**The Lion’s Skin**

W. Somerset Maugham

Agood many people were shocked when they read that Captain Forestier had met his death in a forest fire when trying to save his wife’s dog, which had been accidentally shut up in the house. Some said they never knew he had it in him; others said it was exactly what they would have expected of him, but of these some meant it in one way and some in another. After the tragic occurrence Mrs. Forestier found shelter in the villa of some people called Hardy, whose acquaintance she and her husband had but lately made. Captain Forestier had not liked them, at any rate he had not liked Fred Hardy, but she felt that if he had lived through that terrible night he would have changed his mind. He would have realized how much good there was in Hardy notwithstanding his reputation, and like the great gentleman he was he would not have hesitated to admit that he had been mistaken. Mrs. Forestier did not know how she could ever have kept her reason after the loss of the man who was everything in the world to her but for the Hardys’ wonderful kindness. In her immense distress their unfailing sympathy had been her only consola­tion. They, who had been almost eyewitnesses of her husband’s great sacrifice, knew as did no one else how wonderful he had been. She could never forget the words dear Fred Hardy had used when he was breaking the dreadful news to her. It was these words that had enabled her not only to bear the frightful disaster, but to face the desolate future with the cour­age with which she well knew that brave man, that gallant gentleman, whom she had loved so well, would have wished her to face it.

Mrs. Forestier was a very nice woman. Kindly people often say that of a woman when they can say nothing about her, and it has come to be looked upon as cold praise. I do not mean it as such. Mrs. Fores­tier was neither charming, beautiful nor intelligent; on the contrary she was absurd, homely and foolish; yet the more you knew her, the more you liked her, and when asked why, you found yourself forced to repeat that she was a very nice woman. She was as tall as the average man; she had a large mouth and a great hooked nose, pale blue short-sighted eyes and big ugly hands. Her skin was lined and weather­beaten, but she made up heavily, and her hair, which she wore long, was dyed golden, tightly marcelled and elaborately dressed. She did everything she could to counteract the aggressive masculinity of her appear­ance, and succeeded only in looking like a vaudeville artist doing a female impersonation. Her voice was a woman’s voice, but you were always expecting her, at the end of the number as it were, to break into a deep bass, and tearing off that golden wig, discover a man’s bald pate. She spent a great deal of money on her clothes, which she got from the most fashionable dressmakers in Paris, but though a woman of fifty she had an unfortunate taste for choosing dresses that looked exquisite on pretty little mannequins in the flower *of* their youth. She always wore a great quan­tity of rich jewels. Her movements were awkward and her gestures clumsy. If she went into a draw ing room where there was a valuable piece of jade, she man­aged to sweep it onto the floor; if she lunched with you and you had a set of glasses you treasured, she was almost certain to smash one of them to atoms.

Yet this ungainly exterior sheltered a tender, ro­mantic and idealistic soul. It took you some time to discover this, for when first you knew her you took her for a figure of fun, and then when you knew her better (and had suffered from her clumsiness) she exasperated you; but when you did discover it, you thought yourself very stupid not to have known it all the time, for then it looked out at you through those pale blue near-sighted eyes, rather shyly, but with a sincerity that only a fool could miss. Those dainty muslins and springlike organdies, those vir­ginal silks, clothed not the uncouth body but the fresh, girlish spirit. You forgot that she broke your china and looked like a man dressed up as a woman, you saw her as she saw herself, as indeed she really was if reality were visible, as a dear little thing with a heart of gold. When you came to know her you found her as simple as a child; she was touchingly grateful for any attention you paid her; her own kind­ness was infinite, you could ask her to do anything for you, however tiresome, and she would do it as though by giving her the opportunity to put herself out you rendered her a service. She had a rare capacity for disinterested love. You knew that never an unkind nor a malicious thought had once passed through her head. And having granted all that, you said over again that Mrs. Forestier was a very nice woman.

Unfortunately she was also a damned fool. This you discovered when you met her husband. Mrs. Forestier was American, and Captain Forestier was English. Mrs. Forestier was born in Portland, Oregon, and had never been to Europe till the war of 1914, when, her first husband having recently died, she joined a hospital unit and came to France. She was not rich by American standards, but by our English ones in affluent circumstances. From the way the For­estiers lived I should guess that she had something like thirty thousand dollars a year. Except that she undoubtedly gave the wrong medicines to the wrong men, put on their bandages so that they were worse than useless, and broke every utensil that was break­able, I am sure that she was an admirable nurse. I do not think she ever found work too revolting for her to do it without hesitation; she certainly never spared herself and was surely never out of temper; I have a notion that many a poor wretch had cause to bless the tenderness of her heart, and it may be that not a few took the last bitter step into the unknown with more courage because of the loving-kindness of her golden soul. It was during the last year of the war that Captain Forestier came under her care, and soon after peace was declared they married. They settled down in a handsome villa on the hills behind Cannes, and in a short time became conspicuous in the social life of the Riviera. Captain Forestier played bridge well and was a keen golfer. He was not a bad tennis player either. He had a sailing boat, and in the sum­mer the Forestiers gave very nice parties between the islands. After seventeen years of marriage Mrs. Fores­tier still adored her good-looking husband, and you were unlikely to know her long without being told in that slow Western drawl of hers the full story of their courtship.

“It was a case of love at first sight,” she said. “He was brought in when I happened to be off duty, and when I came on and found him lying in one of my beds, oh, my dear, I felt such a pang in my heart, for a moment I thought I’d been overworking and had strained it. He was the handsomest man I’d ever seen in my life.”

“Was he badly wounded?”

“Well, he wasn’t exactly wounded. You know, it’s a most extraordinary thing, he went all through the war, he was under fire for months at a time, and of course he risked his life twenty times a day, he’s one of those men who simply doesn’t know what fear is; but he never even got a scratch. He had carbuncles.”

It seemed an unromantic ailment on which to start a passionate attachment. Mrs. Forestier was a trifle prudish, and though Captain Forestier’s carbuncles greatly interested her she always found it a little diffi­cult to tell you exactly where they were.

“They were right down at the bottom of his back, even farther really, and he hated to have me dress them. Englishmen are curiously modest, I’ve noticed that over and over again, and it mortified him terri­bly. You’d have thought being on those terms, if you know what I mean, from our first acquaintance it would have made us more intimate. But somehow it didn’t. He was very standoffish with me. When I used to get to his bed on my round I was so breathless and my heart beat so I couldn’t make out what was the matter w’ith me. I’m not naturally a clumsy woman, I never drop things or break anything; but you wouldn’t believe it, when I had to give Robert his medicine I used to drop the spoon and break the glass, I couldn’t imagine what he must be thinking of me.”

It was almost impossible not to laugh when Mrs. Forestier told you this. She smiled rather sweetly.

“I suppose it sounds very absurd to you, but you see I’d never felt that way before. When I married my first husband—well, he was a widower with grown-up children, he was a fine man and one of the most prominent citizens in the state, but somehow it was different.”

“And how did you eventually discover that you were in love with Captain Forestier?”

“Well, I don’t ask you to believe me, I know it sounds funny, but the fact is that one of the other nurses told me, and as soon as she did of course I knew it was true. I was terribly upset at first. You see, I knew nothing about him. Like all Englishmen he was very reserved, and for all I knew he had a wife and half a dozen children.”

“How did you find out he hadn’t?”

“I asked him. The moment he told me he was a bachelor I made up my mind that by hook or by crook I was going to marry him. He suffered agonies, poor darling; you see, he had to lie on his face almost all the time, lying on his back was torture, and as to sitting down—well, of course he couldn’t even think of that. But I don’t believe his agonies were worse than mine. Men like clinging silks and soft, fluffy things, you know what I mean, and I was at such a disadvantage in my nurse’s uniform. The matron, one of those New England spinsters, couldn’t bear make-up, and in those days I didn’t make up any­way; my first husband never liked it; and then my hair wasn’t as pretty as it is now. He used to look at me with those wonderful blue eyes of his, and I felt he must be thinking I looked a perfect sight. He was very low, and I thought I ought to do all I could to cheer him up, so whenever I had a few minutes to spare I’d go and talk to him. He said he couldn’t bear the thought of a strong, husky chap like he was lying in bed week after week while all his pals were in the trenches. You couldn’t talk to him without realizing that he wras one of those men who never feel the joy of life so intensely as when the bullets are whistling all round them, and the next moment may be their last. Danger was a stimulant to him. I don’t mind telling you that when I used to write down his temperature on the chart I added a point or two so that the doc­tors should think him a little worse than he was. I knew he was doing his damnedest to get them to dis­charge him, and I thought it only fair to him to make sure that they wouldn’t. He used to look at me thoughtfully while I talked away and I know he looked forward to our little chats. I told him that I was a widow and had no one dependent on me, and I told him that I was thinking of settling down in Europe after the war. Gradually he thawed *a* little. He didn’t say much about himself, but he began to chaff me, he has a great sense of humour, you know, and sometimes I really began to think he rather liked me. At last they reported him fit for duty. To my sur­prise he asked me to dine with him on his last evening. I managed to get leave from the matron, and we drove in to Paris. You can’t imagine how handsome he looked in his uniform. I’ve never seen anyone look so distinguished. Aristocratic to his finger tips. Some­how or other he wasn’t in such good spirits as I’d expected. He’d been crazy to get back to the front.

“‘Why are you so down tonight?’ I asked him. ‘After all you’ve got your wish at last.’

“‘I know I have,’ he said. ‘If for all that I’m a bit blue, can’t you guess why?’

“I simply dared not think what he meant. I thought I’d better make a little joke.

“‘I’m not very good at guessing,’ I said, with a laugh. ‘If you want me to know you’d better tell me.’

“He looked down, and I could see he was nervous.

“‘ You’ve been most awfully good to me,’ he said. ‘ I can never begin to thank you for all your kindness. You’re the grandest woman I’ve ever known.’

“It upset me terribly to hear him say that. You know how funny Englishmen are; he’d never paid me a compliment before.

“‘I’ve only done what any competent nurse would have,’ I said.

“‘Shall I ever see you again?’ he said.

“‘That’s up to you,’ I said. I hoped he didn’t hear the tremble in my voice.

“‘I hate leaving you,’ he said.

“I really could hardly speak.

“‘Need you?’ I said.

“‘So long as my king and country want me I am at their service.’”

When Mrs. Forestier reached this point, her pale blue eyes filled with tears.

“‘But the war can’t last for ever,’ I said.

“‘When the war ends,’ he answered, ‘supposing a bullet hasn’t put an end to me, I shan’t have a penny. I don’t even know' how I shall set about earning my living. You’re a very rich woman; I’m a pauper.’

“‘You’re an English gentleman,’ I said.

“‘Will that matter very much when the world has been made safe for democracy?’ he said bitterly.

“I was just crying my eyes out by then. Every­thing he said was so beautiful. Of course I saw what he meant. He didn’t think it honourable to ask me to marry him. I felt he’d sooner die than let me think he was after my money. He was a fine man. I knew that I wasn’t worthy of him, but I saw that if I wanted him I must go out and get him myself.

“‘It’s no good pretending I’m not crazy about you, because I am,’ I said.

“‘Don’t make it harder for me,’ he said hoarsely.

“I thought I should die, I loved him so much when he said that. It told me all I wanted to know. I stretched out my hand.

“‘Will you marry me, Robert?’ I said, very simply. “‘Eleanor,’ he said.

“It was then he told me that he’d loved me from the first day he ever saw me. At first he hadn’t taken it seriously, he thought I was just a nurse and perhaps he’d have an affair with me, and then when he found out that I wasn’t that sort *of* woman and had a cer­tain amount of money, he made up his mind that he must conquer his love. You see, he thought that marriage was quite out of the question.”

Probably nothing flattered Mrs. Forestier more than the idea that Captain Forestier had wanted to have a slap and tickle with her. It was certain that no one else had ever made dishonourable proposals to her, and though Forestier hadn’t either, the convic­tion that he had entertained the notion was a never- failing source of satisfaction to her. When they were married Eleanor’s relations, hard-bitten Western people, had suggested that her husband should go work rather than live on her money, and Captain

Forestier was all for it. The only stipulation he made was this:

“There are some things a gentleman can’t do, Eleanor. Anything else I’ll do gladly. God knows, I don’t attach any importance to that sort of thing, but if one’s a sahib one can’t help it, and damn it all, especially in these days, one does owe something to one’s class.”

Eleanor thought he had done enough in risking his life for his country in one bloody battle after another during four long years, but she was too proud of him to let it be said that he was a fortune hunter who had married her for her money, and she made up her mind not to object if he found something to do that was worth his while. Unfortunately, the only jobs that offered were not very important. But he did not turn them down on his own responsibility.

“It’s up to you, Eleanor,” he told her. “You’ve only got to say the word and 1’11 take it. It would make my poor old governor turn in his grave to see me do it, but that can’t be helped. My first duty is to you.”

Eleanor wouldn’t hear of it, and gradually the idea of his working was dropped. The Forestiers lived most of the year in their villa on the Riviera. They seldom went to England; Robert said it was no place for a gentleman since the war, and all the good fel­lows, white men every one of them, that he used to go about with when he was “one of the boys,” had been killed. He would have liked to spend his winters in England, three days a week with the Quorn, that was the life for a man, but poor Eleanor, she would be so out of it in that hunting set, he couldn’t ask her to make the sacrifice. Eleanor was prepared to make any sacrifice, but Captain Forestier shook his head. He wasn’t as young as he had been, and his hunting days were over. He was quite satisfied to breed Sealyhams and raise Buff Orpingtons. They had a good deal of land; the house stood on the top of a hill, on a plateau, surrounded on three sides by forest, and in front they had a garden. Eleanor said he was never so happy as when he was walking round the estate in an old tweed suit with the kennel man, who also looked after the chickens. It was then you saw in him all those generations of country squires that he had behind him. It touched and amused Eleanor to see the long talks he had with the kennel man about the Buff Orpingtons; it was for all the world as if he were discussing the pheasants with his head keeper; and he fussed over the Sealyhams as much as if they had been the pack of hounds you couldn’t help feeling he would have been so much more at home with. Cap­tain Forestier’s great-grandfather had been one of the bucks of the Regency. It was he who had ruined the family so that the estates had to be sold. They had a wonderful old place in Shropshire, they’d had it for centuries, and Eleanor, even though it no longer be­longed to them, would have liked to go and see it; but Captain Forestier said it would be too painful to him and would never take her.

The Forestiers entertained a good deal. Captain Forestier was a connoisseur of wines and was proud of his cellar.

“His father was well known to have the best palate in England,” said Eleanor, “and he’s inherited it.”

Most of their friends were Americans, French and Russians. Robert found them on the whole more in­teresting than the English, and Eleanor liked every­body he liked. Robert did not think the English quite up to their mark. Most of the people he had known in the old days belonged to the shooting, hunting and fishing set; they, poor devils, were all broke now, and though, thank God, he wasn’t a snob, he didn’t half like the idea of his wife getting herself mixed up with a lot of *nouveaux riches* no one had ever heard of. Mrs. Forestier was not nearly so particular, but she re­spected his prejudices and admired his exclusiveness.

“Of course he has his whims and fancies,” she said, “but I think it’s only loyal on my part to defer to them. When you know the sort of people he comes from you can’t help seeing how natural it is he should have them. The only time I’ve ever seen him vexed in all the years we’ve been married was when once a gigolo came up to me in the Casino and asked me to

dance. Robert nearly knocked him down. I told him the poor little thing was only doing his job, but he said he wasn’t going to have a damned swine like that even asking his wife to dance.”

Captain Forestier had high moral standards. He thanked God that he wasn’t narrow-minded, but one had to draw the line somewhere; and just because he lived on the Riviera he didn’t see why he should hob­nob with drunks, wastrels and perverts. He had no indulgence for sexual irregularities and would not allow Eleanor to frequent women of doubtful repu­tation.

“You see,” said Eleanor, “he’s a man of complete integrity; he’s the cleanest man I’ve ever known; and if sometimes he seems a little intolerant, you must always remember that he never asks of others what he isn’t prepared to do himself. After all, one can’t help admiring a man whose principles are so high and who’s prepared to stick to them at any cost.”

When Captain Forestier told Eleanor that such and such a man, whom you met everywhere, and who you thought was rather pleasant, wasn’t a pukka sahib, she knew it was no good insisting. She knew that in her husband’s judgment that finished him, and she was prepared to abide by it. After nearly twenty years of marriage she was sure of one thing, if of no other, and this was that Robert Forestier was the perfect type of an English gentleman.

“And I don’t know that God has ever created any­thing finer than that,” she said.

The trouble was that Captain Forestier was almost too perfect a type of the English gentleman. He was at forty-five (he was two or three years younger than Eleanor) still a very handsome man, with his wavy, abundant grey hair and his handsome moustache; he had the weather-beaten, healthy, tanned skin of a man who is much in the open air. He was tall, lean and broad-shouldered. He looked every inch a soldier. He had a bluff, hearty way with him and a loud, frank laugh. In his conversation, in his manner, in his dress he was so typical that you could hardly believe it. He was so much of a country gentleman that he made you think rather of an actor giving a marvellous per­formance *of* the part. When you saw him walking along the Croisette, a pipe in his mouth, in plus fours and just the sort of tweed coat he would have worn on the moors, he looked so like an English sportsman that it gave you quite a shock. And his conversation, the way he dogmatized, the platitudinous inanity of his statements, his amiable, well-bred stupidity, were all so characteristic of the retired officer that you could hardly help thinking he was putting it on.

When Eleanor heard that the house at the bottom of their hill had been taken by a Sir Frederick and Lady Hardy she was much pleased. It would be nice for Robert to have as a near neighbour someone of his own class. She made enquiries about them from her friends in Cannes. It appeared that Sir Frederick had lately come into the baronetcy on the death of an uncle and was come to the Riviera for two or three years while he was paying off the death duties. He was said to have been very wild in his youth, he was well on in the fifties when he came to Cannes, but now he was respectably married, to a very nice little woman, and had two small boys. It was a pity that Lady Hardy had been an actress, for Robert was apt to be a little stuffy about actresses, but everyone said that she was very well mannered and ladylike, and you would never have guessed she had been on the stage. The Forestiers met her first at a tea party to which Sir Frederick did not go, and Robert acknowl­edged that she seemed a very decent sort of person; so Eleanor, wishing to be neighbourly, invited them both to luncheon. A day was arranged. The Forestiers had asked a good many people to meet them, and the Hardys were rather late. Eleanor took an immediate fancy to Sir Frederick. He looked much younger than she expected, he hadn’t a white hair on his close­cropped head; indeed there was about him something boyish that was rather attractive. He was slightly built, not as tall as she was; and he had bright friendly eyes and a ready smile. She noticed that he wore the same Guards tie that Robert sometimes wore; he was not nearly so well dressed as Robert, who always looked as though he had stepped out of a show win­dow, but he wore his old clothes as though it didn’t much matter what one wore. Eleanor could quite be­lieve he had been a trifle wild as a young man. She was not inclined to blame him.

“I must introduce my husband to you,” she said.

She called him. Robert was talking to some of the other guests on the terrace, and hadn’t noticed the Hardys come in. He came forward and in his affable, hearty way, with a grace that always charmed Elea­nor, shook hands with Lady Hardy. Then he turned to Sir Frederick. Sir Frederick gave him a puzzled look.

“Haven’t we met before?” he said.

Robert looked at him coolly.

“I don’t think so.”

“I could have sworn I knew your face.”

Eleanor felt her husband stiffen and at once real­ized that something was going wrong. Robert laughed.

“It sounds terribly rude, but to the best of my belief I’ve never set eyes on you in my life. We may have run across one another in the war. One met such hosts of fellers, then, didn’t one? Will you have a cocktail, Lady Hardy?”

During luncheon Eleanor noticed that Hardy kept looking at Robert. He was evidently trying to place him. Robert was busy with the women on either side of him and did not catch the glances. He was making efforts to entertain his neighbours; and his loud, ring­ing laugh rang through the room. He was a wonderful host. Eleanor had always admired his sense of social duty; however dull the women were he was sitting next to, he gave them of his best. But when their guests had gone, Robert’s gaiety dropped from him like a cloak from his shoulders. She had a feeling that he was upset.

“Was the princess very boring?” she asked kindly.

“She’s a malignant old cat, but otherwise she was all right.”

“Funny that Sir Frederick thought he knew you.” “I’ve never set eyes on him in my life. But I know all about him. I wouldn’t have more to do with him than you can help if I were you, Eleanor. I don’t think he’s quite our mark.”

“But it’s one *of* the oldest baronetcies in England.

We looked it out in *Who’s Who."*

“He’s a disreputable scamp. I didn’t dream that the Captain Hardy,” Robert corrected himself, “the Fred Hardy I used to know about in the old days was now Sir Frederick. I would never have allowed you to ask him to my house.”

“Why, Robert? I’m bound to tell you that I thought him very attractive.”

For once Eleanor thought her husband rather un­reasonable.

“A great many women have found him so, and a pretty penny it’s cost them.”

“You know how people talk. One really can’t believe everything one hears.”

He took one of her hands in his and looked ear­nestly into her eyes.

“Eleanor, you know I’m not the sort of chap to say anything against another chap behind his back, and I’d rather not tell you what I know about Hardy; I can only ask you to take my word for it that he isn’t a proper person for you to know.”

This was an appeal to which Eleanor was incapable of turning a deaf ear. It thrilled her to know that Robert placed such confidence in her; he knew that in a crisis he had only to call on her loyalty and she would not fail him.

“No one can be better aware than I, Robert,” she answered gravely, “of your perfect integrity; I know that if you could tell me you would, but even if you wanted to now I wouldn’t let you; it would look as if I had less confidence in you than you have in me. I am willing to abide by your judgment. I promise you that the Hardys shall never darken these doors again.”

But Eleanor often lunched out without Robert, when he was playing golf, and so frequently met the Hardys. She was very stiff with Sir Frederick, be­cause if Robert disapproved of him, she must too; but he either did not notice or did not care. He went out of his way to be nice to her, and she found him easy to get on with. It was difficult to dislike a man who plainly thought that no woman was better than she should be, but very sweet for all that, and who had such delightful manners. It might be that he was an improper man for her to know, but she couldn’t help liking the look in his brown eyes. It was a mock­ing look, which put you on your guard, and yet so caressing that you could not think he meant you harm. But the more Eleanor heard about him, the more she realized how right Robert was. He was an unprincipled rascal. They mentioned the names of women who had sacrificed everything for his sake and whom he had thrown aside without ceremony the moment he was tired of them. He seemed to have settled down now, and to be devoted to his wife and children; but can the leopard change his spots? It was only too probable that Lady Hardy had more to put up with than anyone suspected.

Fred Hardy was a bad lot. Pretty women, *chemin de fer,* and an unlucky knack for backing the wrong horse had landed him in the bankruptcy court by the time he was twenty-five, and he had been forced to resign his commission. He had seen no shame then in allowing women no longer in their first youth, who found his charm irresistible, to supply his wants. But the war came, he rejoined his regiment, and got a D.S.O. Then he went out to Kenya, where he found occasion to become co-respondent in a notorious divorce case; he left Kenya over some trouble with a cheque. His ideas of honesty were lax. It was unsafe to buy a car or a horse off him, and you did much better to keep away from the champagnes he warmly recommended to you. When with his persuasive charm he put before you a speculation by which you and he would make a fortune, you could only be sure that, whatever he made out of it, you would make nothing. He was in turn a motor salesman, an out­side broker, a commission agent and an actor. Were there any justice in the world he should have ended, if not in gaol, at least in the gutter. But by one of fate’s monstrous tricks, having at last inherited his baronetcy and an adequate income, having married when well over forty a pretty, clever wife to whom were in due course born two healthy and handsome children, the future offered him affluence, position and respectability. He had never taken life any more seriously than he took women, and life had been as kind to him as women. If he thought of his past it was with complacency; he had had a good time, he had enjoyed his ups and downs; and now, with good health and a clear conscience, he was prepared to settle down as a country gentleman, damn it, bring up the kids as kids should be brought up; and when the old buffer who sat for his constituency pegged out, by George, go into Parliament himself.

“I could tell them a thing or two they don’t know,” he said.

He was probably right, but he did not stop to reflect that perhaps they were not things they much wanted to know.

One afternoon, about sunset, Fred Hardy went into one of the bars on the Croisette. He was a sociable creature and did not care to drink alone, so he looked around to see if there were anyone he knew. He caught sight of Robert, who had been playing golf and was waiting there for Eleanor.

“Hulloa, Bob, what about having a tiddly?”

Robert gave a start. No one on the Riviera called him Bob. When he saw who it was he answered stiffly.

“I’ve got a drink, thanks.”

“Have another. My old lady don’t approve of my drinking between meals, but when I can manage to get away from her I generally slip in and have one about this time. I don’t know what you think about it, but my feeling is that God made six o’clock for man to have a drink at.”

He flung himself into a great leather armchair next to the one Robert was sitting in and called a waiter. He gave Robert his good-natured, engaging smile.

“A lot of water has passed under the bridges since first we met, old boy, hasn’t it?”

Robert, frowning a little, shot a look at him which an observer might have described as wary.

“I don’t know exactly what you mean. To the best *of my* belief we met for the first time three or four weeks ago when you and your wife were good enough to come and have lunch with us.”

“Come off it, Bob. I knew I’d seen you before. I was puzzled at first, and then it flashed across me. You were the car washer at that garage off Bruton Street where I used to keep my car.”

Captain Forestier gave a hearty laugh.

“I’m sorry, but you’ve made a mistake. I never heard anything so ridiculous.”

“I’ve got a damned good memory, and I never forget a face. I bet you haven’t forgotten me, either. Many’s the half-crown I’ve given you for fetching the car away from my flat when I didn’t want to be bothered to bring it round to the garage myself.”

“You’re talking absolute rot. I’d never seen you in my life till you came to my house.”

Hardy grinned cheerfully.

“You know I’ve always been a Kodak fiend. I’ve got albums of snaps that I’ve taken at one time and another. Would it surprise you to learn that I’ve found a snap of you standing by a two-seater I’d just bought? A damned good-looking fellow you were in those days, even though you had overalls on and your face was none too clean. Of course you’ve broadened out, your hair’s grey and you’ve got a moustache, but it’s the same chap. Unmistakably.”

Captain Forestier looked at him coolly.

“You must have been misled by an accidental resemblance. It was somebody else you gave your half-crowns to.”

“Well, where were you then, if you weren’t a car washer at the Bruton Garage between 1913 and 1914?”

“I was in India.”

“With your regiment?” asked Fred Hardy with another grin.

“I was shooting.”

“You liar.”

Robert flushed deeply.

“This isn’t quite the place to choose for a scrap, but if you think I’m going to stay here to be insulted by a drunken swine like you, you’re mistaken.”

“Wouldn’t you like to hear what else I know about you? You know how things come back to one, and I’ve remembered quite a lot.”

“I’m not in the least interested. I tell you that you’re making an absolute mistake. You’re confusing me with somebody else.”

But he made no attempt to go.

“You were a bit *of* a slacker even in those days. I remember once, when I was going into the country early, I’d told you to have my car washed by nine, and it wasn’t ready, so I kicked up a row and old Thompson told me then your father had been a pal of his and he’d taken you on out of charity because you were down and out. Your father had been a wine waiter at one of the clubs, White’s or Brooks’s, I forget which, and you’d been a page boy there your­self. You enlisted in the Coldstream Guards, if I remember right, and some chap bought you out and made you his valet.”

“It’s too fantastic,” said Robert scornfully.

“And I remember, when I was home on leave once and went to the garage, old Thompson told me you’d enlisted in the A.S.C. You weren’t going to take any more risks than you could help, were you? You’ve been drawing the longbow a bit, haven’t you, with all those stories I hear of your gallantry in the trenches? I suppose you did get a commission, or is that a fake, too?”

“Of course I got a commission.”

“Well, a lot of funny people did in those days, but you know, old boy, if it was in the A.S.C. I wouldn’t wear a Guards tie if I were you.”

Captain Forestier instinctively put his hand up to his tie, and Fred Hardy, watching him with his mocking eyes, was pretty sure that notwithstanding his tan he went white.

“It’s no business of yours what tie I wear.”

“Don’t get snotty, old boy. There’s no reason to get up on your hind legs. I’ve got the goods on you, but I’m not going to give you away, so why don’t you come clean?”

“I’ve got nothing to come clean about. I tell you it’s all an absurd mistake. And I should tell you that if I find that you’ve been spreading these lying stories about me, I shall immediately start proceedings for slander.”

“Stow it, Bob. I’m not going to spread any stories. You don’t think I care? I think the whole thing’s rather a lark. I’ve got no ill feeling towards you. I’ve been a bit of an adventurer myself; I admire you for carrying off such a stupendous bluff. Starting as a page boy and then being a trooper, a valet and a car washer; and there you are a fine gentleman, with a grand house, entertaining all the big bugs of the Riviera, winning golf tournaments, vice-president of the Sailing Club, and I don’t know what all. You’re It in Cannes and no mistake. It’s stupendous. I’ve done some pretty rum things in my day, but the nerve you must have; old boy, I take off my hat to you.”

“I wish I deserved your compliments. I don’t. My father was in the Indian cavalry, and I was at least born a gentleman. I may not have had a very distinguished career, but I certainly have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Oh, come off it, Bob. I shan’t split, you know, not even to my old lady. I never tell women anything that they don’t know already. Believe me, I’d have got into even worse scrapes than I have if I hadn’t made a rule of that. I should have thought you’d be glad to have someone around that you could be your­self with. Isn’t it a strain never to let up? Silly of you to keep me at arm’s length. I haven’t got anything on you, old boy. It’s true I’m a bart and a landed proprietor now, but I’ve been in some pretty tight places in my time, and it’s a wonder to me that I’ve kept out of gaol.”

“It’s a wonder to a good many other people.”

Fred Hardy broke into a guffaw.

“That’s one on me, old boy. All the same, if you don’t mind my saying so, I think it was a bit thick, your telling your wife I wasn’t a proper person for her to associate with.”

“I never said anything of the sort.”

“Oh yes, you did. She’s a grand old girl, but a bit garrulous, or am I mistaken?”

“I’m not prepared to discuss my wife with a man like you,” said Captain Forestier coldly.

“Oh, don’t be so damned gentlemanly with me, Bob. We’re a couple of bums and that’s all there is to it. We could have some grand times together if you’d only have a little sense. You’re a liar, a hum­bug and a cheat, but you seem to be very decent to your wife, and that’s something in your favour. She just dotes upon you, doesn’t she? Funny, women are. She’s a very nice woman, Bob.”

Robert’s face grew red, he clenched his fist and half rose from his chair.

“Damn you, stop talking about my wife. If you

mention her name again I swear I’ll knock you down.”

“Oh no, you won’t. You’re too great a gentleman to hit a feller smaller than yourself.”

Hardy had said these words mockingly, watching Robert, and quite ready to dodge if that great fist struck out; he was astounded at their effect. Robert sank back into his chair and unclenched his fist.

“You’re right. But only a mean hound would trade on it.”

The reply was so theatrical that Fred Hardy began to chuckle, but then he saw that the man meant it. He was deadly serious. Fred Hardy was no fool; he could hardly have lived for twenty-five years on his wits in tolerable comfort unless he had had them all about him. And now, in amazement, staring at that heavy, powerful man, who looked so like the typical English sportsman, sunk back in the chair, he had a sudden flash of comprehension. He was no common swindler who had got hold of a silly woman to keep him in luxury and idleness. She was only a means to a greater end. He had been captivated by an ideal and in pursuit of it had stuck at nothing. Perhaps the notion had come to him when he was a page boy in a smart club; the members, with their lounging ease, their casual manner, may have seemed very wonder­ful to him; and afterwards as a trooper, as a valet, as a car washer, the many men he ran across, belonging to a different world and seen through a haze of hero worship, had filled him perhaps with admiration and envy. He wanted to be like them. He wanted to be one of them. That was the ideal that haunted his dreams. He wanted—it was grotesque, it was pathetic —he wanted to be a gentleman. The war, with the commission it brought him, gave him his chance. Eleanor’s money provided the means. That wretched fellow had spent twenty years pretending to be some­thing the only value of which was that it wasn’t a pretence. That was grotesque too; that was pathetic. Without meaning to, Fred Hardy uttered the thought that passed through his head.

“Poor old chap,” he said.

Forestier looked at him quickly. He could not understand what those words meant or the tone in which they were said. He flushed.

“What d’you mean by that?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

“I don’t think we need continue this conversation. Apparently there’s nothing I can say to persuade you that you’re mistaken. I can only repeat that there’s not a word of truth in it. I am not the fellow you think I am.”

“All right, old boy, have it your own way.” Forestier called the waiter.

“D’you want me to pay for your drink?” he asked icily.

“Yes, old boy.”

Forestier somewhat grandly gave the waiter a note and told him to keep the change; then, without a word, without giving Fred Hardy another look, stalked out of the bar.

They did not meet again till the night on which Robert Forestier lost his life.

The winter passed into spring, and the gardens on the Riviera were ablaze with colour. The hillsides were primly gay with wildflowers. The spring passed into summer. In the towns along the Riviera the streets were hot with a bright, eager heat that made the blood run faster; and women walked about in great straw hats and pyjamas. The beaches were crowded. Men in trunks and women almost naked lay in the sun. In the evening the bars on the Croi- sette were thronged by a restless, chattering crowd as many-coloured as the flowers of spring. It had not rained for weeks. There had been several forest fires along the coast, and Robert Forestier in his hearty, joking way had several times said that they would stand a pretty thin chance if they had a fire in their woods. One or two people had advised him to cut down some of the trees at the back of his house; but he couldn’t bear to: they had been in poor condition when the Forestiers bought the place, but now that the deadwood had been cut away year by year, that they had been given air and kept clean of pests, they were magnificent.

“Why, it would be like having my leg chopped off to cut one of ’em down. They must be the best part of a hundred years old.”

On the fourteenth of July the Forestiers went over to a gala dinner at Monte Carlo, and they gave their staff leave to go to Cannes. It was the national holi­day, and in Cannes they danced in the open air under the plane trees, there were fireworks, and from far and near the people came in to have a good time. The Hardys had sent their servants out too, but they were sitting at home, and their two little boys were in bed. Fred was playing patience, and Lady Hardy was working at a piece of tapestry to cover a chair. Suddenly there was a ring of the bell and a loud knocking on the door.

“Who the devil’s that?”

Hardy went to the door and found a boy who told him that fire had broken out in the Forestiers’ woods. Some men had gone up from the village and were fighting it, but they needed all the help they could get, and would he come.

“Of course I’ll come.” He hurried back to his wife and told her. “Wake the kids and let them come up and see the fun. By George, after all this drought it’ll be a blaze.”

He bolted out. The boy told him they had tele­phoned to the police station and they were going to send along the soldiers. Someone was trying to get through to Monte Carlo and let Captain Forestier know.

“It’ll take him an hour to get here,” said Hardy.

As they ran they saw the glow in the sky, and when they came to the top of the hill, the leaping flames. There was no water, and the only thing to do was to try to beat them out. Already a number of men were at work. Hardy joined them. But you had no sooner beat out the flames in one bush than another began to crackle and, before you could look, had turned into a fiery torch. The heat was terrific, and the workers, unable to support it, were slowly driven back. A breeze was blowing, and the sparks were carried from tree to bush. After weeks of drought everything was as dry as tinder, and the moment a spark fell the tree, the bush, went up in flames. If it had not been terrify­ing, it would have been awe-inspiring to see a great fir tree, sixty feet high, blazing like matchwood. The fire roared like the fire in a factory furnace. The best way to put a stop to it was by cutting down trees and brushwood, but the men were few, and but two or three had axes. The only hope was in the troops, who were used to dealing with the forest fires, and the troops did not come.

“Unless they get here soon we shall never save the house,” said Hardy.

He caught sight *of* his wife, who had come up with the two boys, and waved to them. Already he was black with grime, and the sweat was pouring down his face. Lady Hardy ran up.

“Oh, Fred, the dogs and the chickens.”

“By George, yes.”

The kennels and the chicken run were at the back of the house, in a clearing that had been cut in the woods, and the wretched animals were already frantic with terror. Hardy let them out, and they rushed to safety. They could only be left to shift for themselves. They must be rounded up later. The blaze could be seen now from far away. But the troops did not come, and the small body of helpers were powerless against the advancing flames.

“If those damned soldiers don’t get here soon the house is for it,” said Hardy. “I think we’d better get what we can out *of* it.”

It was a stone house, but there were wooden ve­randas all round it, and they would burn like kindling. The Forestiers’ servants had come by now. He got them together, his wife gave a hand, and the two boys; they carried out onto the lawn in front such things as were portable, linen and silver, clothes, ornaments, pictures, pieces of furniture. At last the troops came, two lorry-loads of them, and set about systematically digging trenches and felling trees. There was an officer in charge, and Hardy, pointing out the danger to the house, begged him first of all to cut down the trees that surrounded it.

“The house must look after itself,” he said. “I’ve got to prevent the fire spreading beyond the hill.”

The lights of a car were seen speeding along the winding road, and a few minutes later Forestier and his wife sprang out of it.

“Where are the dogs?” he cried.

“I’ve let them out,” said Hardy.

“Oh, it’s you.”

At first in that filthy fellow, his face begrimed with soot and sweat, he had not recognized Fred Hardy. He frowned angrily.

“I thought the house might catch. I’ve got every­thing out I could.”

Forestier looked at the blazing forest.

“Well, that’s the end of my trees,” he said.

“The soldiers are working on the side of the hill. They’re trying to save the next property. We’d better go along and see if we can save anything.”

“I’ll go. You needn’t,” Forestier cried irritably.

On a sudden Eleanor gave an anguished cry.

“Oh, look. The house.”

From where they stood they could see a veranda at the back suddenly burst into flames.

“That’s all right, Eleanor. The house can’t burn. It’ll only get the woodwork. Take my coat; I’m going along to help the soldiers.”

He took off his dinner jacket and handed it to his wife.

“I’ll come with you,” said Hardy. “Mrs. Forestier, you’d better go along to where your things are. I think we’ve got everything out that’s valuable.”

“Thank heaven, I was wearing most of my jew­elry.”

Lady Hardy was a woman of sense.

“Mrs. Forestier, let’s get the servants together and carry what we can down to our house.”

The two men walked towards where the soldiers were at work.

“It’s very decent of you to have got that stuff out of my house,” said Robert stiffly.

“Not at all,” answered Fred Hardy.

They had not gone far when they heard somebody calling. They looked round and vaguely saw' a woman running after them.

*“Monsieur, monsieur.”*

They stopped, and the woman, her arms out­stretched, rushed up. It was Eleanor’s maid. She was distraught.

*“La petite Judy.* Judy. I shut her up when we went out. She’s on heat. I put her in the servants’ bath­room.”

“My God!” cried Forestier.

“What is it?”

“Eleanor’s dog. I must save her at any cost.”

He turned round and started to run back to the house. Hardy caught hold of his arm to hold him.

“Don’t be a damned fool, Bob. The house is burn­ing. You can’t go into it.”

Forestier struggled to release himself.

“Let me go, damn you. D’you think I’m going to let a dog be burned alive?”

“Oh, shut up. This is no time for play-acting!”

Forestier shook Hardy off, but Hardy sprang on him and seized him round the middle. Forestier with his clenched fist hit Hardy in the face as hard as he could. Hardy staggered, releasing his hold, and Forestier hit him again; Hardy fell to the ground.

“You rotten bounder. I’ll show you how a gentle­man behaves.”

Fred Hardy picked himself up slowly and felt his face. It hurt him.

“God, the black eye I’m going to have tomorrow!” He was shaken and a trifle dazed. The maid suddenly broke into a storm of hysterical tears. “Shut up, you slut,” he cried crossly. “And don’t say a word to your mistress.”

Forestier was nowhere to be seen. It was more than an hour before they were able to get at him. They found him lying on the landing outside the bathroom, dead, with the dead Sealyham in his arms. Hardy looked at him for a long time before speaking.

“You fool,” he muttered between his teeth, angrily. “You damned fool!”

That imposture of his had paid him out at last.

Like a man who cherishes a vice till it gets a strangle hold on him so that he is its helpless slave, he had lied so long that he had come to believe his own lies. Bob Forestier had pretended for so many years to be a gentleman that in the end, forgetting that it was all a fake, he had found himself driven to act as in that stupid, conventional brain of his he thought a gentle­man must act. No longer knowing the difference between sham and real, he had sacrificed his life to a spurious heroism. But Fred Hardy had to break the news to Mrs. Forestier. She was with his wife, in their villa at the bottom of the hill, and she still thought that Robert was with the soldiers cutting down trees and clearing the brushwood. He told her as gently as he could, but he had to tell her, and he had to tell her everything. At first it seemed as though she could not grasp the sense of what he said.

“Dead?” she cried. “Dead? My Robert?”

Then Fred Hardy, the rip, the cynic, the unscrupu­lous ruffian, took her hands in his and said the words that alone enabled her to bear her anguish:

“Mrs. Forestier, he was a very gallant gentleman.”