would,” she said.

“He was your lover?”

“Yes.”

“You swine.”

With one hand still on her shoulder so that she could not move he swung back his other arm and with a flat palm struck her repeatedly, with all his strength, on the side of her face. She quivered under the blows, but did not flinch or cry out. He struck her again and again. All at once he felt her strangely inert, he let go of her and she sank unconscious to the floor. Fear seized him. He bent down and touched her, calling her name. She did not move. He lifted her up and put her back into the chair from which a little while before he had pulled her. The brandy that had been brought when first she fainted was still in the room and he fetched it and tried to force it down her throat. She choked and it spilt over her chin and neck. One side of her pale face was livid from the blows of his heavy hand. She sighed a little and opened her eyes. He held the glass again to her lips, supporting her head, and she sipped a little of the neat spirit. He looked at her with penitent, anxious eyes.

“I’m sorry, Violet. I didn’t mean to do that. I’m dreadfully ashamed of myself. I never thought I could sink so low as to hit a woman.”

Though she was feeling very weak and her face was hurting, the flicker of a smile crossed her lips. Poor Tom. He did say things like that. He felt like that. And how scandalized he would be if you asked him why a man shouldn’t hit a woman. But Saffary, seeing the wan smile, put it down to her indomitable courage. By God, she’s a plucky little woman, he thought. Game isn’t the word.

“Give me a cigarette,” she said.

He took one out of his case and put it in her mouth. He made two or three ineffectual attempts to strike his lighter. It would not work.

“Hadn’t you better get a match?” she said.

For the moment she had forgotten her heart-rending grief and was faintly amused at the situation. He took a box from the table and held the lighted match to her cigarette. She inhaled the first puff with a sense of infinite relief.

“I can’t tell you how ashamed I am, Violet,” he said. “I’m disgusted with myself. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oh, that’s all right. It was very natural. Why don’t you have a drink? It’ll do you good.”

Without a word, his shoulders all hunched up as though the burden that oppressed him were material, he helped himself to a brandy and soda. Then, still silent, he sat down. She watched the blue smoke curl into the air.

“What are you going to do?” she said at last.

He gave a weary gesture of despair.

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow. You’re not in a fit state tonight. As soon as you’ve finished your cigarette you’d better go to bed.”

“You know so much, you’d better know everything.”

“Not now, Violet.”

“Yes, now.”

She began to speak. He heard her words, but could hardly make sense of them. He felt like a man who has built himself a house with loving care and thought to live in it all his life, and then, he does not understand why, sees the housebreakers come and with their picks and heavy hammers destroy it room by room, till what was a fair dwelling-place is only a heap of rubble. What made it so awful was that it was Knobby Clarke who had done this thing. They had come to the F.M.S. on the same ship and had worked at first on the same estate. They call the young planter a creeper and you can tell him in the streets of Singapore by his double felt hat and his khaki coat turned up at the wrists. Callow youths who saunter about staring and are inveigled by wily Chinese into buying worthless truck from Birmingham which they send home as Eastern curios, sit in the lounges of cheap hotels drinking innumerable stengahs, and after an evening at the pictures get into rickshaws and finish the night in the Chinese quarter. Tom and Knobby were inseparable. Tom, a big, powerful fellow, simple, very honest, hard-working; and Knobby, ungainly, but curiously attractive, with his deep-set eyes, hollow cheeks, and large humorous mouth. It was Knobby who made the jokes and Tom who laughed at them. Tom married first. He met Violet when he went on leave. The daughter of a doctor killed in the war, she was governess in the house of some people who lived in the same place as his father. He fell in love with her because she was alone in the world, and his tender heart was touched by the thought of the drab life that lay before her. But Knobby married, because Tom had and he felt lost without him, a girl who had come East to spend the winter with relations. Enid Clarke had been very pretty then in her blonde way, and full-face she was pretty still, though her skin, once so clear and fresh, was already faded; but she had a very weak, small, insignificant chin and in profile reminded you of a sheep. She had pretty flaxen hair, straight, because in the heat it would not keep its wave, and china-blue eyes. Though but twenty-six, she had already a tired look. A year after marriage she had a baby, but it died when only two years old. It was after this that Tom Saffary managed to get Knobby the post of manager of the estate next his own. The two men pleasantly resumed their old familiarity, and their wives, who till then had not known one another very well, soon made friends. They copied one another’s frocks and lent one another servants and crockery when they gave a party. The four of them met every day. They went everywhere together. Tom Saffary thought it grand.

The strange thing was that Violet and Knobby Clarke lived on those terms of close intimacy for three years before they fell in love with one another. Neither saw love approaching. Neither suspected that in the pleasure each took in the other’s company there was anything more than the casual friendship of two persons thrown together by the circumstances of life. To be together gave them no particular happiness, but merely a quiet sense of comfort. If by chance a day passed without their meeting they felt unaccountably bored. That seemed very natural. They played games together. They danced together. They chaffed one another. The revelation came to them by what looked like pure accident. They had all been to a dance at the club and were driving home in Saffary’s car. The Clarkes’s estate was on the way and he was dropping them at their bungalow. Violet and Knobby sat in the back. He had had a good deal to drink, but was not drunk; their hands touched by chance, and he took hers and held it. They did not speak. They were all tired. But suddenly the exhilaration of the champagne left him and he was cold sober. They knew in a flash that they were madly in love with one another and at the same moment they realized they had never been in love before. When they reached the Clarkes’s Tom said:

“You’d better hop in beside me, Violet.”

“I’m too exhausted to move,” she said.

Her legs seemed so weak that she thought she would never be able to stand.

When they met next day neither referred to what had happened, but each knew that something inevitable had passed. They behaved to one another as they had always done, they continued to behave so for weeks, but they felt that everything was different. At last flesh and blood could stand it no longer and they became lovers. But the physical tie seemed to them the least important element in their relation, and indeed their way of living made it impossible for them, except very seldom, to enjoy any intimate connexion. It was enough that they saw one another, though in the company of others, every day; a glance, a touch of the hand, assured them of their love, and that was all that mattered. The sexual act was no more than an affirmation of the union of their souls.

They very seldom talked of Tom or Enid. If sometimes they laughed together at their foibles it was not unkindly. It might have seemed odd to them to realize how completely these two people whom they saw so constantly had ceased to matter to them if they had given them enough thought to consider the matter. Their relations with them fell into the routine of life that nobody notices, like shaving oneself, dressing, and eating three meals a day. They felt tenderly towards them. They even took pains to please them, as you would with a bed-ridden invalid, because their own happiness was so great that in charity they must do what they could for others less fortunate. They had no scruples. They were too much absorbed in one another to be touched even for a moment by remorse. Beauty now excitingly kindled the pleasant humdrum life they had led so long.

But then an event took place that filled them with consternation. The company for which Tom worked entered into negotiations to buy extensive rubber plantations in British North Borneo and invited Tom to manage them.

It was a better job than his present one, with a higher salary, and since he would have assistants under him he would not have to work so hard. Saffary welcomed the offer. Both Clarke and Saffary were due for leave and the two couples had arranged to travel home together. They had already booked their passages. This changed everything. Tom would not be able to get away for at least a year. By the time the Clarkes came back the Saffarys would be settled in Borneo. It did not take Violet and Knobby long to decide that there was only one thing to do. They had been willing enough to go on as they were, notwithstanding the hindrance to the enjoyment of their love, when they were certain of seeing one another continually; they felt that they had endless time before them and the future was coloured with a happiness that seemed to have no limit; but neither could suffer for an instant the thought of separation. They made up their minds to run away together, and then it seemed to them on a sudden that every day that passed before they could be together always and all the time was a day lost. Their love took another guise. It flamed into a devouring passion that left them no emotion to waste on others. They cared little for the pain they must cause Tom and Enid. It was unfortunate, but inevitable. They made their plans deliberately. Knobby on the pretence of business would go to Singapore and Violet, telling Tom that she was going to spend a week with friends on an estate down the line, would join him there. They would go over to Java and thence take ship to Sydney. In Sydney Knobby would look for a job. When Violet told Tom that the Mackenzies had asked her to spend a few days with them, he was pleased.

“That’s grand. I think you want a change, darling,” he said. I’ve fancied you’ve been looking a bit peaked lately.”

He stroked her cheek affectionately. The gesture stabbed her heart.

“You’ve always been awfully good to me, Tom,” she said, her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“Well, that’s the least I could be. You’re the best little woman in the world.”

“Have you been happy with me these eight years?”

“Frightfully.”

“Well, that’s something, isn’t it? No one can ever take that away from you.”

She told herself that he was the kind of man who would soon console himself. He liked women for themselves and it would not be long after he had regained his freedom before he found someone that he would wish to marry. And he would be just as happy with his new wife as he had been with her. Perhaps he would marry Enid. Enid was one of those dependent little things that somewhat exasperated her and she did not think her capable of deep feeling. Her vanity would be hurt; her heart would not be broken. But now that the die was cast, everything settled and the day fixed, she had a qualm. Remorse beset her. She wished that it had been possible not to cause those two people such fearful distress. She faltered.

“We’ve had a very good time here, Tom,” she said. “I wonder if it’s wise to leave it all. We’re giving up a certainty for we don’t know what.”

“My dear child, it’s a chance in a million and much better money.”

“Money isn’t everything. There’s happiness.”

“I know that, but there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be just as happy in B.N.B. And besides, there was no alternative. I’m not my own master. The directors want me to go and I must, and that’s all there is to it.”

She sighed. There was no alternative for her either. She shrugged her shoulders. It was hateful to cause others pain; sometimes you couldn’t help yourself. Tom meant no more to her than the casual man on the voyage out who was civil to you: it was absurd that she should be asked to sacrifice her life for him.

The Clarkes were due to sail for England in a fortnight and this determined the date of their elopement. The days passed. Violet was restless and excited. She looked forward with a joy that was almost painful to the peace that she anticipated when they were once on board the ship and could begin the life which she was sure would give her at last perfect happiness.

She began to pack. The friends she was supposed to be going to stay with entertained a good deal and this gave her an excuse to take quite a lot of luggage. She was starting next day. It was eleven o’clock in the morning and Tom was making his round of the estate. One of the boys came to her room and told her that Mrs Clarke was there and at the same moment she heard Enid calling her. Quickly closing the lid of her trunk, she went out on to the veranda. To her astonishment Enid came up to her, flung her arms round her neck and kissed her eagerly. She looked at Enid and saw her cheeks, usually pale, were flushed and that her eyes were shining. Enid burst into tears.

“What on earth’s the matter, darling?” she cried.

For one moment she was afraid that Enid knew everything. But Enid was flushed with delight and not with jealousy or anger.

“I’ve just seen Dr Harrow,” she said. “I didn’t want to say anything about it. I’ve had two or three false alarms, but this time he says it’s all right.”

A sudden coldness pierced Violet’s heart.

“What do you mean? You’re not going to …”

She looked at Enid and Enid nodded.

“Yes, he says there’s no doubt about it at all. He thinks I’m at least three months gone. Oh, my dear, I’m so wildly happy.”

She flung herself again into Violet’s arms and clung to her, weeping.

“Oh, darling, don’t.”

Violet felt herself grow pale as death and knew that if she didn’t keep a tight hold of herself she would faint.

“Does Knobby know?”

“No, I didn’t say a word. He was so disappointed before. He was so frightfully cut up when baby died. He’s wanted me to have another so badly.”

Violet forced herself to say the things that were expected of her, but Enid was not listening. She wanted to tell the whole story of her hopes and fears, of her symptoms, and then of her interview with the doctor. She went on and on.

“When are you going to tell Knobby?” Violet asked at last. “Now, when he gets in?”

“Oh, no, he’s tired and hungry when he gets back from his round. I shall wait until tonight after dinner.”

Violet repressed a movement of exasperation; Enid was going to make a scene of it and was choosing her moment; but after all, it was only natural. It was lucky, for it would give her the chance to see Knobby first. As soon as she was rid of her she rang him up. She knew that he always looked in at his office on his way home, and she left a message asking him to call her. She was only afraid that he would not do so till Tom was back, but she had to take a chance of that. The bell rang and Tom had not come in.

“Hal?”

“Yes.”

“Will you be at the hut at three?”

“Yes. Has anything happened?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Don’t worry.”

She rang off. The hut was a little shelter on Knobby’s estate which she could get to without difficulty and where they occasionally met. The coolies passed it while they worked and it had no privacy; but it was a convenient place for them without exciting comment to exchange a few minutes’ conversation. At three Enid would be resting and Tom at work in his office.

When Violet walked up Knobby was already there. He gave a gasp.

“Violet, how white you are.”

She gave him her hand. They did not know what eyes might be watching them and their behaviour here was always such as anyone could observe.

“Enid came to see me this morning. She’s going to tell you tonight. I thought you ought to be warned. She’s going to have a baby.”

“Violet!”

He looked at her aghast. She began to cry. They had never talked of the relations they had, he with his wife and she with her husband. They ignored the subject because it was to each horribly painful. Violet knew what her own life was; she satisfied her husband’s appetite, but, with a woman’s strange nonchalance, because to do so gave her no pleasure, attached no importance to it; but somehow she had persuaded herself that with Hal it was different. He felt now instinctively how bitterly what she had learned wounded her. He tried to excuse himself.

“Darling, I couldn’t help myself.”

She cried silently and he watched her with miserable eyes.

“I know it seems beastly,” he said, “but what could I do? It wasn’t as if I had any reason to …”

She interrupted him.

“I don’t blame you. It was inevitable. It’s only because I’m stupid that it gives me such a frightful pain in my heart.”

“Darling!”

“We ought to have gone away together two years ago. It was madness to think we could go on like this.”

“Are you sure Enid’s right? She thought she was in the family way three or four years ago.”

“Oh, yes, she’s right. She’s frightfully happy. She says you wanted a child so badly.”

“It’s come as such an awful surprise. I don’t seem able to realize it yet.”

She looked at him. He was staring at the leaf-strewn earth with harassed eyes. She smiled a little.

“Poor Hal.” She sighed deeply. “There’s nothing to be done about it. It’s the end of us.”

“What do you mean?” he cried.

“Oh, my dear, you can’t very well leave her now, can you? It was all right before. She would have been unhappy, but she would have got over it. But now it’s different. It’s not a very nice time for a woman anyhow. For months she feels more or less ill. She wants affection. She wants to be taken care of. It would be frightful to leave her to bear it all alone. We couldn’t be such beasts.”

“Do you mean to say you want me to go back to England with her?”

She nodded gravely.

“It’s lucky you’re going. It’ll be easier when you get away and we don’t see one another every day.”

“But I can’t live without you now.”

“Oh, yes, you can. You must. I can. And it’ll be worse for me, because I stay behind and I shall have nothing.”

“Oh, Violet, it’s impossible.”

“My dear, it’s no good arguing. The moment she told me I saw it meant that. That’s why I wanted to see you first. I thought the shock might lead you to blurt out the whole truth. You know I love you more than anything in the world. She’s never done me any harm. I couldn’t take you away from her now. It’s bad luck on both of us, but there it is, I simply wouldn’t dare to do a filthy thing like that.”

“I wish I were dead,” he moaned.

“That wouldn’t do her any good, or me either,” she smiled.

“What about the future? Have we got to sacrifice our whole lives?”

“I’m afraid so. It sounds rather grim, darling, but I suppose sooner or later we shall get over it. One gets over everything.”

She looked at her wrist-watch.

“I ought to be getting back. Tom will be in soon. We’re all meeting at the club at five.”

“Tom and I are supposed to be playing tennis.” He gave her a pitiful look. “Oh, Violet, I’m so frightfully unhappy.”

“I know. So am I. But we shan’t do any good by talking about it.”

She gave him her hand, but he took her in his arms and kissed her, and when she released herself her cheeks were wet with his tears. But she was so desperate she could not cry.

Ten days later the Clarkes sailed.

While George Moon was listening to as much of this story as Tom Saffary was able to tell him, he reflected in his cool, detached way how odd it was that these commonplace people, leading lives so monotonous, should have been convulsed by such a tragedy. Who would have thought that Violet Saffary, so neat and demure, sitting in the club reading the illustrated papers or chatting with her friends over a lemon squash, should have been eating her heart out for love of that ordinary man? George Moon remembered seeing Knobby at the club the evening before he sailed. He seemed in great spirits. Fellows envied him because he was going home. Those who had recently come back told him by no means to miss the show at the Pavilion. Drink flowed freely. The Resident had not been asked to the farewell party the Saffarys gave for the Clarkes, but he knew very well what it had been like, the good cheer, the cordiality, the chaff, and then after dinner the gramophone turned on and everyone dancing. He wondered what Violet and Clarke had felt as they danced together. It gave him an odd sensation of dismay to think of the despair that must have filled their hearts while they pretended to be so gay.

And with another part of his mind George Moon thought of his own past. Very few knew that story. After all, it happened twenty-five years ago.

“What are you going to do now, Saffary?” he asked.

“Well, that’s what I wanted you to advise me about. Now that Knobby’s dead I don’t know what’s going to happen to Violet if I divorce her. I was wondering if I oughtn’t to let her divorce me.”

“Oh, you want to divorce?”

“Well, I must.”

George Moon lit another cigarette and watched for a moment the smoke that curled away into the air.

“Did you ever know that I’d been married?”

“Yes, I think I’d heard. You’re a widower, aren’t you?”

“No, I divorced my wife. I have a son of twenty-seven. He’s farming in New Zealand. I saw my wife the last time I was home on leave. We met at a play. At first we didn’t recognize one another. She spoke to me. I asked her to lunch at the Berkeley.”

George Moon chuckled to himself. He was alone. It was a musical comedy. He found himself sitting next to a large fat dark woman whom he vaguely thought he had seen before, but the play was just starting and he did not give her a second look. When the curtain fell after the first act she looked at him with bright eyes and spoke.

“How are you, George?”

It was his wife. She had a bold, friendly manner and was very much at her ease.

“It’s a long time since we met,” she said.

“It is.”

“How has life been treating you?”

“Oh, all right.”

“I suppose you’re a Resident now. You’re still in the Service, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’m retiring soon, worse luck.”

“Why? You look very fit.”

“I’m reaching the age limit. I’m supposed to be an old buffer and no good any more.”

“You’re lucky to have kept so thin. I’m terrible, aren’t I?”

“You don’t look as though you were wasting away.”

“I know. I’m stout and I’m growing stouter all the time. I can’t help it and I love food. I can’t resist cream and bread and potatoes.”

George Moon laughed, but not at what she said; at his own thoughts. In years gone by it had sometimes occurred to him that he might meet her, but he had never thought that the meeting would take this turn. When the play was ended and with a smile she bade him good night, he said:

“I suppose you wouldn’t lunch with me one day?”

“Any day you like.”

They arranged a date and duly met. He knew that she had married the man on whose account he had divorced her, and he judged by her clothes that she was in comfortable circumstances. They drank a cocktail. She ate the hors-d’oeuvre with gusto. She was fifty if she was a day, but she carried her years with spirit. There was something jolly and careless about her, she was quick on the uptake, chatty, and she had the hearty, infectious laugh of the fat woman who has let herself go. If he had not known that her family had for a century been in the Indian Civil Service he would have thought that she had been a chorus girl. She was not flashy, but she had a sort of flamboyance of nature that suggested the stage. She was not in the least embarrassed.

“You never married again, did you?” she asked.

“No.”

“Pity. Because it wasn’t a success the first time there’s no reason why it shouldn’t have been the second.”

“There’s no need for me to ask if you’ve been happy.”

“I’ve got nothing to complain of. I think I’ve got a happy nature. Jim’s always been very good to me; he’s retired now, you know, and we live in the country, and I adore Betty.”

“Who’s Betty?”

“Oh, she’s my daughter. She got married two years ago. I’m expecting to be a grandmother almost any day.”

“That ages us a bit.”

She gave a laugh.

“Betty’s twenty-two. It was nice of you to ask me to lunch, George. After all, it would be silly to have any feelings about something that happened so long ago as all that.”

“Idiotic’

“We weren’t fitted to one another and it’s lucky we found it out before it was too late. Of course I was foolish, but then I was very young. Have you been happy too?”

“I think I can say I’ve been a success.”

“Oh, well, that’s probably all the happiness you were capable of.”

He smiled in appreciation of her shrewdness. And then, putting the whole matter aside easily, she began to talk of other things. Though the courts had given him custody of their son, he, unable to look after him, had allowed his mother to have him. The boy had emigrated at eighteen and was now married. He was a stranger to George Moon, and he was aware that if he met him in the street he would not recognize him. He was too sincere to pretend that he took much interest in him. They talked of him, however, for a while, and then they talked of actors and plays.

“Well,” she said at last, “I must be running away. I’ve had a lovely lunch. It’s been fun meeting you, George. Thanks so much.”

He put her into a taxi and taking off his hat walked down Piccadilly by himself. He thought her quite a pleasant, amusing woman: he laughed to think that he had ever been madly in love with her. There was a smile on his lips when he spoke again to Tom Saffary.

“She was a damned good-looking girl when I married her. That was the trouble. Though, of course, if she hadn’t been I’d never have married her. They were all after her like flies round a honey-pot. We used to have awful rows. And at last I caught her out. Of course I divorced her.”

“Of course.”

“Yes, but I know I was a damned fool to do it.” He leaned forward. “My dear Saffary, I know now that if I’d had any sense I’d have shut my eyes. She’d have settled down and made me an excellent wife.”

He wished he were able to explain to his visitor how grotesque it had seemed to him when he sat and talked with that jolly, comfortable, and good-humoured woman that he should have made so much fuss about what now seemed to him to matter so little.

“But one has one’s honour to think of,” said Saffary.

“Honour be damned. One has one’s happiness to think of. Is one’s honour really concerned because one’s wife hops into bed with another man? We’re not crusaders, you and I, or Spanish grandees. I liked my wife. I don’t say I haven’t had other women. I have. But she had just that something that none of the others could give me. What a fool I was to throw away what I wanted more than anything in the world because I couldn’t enjoy exclusive possession of it!”

“You’re the last man I should ever have expected to hear speak like that.”

George Moon smiled thinly at the embarrassment that was so clearly expressed on Saffary’s fat troubled face.

“I’m probably the first man you’ve heard speak the naked truth,” he retorted.

“Do you mean to say that if it were all to do over again you would act differently?”

“If I were twenty-seven again I suppose I should be as big a fool as I was then. But if I had the sense I have now I’ll tell you what I’d do if I found my wife had been unfaithful to me. I’d do just what you did last night: I’d give her a damned good hiding and let it go at that.”

“Are you asking me to forgive Violet?”

The Resident shook his head slowly and smiled.

“No. You’ve forgiven her already. I’m merely advising you not to cut off your nose to spite your face.”

Saffary gave him a worried look. It disconcerted him to know that this cold precise man should see in his heart emotions which seemed so unnatural to himself that he thrust them out of his consciousness.

“You don’t know the circumstances,” he said. “Knobby and I were almost like brothers. I got him his job. He owed everything to me. And except for me Violet might have gone on being a governess for the rest of her life. It seemed such a waste; I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. If you know what I mean, it was pity that first made me take any notice of her. Don’t you think it’s a bit thick that when you’ve been thoroughly decent with people they should go out of their way to do the dirty on you? It’s such awful ingratitude.”

“Oh, my dear boy, one mustn’t expect gratitude. It’s a thing that no one has a right to. After all, you do good because it gives you pleasure. It’s the purest form of happiness there is. To expect thanks for it is really asking too much. If you get it, well, it’s like a bonus on shares on which you’ve already received a dividend; it’s grand, but you mustn’t look upon it as your due.”

Saffary frowned. He was perplexed. He could not quite make it out that George Moon should think so oddly about things that it had always seemed to him there were no two ways of thinking about. After all there were limits. I mean, if you had any sense of decency you had to behave like a tuan. There was your own self-respect to think of. It was funny that George Moon should give reasons that looked so damned plausible for doing something that, well, damn it, you had to admit you’d be only too glad to do if you could see your way to it. Of course George Moon was queer. No one ever quite understood him.

“Knobby Clarke is dead, Saffary. You can’t be jealous of him any more. No one knows a thing except you and me and your wife, and tomorrow I’m going away for ever. Why don’t you let bygones be bygones?”

“Violet would only despise me.”

George Moon smiled and, unexpectedly on that prim, fastidious face, his smile had a singular sweetness.

“I know her very little. I always thought her a very nice woman. Is she as detestable as that?”

Saffary gave a start and reddened to his ears.

“No, she’s an angel of goodness. It’s me who’s detestable for saying that of her.” His voice broke and he gave a little sob. “God knows I only want to do the right thing.”

“The right thing is the kind thing.”

Saffary covered his face with his hands. He could not curb the emotion that shook him.

“I seem to be giving, giving all the time, and no one does a God-damned thing for me. It doesn’t matter if my heart is broken, I must just go on.” He drew the back of his hand across his eyes and sighed deeply. “I’ll forgive her.”

George Moon looked at him reflectively for a little.

“I wouldn’t make too much of a song and dance about it, if I were you,” he said. “You’ll have to walk warily. She’ll have a lot to forgive too.”

“Because I hit her, you mean? I know, that was awful of me.”

“Not a bit. It did her a power of good. I didn’t mean that. You’re behaving generously, old boy, and, you know, one needs a devil of a lot of tact to get people to forgive one one’s generosity. Fortunately women are frivolous and they very quickly forget the benefits conferred upon them. Otherwise, of course, there’d be no living with them.”

Saffary looked at him open-mouthed.

“Upon my word you’re a rum “un, Moon,” he said. “Sometimes you seem as hard as nails and then you talk so that one thinks you’re almost human, and then, just as one thinks one’s misjudged you and you have a heart after all, you come out with something that just shocks one. I suppose that’s what they call a cynic’

“I haven’t deeply considered the matter,” smiled George Moon, “but if to look truth in the face and not resent it when it’s unpalatable, and take human nature as you find it, smiling when it’s absurd and grieved without exaggeration when it’s pitiful, is to be cynical, then I suppose I’m a cynic. Mostly human nature is both absurd and pitiful, but if life has taught you tolerance you find in it more to smile at than to weep.”

When Tom Saffary left the room the Resident lit himself with deliberation the last cigarette he meant to smoke before tiffin. It was a new role for him to reconcile an angry husband with an erring wife and it caused him a discreet amusement. He continued to reflect upon human nature. A wintry smile hovered upon his thin and pallid lips. He recalled with what interest in the dry creeks of certain places along the coast he had often stood and watched the Jumping Johnnies. There were hundreds of them sometimes, from little things of a couple of inches long to great fat fellows as long as your foot. They were the colour of the mud they lived in. They sat and looked at you with large round eyes and then with a sudden dash buried themselves in their holes. It was extraordinary to see them scudding on their flappers over the surface of the mud. It teemed with them. They gave you a fearful feeling that the mud itself was mysteriously become alive and an atavistic terror froze your heart when you remembered that such creatures, but gigantic and terrible, were once the only inhabitants of the earth. There was something uncanny about them, but something amusing too. They reminded you very much of human beings. It was quite entertaining to stand there for half an hour and observe their gambols.

George Moon took his topee off the peg and not displeased with life stepped out into the sunshine.