ДЖОН ГОЛСУЪРТИ
A STRANGE THING

Not very long ago, during a sojourn in a part of the West country never yet visited by me, I went out one fine but rather cold March morning for a long ramble. I was in one of those disillusioned moods that come to writers, bankrupt of ideas, bankrupt of confidence, a prey to that recurrent despair, the struggle with which makes the profession of the pen—as a friend once said to me—"a manly one." "Yes"—I was thinking, for all that the air was so brisk, and the sun so bright—"nothing comes to me nowadays, no flashes of light, none of those suddenly shaped visions that bring cheer and warmth to a poor devil's heart, and set his brain and pen to driving on. A bad, bad business!" And my eyes, wandering over the dip and rise, the woods, the moor, the rocks of that fine countryside, took in the loveliness thereof with the profound discontent of one who, seeing beauty, feels that he cannot render it. The high lane-banks had just been pollarded, one could see right down over the fields and gorse and bare woods tinged with that rosy brown of beech and birch twigs, and the dusty saffron of the larches. And suddenly my glance was arrested by something vivid, a sort of black and white excitement in the air. "Aha!" I thought, "a magpie. Two! Three! Good! Is it an omen?" The birds had risen at the bottom of a field, their twining, fluttering voyage—most decorative of all bird flights—was soon lost in the wood beyond, but something it had left behind in my heart; I felt more hopeful, less inclined to think about the failure of my spirit, better able to give myself up to this new country I was passing through. Over the next rise in the very winding lane I heard the sound of brisk church bells, and not three hundred yards beyond came to a village green, where knots of men dressed in the dark clothes, light ties, and bowler hats of village festivity, and of women smartened up beyond belief, were gathered, chattering, round the yard of an old, grey, square-towered church.

"What's going on?" I thought. "It's not Sunday, not the birthday of a Potentate, and surely they don't keep Saint days in this manner. It must be a wedding. Yes—there's a favour! Let's go in and see!" And, passing the expectant groups, I entered the church and made my way up the aisle. There was already a fair sprinkling of folk all turned round towards the door, and the usual licensed buzz and whisper of a wedding congregation. The church, as seems usual in remote parishes, had been built all those centuries ago to hold a population in accordance with the expectations of its tenet, "Be fruitful and multiply." But the whole population could have been seated in a quarter of its space. It was lofty and unwarmed save by excitement, and

the smell of bear's-grease. There was certainly more animation than I had ever seen or savoured in a truly rural district.

The bells which had been ringing with a sort of languid joviality, fell now into the hurried crashing which marks the approach of a bride, and the people I had passed outside came thronging in. I perceived a young man—little more than a boy, who by his semi-detachment, the fumbling of his gloved hands, and the sheepishness of the smile on his good-looking, open face, was obviously the bridegroom. I liked the looks of him—a cut above the usual village bumpkin—something free and kind about his face. But no one was paying him the least attention. It was for the bride they were waiting; and I myself began to be excited. What would this young thing be like? Just the ordinary village maiden with tight cheeks, and dress; coarse veil, high colour, and eyes like a rabbit's; or something—something like that little Welsh girl on the hills whom I once passed and whose peer I have never since seen? Bending forward, I accosted an apple-faced woman in the next pew. "Can you tell me who the bride is?"

Regarding me with the grey, round, defensive glance that one bestows on strangers, she replied:

"Aw, don't 'ee know? 'Tes Gwenny Mara—prettiest, brightest maid in these parts." And, jerking her thumb towards the neglected bridegroom, she added: "He's a lucky young chap. She'm a sunny maid, for sure, and a gude maid tu."

Somehow the description did not reassure me, and I prepared for the worst.

A bubble, a stir, a rustle!

Like everyone else, I turned frankly round. She was coming up the aisle on the arm of a hard-faced, rather gipsy-looking man, dressed in a farmer's very best.

I can only tell you that to see her coming down the centre of that grey church amongst all those dark-clothed people, was like watching the dance of a sunbeam. Never had I seen a face so happy, sweet, and radiant. Smiling, eager, just lost enough to her surroundings, her hair unconquerably golden through the coarse veil; her dancing eyes clear and dark as a peat pool—she was the prettiest sight. One could only think of a young apple-tree with the spring sun on its blossom. She had that kind of infectious brightness which comes from very simple goodness. It was quite a relief to

have taken a fancy to the young man's face, and to feel that she was passing into good hands.

The only flowers in the church were early daffodils, but those first children of the sun were somehow extraordinarily appropriate to the wedding of this girl. When she came out she was pelted with them, and with that miserable confetti without which not even the simplest souls can pass to bliss, it seems. There are things in life which make one feel good—sunshine, most music, all flowers, many children, some animals, clouds, mountains, bird-songs, blue sky, dancing, and here and there a young girl's face. And I had the feeling that all of us there felt good for the mere seeing of her.

When she had driven away, I found myself beside a lame old man, with whiskers, and delightful eyes, who continued to smile after the carriage had quite vanished. Noticing, perhaps, that I, too, was smiling, he said: "'Tes a funny thing, tu, when a maid like that gets married—makes you go all of a tremble—so it du." And to my nod he added: "Brave bit o' sunshine—we'll miss her hereabout; not a doubt of it. We ain't got another one like that."

"Was that her father?" I asked, for the want of something to say. With a sharpish look at my face, he shook his head.

"No, she an't got no parents, Mr. Mara bein' her uncle, as you may say. No, she an't got no parents," he repeated, and there was something ill at ease, yet juicy, about his voice, as though he knew things that he would not tell.

Since there was nothing more to wait for, I went up to the little inn, and ordered bread and cheese. The male congregation was whetting its whistle noisily within, but, as a stranger, I had the verandah to myself, and, finishing my simple lunch in the March sunlight, I paid and started on. Taking at random one of the three lanes that debouched from the bottom of the green, I meandered on between high banks, happy in the consciousness of not knowing at all where it would lead me—that essential of a country ramble. Except one cottage in a bottom and one farm on a rise, I passed nothing, nobody. The spring was late in these parts, the buds had hardly formed as yet on any trees, and now and then between the bursts of sunlight a few fine specks of snow would come drifting past me on the wind. Close to a group of pines at a high corner, the lane dipped sharply down to a long farm-house standing back in its yard, where three carts were drawn up, and

an empty waggonette with its shafts in the air. And suddenly, by some broken daffodils on the seats and confetti on the ground, I perceived that I had stumbled on the bride's home, where the wedding feast was, no doubt, in progress.

Gratifying but by no means satisfying my curiosity by gazing at the lichened stone and thatch of the old house, at the pigeons, pigs, and hens at large between it and the barns, I passed on down the lane, which turned up steeply to the right beside a little stream. To my left was a long larch wood, to my right rough fields with many trees. The lane finished at a gate below the steep moorside crowned by a rocky tor. I stood there leaning on the top bar, debating whether I should ascend or no. The bracken had, most of it, been cut in the autumn, and not a hundred yards away the furze was being swaled; the little blood-red flames and the blue smoke, the yellow blossoms of the gorse, the sunlight, and some flecks of drifting snow were mingled in an amazing tangle of colour.

I had made up my mind to ascend the tor, and was pushing through the gate, when suddenly I saw a woman sitting on a stone under the wall bordering the larch wood. She was holding her head in her hands, rocking her body to and fro; and her eyes were evidently shut, for she had not noticed me. She wore a blue serge dress; her hat reposed beside her, and her dark hair was straggling about her face. That face, all blowsy and flushed, was at once wild and stupefied. A face which has been beautiful, coarsened and swollen by life and strong emotion, is a pitiful enough sight. Her dress, hat, and the way her hair had been done were redolent of the town, and of that unnameable something which clings to women whose business it is to attract men. And yet there was a gipsyish look about her, as though she had not always been of the town.

The sight of a woman's unrestrained distress in the very heart of untouched nature is so rare that one must be peculiar to remain unmoved. And there I stood, not knowing what on earth to do. She went on rocking herself to and fro, her stays creaking, and a faint moaning sound coming from her lips; and suddenly she drooped over her lap, her hands fallen to her sides, as though she had gone into a kind of coma. How go on and leave her thus; yet how intrude on what did not seem to me mere physical suffering?

In that quandary I stood and watched. This corner was quite sheltered from the wind, the sun almost hot, and the breath of the swaling reached

one in the momentary calms. For three full minutes she had not moved a finger; till, beginning to think she had really fainted, I went up to her. From her drooped body came a scent of heat, and of stale violet powder, and I could see, though the east wind had outraddled them, traces of rouge on her cheeks and lips; their surface had a sort of swollen defiance, but underneath, as it were, a wasted look. Her breathing sounded faint and broken.

Mustering courage, I touched her on the arm. She raised her head and looked up. Her eyes were the best things she had left; they must have once been very beautiful. Bloodshot now from the wind, their wild, stupefied look passed after a moment into the peculiar, half-bold, half-furtive stare of women of a certain sort. She did not speak, and in my embarrassment I drew out the flask of port I always take with me on my rambles, and stammered:

"I beg your pardon—are you feeling faint? Would you care—?" And, unscrewing the top, I held out the flask. She stared at it a moment blankly, then taking it, said:

"That's kind of you. I feel to want it, tu." And, putting it to her lips, she drank, tilting back her head. Perhaps it was the tell-tale softness of her u's, perhaps the naturally strong lines of her figure thus bent back, but somehow the plumage of the town bird seemed to drop off her suddenly.

She handed back the flask, as empty as it had ever been, and said, with a hard smile:

"I dare say you thought me funny sittin' 'ere like that."

"I thought you were ill."

She laughed without the faintest mirth, and muttered:

"I did go on, didn't I?" Then, almost fiercely, added: "I got some reason, too. Seein' the old place again after all these years." Her dark eyes, which the wine seemed to have cleared and boldened, swept me up and down, taking me in, making sure perhaps whether or no she had ever seen me, and what sort of a brute I might be. Then she said: "I was born here. Are you from these parts?" I shook my head—"No, from the other side of the county."

She laughed. Then, after a moment's silence, said abruptly:

"I been to a weddin'—first I've seen since I was a girl."

Some instinct kept me silent.

“My own daughter’s weddin’, but nobody didn’t know me—not likely.”

I had dropped down under the shelter of the wall on to a stone opposite, and at those words looked at her with interest indeed. She—this coarsened, wasted, suspiciously scented woman of the town—the mother of that sweet, sunny child I had just seen married. And again instinctively silent about my own presence at the wedding, I murmured:

“I thought I saw some confetti in that farmyard as I came up the lane.”

She laughed again.

“Confetti—that’s the little pink and white and blue things—plenty o’ that,” and she added fiercely: “My own brother didn’ know me—let alone my girl. How should she?—I haven’t seen her since she was a baby—she was a laughin’ little thing,” and she gazed past me with that look in the eyes as of people who are staring back into the bygone. “I guess we was laughin’ when we got her. ’Twas just here—summer-time. I ’ad the moon in my blood that night, right enough.” Then, turning her eyes on my face, she added: “That’s what a girl *will* ’ave, you know, once in a while, and like as not it’ll du for her. Only thirty-five now, I am, an’ pretty nigh the end o’ my tether. What can you expect?—I’m a gay woman. Did for me right enough. Her father’s dead, tu.”

“Do you mean,” I said, “because of your child?”

She nodded. “I suppose you can say that. They made me bring an order against him. He wouldn’t pay up, so he went and enlisted, an’ in tu years ’e was dead in the Boer War—so it killed him right enough. But there she is, a sweet sprig if ever there was one. That’s a strange thing, isn’t it?” And she stared straight before her in a sudden silence. Nor could *I* find anything to say, slowly taking in the strangeness of this thing. That girl, so like a sunbeam, of whom the people talked as though she were a blessing in their lives—her coming into life to have been the ruin of the two who gave her being!

The woman went on dully: “Funny how I knew she was goin’ to be married—’twas a farmer told me—comes to me regular when he goes to Exeter market. I always knew he came from near my old home. ‘There’s a weddin’ on Tuesday,’ ’e says, ‘I’d like to be the bridegroom at. Prettiest, sunniest maid you ever saw’; an’ he told me where she come from, so I knew. He found me a bit funny that afternoon. But he don’t know who I am,

though he used to go to school with me; I'd never tell, not for worlds." She shook her head vehemently. "I don't know why I told you; I'm not meself to-day, and that's a fact." At her half-suspicious, half-appealing look, I said quickly:

"I don't know a soul about here. It's all right."

She sighed. "It was kind of you; and I feel to want to talk sometimes. Well, after he was gone, I said to myself: 'I'll take a holiday and go an' see my daughter married.'" She laughed—"I never had no pink and white and blue little things myself. That was all done up for me that night I had the moon in me blood. Ah! my father was a proper hard man. 'Twas bad enough before I had my baby; but after, when I couldn't get the father to marry me, an' he cut an' run, proper life they led me, him and stepmother. Cry! Didn' I cry—I was a soft-hearted thing—never went to sleep with me eyes dry—never. 'Tis a cruel thing to make a young girl cry."

I said quietly: "Did you run away, then?"

She nodded. "Bravest thing I ever did. Nearly broke my 'eart to leave my baby; but 'twas that or drownin' myself. I was soft then. I went off with a young fellow—bookmaker that used to come over to the sports meetin', wild about me—but he never married me"—again she uttered her hard laugh—"knew a thing worth tu o' that." Lifting her hand towards the burning furze, she added: "I used to come up here an' help 'em light that when I was a little girl." And suddenly she began to cry. It was not so painful and alarming as her first distress, for it seemed natural now.

At the side of the cart-track by the gate was an old boot thrown away, and it served me for something to keep my eyes engaged. The dilapidated black object among the stones and wild plants on that day of strange mixed beauty was as incongruous as this unhappy woman herself revisiting her youth. And there shot into my mind a vision of this spot as it might have been that summer night when she had "the moon in her blood"—queer phrase—and those two young creatures in the tall soft fern, in the warmth and the darkened loneliness, had yielded to the impulse in their blood. A brisk fluttering of snowflakes began falling from the sky still blue, drifting away over our heads towards the blood-red flames and smoke. They powdered the woman's hair and shoulders, and with a sob and a laugh she held up her hand and began catching them as a child might.

"'Tis a funny day for my girl's weddin'," she said. Then with a sort of fierceness added: "She'll never know her mother—she's in luck there, tu!"

And, grabbing her feathered hat from the ground, she got up. “I must be gettin’ back for my train, else I’ll be late for an appointment.”

When she had put her hat on, rubbed her face, dusted and smoothed her dress, she stood looking at the burning furze. Restored to her town plumage, to her wonted bravado, she was more than ever like that old discarded boot, incongruous.

“I’m a fool ever to have come,” she said; “only upset me—and you don’t want no more upsettin’ than you get, that’s certain. Good-bye, and thank you for the drink—it lusened my tongue praaper, didn’t it?” She gave me a look—not as a professional—but a human, puzzled look. “I told you my baby was a laughin’ little thing. I’m glad she’s still like that. I’m glad I’ve seen her.” Her lips quivered for a second; then, with a faked jauntiness, she nodded. “So long!” and passed through the gate down into the lane.

I sat there in the snow and sunlight some minutes after she was gone. Then, getting up, I went and stood by the burning furze. The blowing flames and the blue smoke were alive and beautiful; but behind them they were leaving blackened skeleton twigs.

“Yes,” I thought, “but in a week or two the little green grass-shoots will be pushing up underneath into the sun. So the world goes! Out of destruction! It’s a strange thing!”

1916.

ЗАСЛУГИ

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