



XVII

TRISTRAM SHEEPSHANKS had, besides his prospective bargain over the 'Nebuchadnezzar', another piece of business; he hoped to sell for Mr. Fargo one of his collection of the religious paintings of Sigismund Goetz to a Chinese Plymouth Brother who wished to make a present to his latest concubine, also of the same persuasion. Then, on his own account he had to meet Baron Matsuda who, having drunk away most of his original capital in company with a woman whom he had variously introduced to society as the Baroness, as his nurse, as his niece, was now anxious to re-stock his cellar with rye-whisky and green Chartreuse, which he drank mixed, on the proceeds of the sale of marvellous heirlooms dating from the splendid but anti-foreign era of Iyeyasu. Sheepshanks was able to dispose of these advantageously in London, while reserving a few for Mr. Fargo, priceless little intro or nest boxes for drugs, the lacquer of which had been burnished numberless times, books of animal drawings by Hokusai, swords with their racks inlaid with nacre, sumptuous dolls and furniture from the girls' festival. Both the Chinese and the Baron inspired him to-day with an antipathy which he felt was foreign to his nature, especially since they represented substantial commissions. When Matsuda, fixing upon him with difficulty a cuttlefish-like eye, smote him on the back and muttered 'You vey goo' ferrow, I vey goo' ferrow, unshtan' one 'nother', he found it difficult to respond with the expected smile.

Left to himself, he transacted paper-business with increasing gloom for an hour. At the end of this time the spiritual trouble revealed itself as a mere matter of bodily derangement—dagger-like pains in the ribs, and in the stomach a cloying heaviness. Dyspepsia, of course; it was those waffles getting to work. He hurried to a neighbouring pharmacy for some bismuth and bicarbonate of soda which, he grieved to find, did him no good; for within another hour an unbearable headache almost blinded him, putting at once out of court the arrangement of affairs that should have occupied him until well into the afternoon. His rebellious flesh demanded repose, oblivion behind curtains and shutters. There was nothing for it but to telephone for a car, to be jolted in a succession of agonies to the station, to climb wearily into the jaded local train, and to fall into a stupor, from which the despairing yells of the porters at Osakai partially roused him. In a moment of escape from a painful trance he recognised his own garden gate. Profound silence reigned in the house; the servants had taken advantage of to-day's exodus to put in a long gossip at the public baths; the macaw slept with a fretful look.

Tristram crept upstairs to his little room, took two aspirins, and rolled with a sigh on to his bed. When he again became cognisant of an exterior world a breath of coolness had stolen through the leaves to his bedside, and his headache was gone. That, and the low-pitched throb of a dialogue shattering intermittently the glassy quiet of the room, drew him slowly back over the threshold of life. One of the voices was familiar—a rather husky contralto that vibrated pleasantly. It seemed to be talking nonsense to the parrot. 'Kiss me again, kiss me again'. In response he did not hear the guttural croak of the bird's newly acquired English,

'Prutty paul'! but a stronger, deeper voice, 'Do you expect me to live on kisses?'

'No, I'm yours entirely and eternally. But let's get away from here.'

'Get away? How do you mean get away?'

'Clear out of Japan. Come away with me and be happy. I must go anyhow; the doctor told me I shall die if I don't. I can't go away without you.'

Physical silence and mental tumult followed.

'Well, but how am I to live if I chuck up my job?'

(Insufferable coward!) 'Damn your job, James! I've got enough money of my own. I'll *keep* you if necessary. You've plenty of wits, my dear boy, and you'll find something. Don't worry, but come. See to-morrow if we need passports.'

'Yes, we shall, I know. . . . What d'you think Tristram'll do?'

'I can't help it whatever he does; he's nothing to me; he doesn't exist. There's only you.'

Tristram then was annihilated. The not-Tristram drifted, a tiny vacuum, through Nonentity.

'All right, darling, let's go off then; but give me a little more time. I must cover my retreat, and that'll take some days. I'm a cog in a machine, you see, and can't just break away like that.'

'I don't see why not; love comes before everything. All your machinery ought to give way to it. Besides, there's my love to consider. I don't want to die. If you really loved me you wouldn't let any other consideration stand in the way. You do really love me, don't you?'

'Of course I do, darling, and I'm going to take you away all right'. An interval, probably for kisses. 'But give me just ten days; it'll be to our advantage; we can get away more completely and successfully. Shall it be East or West?'

‘ Oh, I’d love to be on the Indian Ocean with you ; sunsets and flying-fish and islands full of flowers that you can smell miles out at sea. I want to be on deck with you at night looking at the phosphorescence and the Southern Cross low on the horizon. I wouldn’t mind the heat a bit ’.

‘ Splendid, and we’ll have curry at Colombo ’.

Tristram is dead, and the cold winds of interstellar space rush whistling in to fill and obliterate the puny vacuum of the Not-Tristram. But they will be eating at Colombo where the parrot-green surf shouts for joy beneath the titanic coconut palms.

‘ Come and talk about it in my cottage, Alba. I don’t feel safe here. We mustn’t take risks on any account. You’re such a reckless girl ’.

‘ So would you be if you were told you might die any day. If I’ve only got a few years I’m going to jolly well make the most of them. A short life and a gay one. Come along and stand me a drink ’.

Did a voice cry ‘ Cuckoldry ’ ! in all the house ? The Devil wore horns only since Belphegor, appearing on earth, was monstrously deceived and then poisoned by the shrew Marian.

Inward harmony, expelled upward from the knee-joints, forsook his brain, which abandoned itself to an orgy of grotesque images. Numbly it beheld the mediaevalised Greek gods of doom lashing their arrow-headed tails about in the spume of brimstone, nodding their grim, forked heads, pawing the burning marl with vast polished hoofs. To be ridiculous was to suffer some negation of oneself ; the man who could not keep his wife was absurd because he was more of a nonentity than people suspected. And now, found out, annihilated ; the Not-Tristram flickered out in the shrieking gale. She has said, ‘ He doesn’t exist ; ‘here’s only you ’. The

aspect of ludicrousness faded quickly away before the swift and returning tide of anguish, tossed upon which it became impossible to lie still on his bed and suffer. Forgetting for the first time in his life hat and stick, faithful companions on country walks, he wandered out into the dying afternoon. Any member of the foreign colony would have been vastly intrigued to meet him shuffling along, hatless and without the collar-stud he had removed for comfort before he lay down, his eyes staring blindly ahead of him, tears rolling from time to time down his cheeks, some catching dewily in his beard. But it so happened that no one remarked his plight except a few Japanese, who smiled deprecatingly; another of these crazy foreigners!

The road he followed dwindled to a path outside the town, among little terraces of rice and tea and vegetables, reeking of liquid manure; beyond them rose black, wooded hills, silent as death. Singing birds are not widely distributed in Japan, and it is possible to traverse miles of forest without hearing a sound. Wild mauve hortensia and orange lychnis skirted the track, ferns and liverwort draped brilliantly here and there an oozing wall of rock; but all was black and bitter in Mr. Sheepshanks' eyes. Sometimes the bamboo from either side met in shock tufts through which he forced his way. He stumbled on through menacingly quiet and dismal uplands, unaware that he was trespassing on a secret military zone.

Darkness began to surge about the boles of cryptomeria and camellia—for in the sheltered valley through which he descended the crimson camellia was a forest tree. The little owl took up its fluting, liquid and delicate; the sweet odour of burning weeds from a garden patch reminded him of the propinquity of man. Now he could hear the interminable rhythmic clicking that some

pious person made as an accompaniment to his evening prayer, now the treble crow of a bantam cock, echoed by its rival. A slatternly woman, nigger-black from toil in the fields, wearing the blue cotton pantaloons of the coolie, crossed his path, a bundle of Chinese cabbage on her back, issuing from a field of dwarf pollarded mulberries grown for the nurture of silkworms. Battered cans and discarded straw sandals began to fill the clovery little ditch by the roadside, and a cluster of heavily thatched pyramidal roofs appeared, crowned with festoons of hemerocallis. Lights were lit, pale paper rectangles by which the community rested after its work; tailless cats and yelping children, the faces of the latter smeared with a chocolate-coloured conserve of beans, hindered his progress through the village. On the polished rice-straw mats of the cottages their inmates, naked save for loincloths and such garments, stretched themselves to enjoy the cool of the evening, before the mosquitoes had as yet begun to bite them. Clumps of dahlia and phlox, a few little dwarf trees in china bowls, contributed to the general lusciousness, rotten-ripe, of the scene, which Tristram viewed as distorted parts of an evil whole conceived by a maniac god.

He rapidly approached the further hillside, the feathery outline of which rose darkly against the west. Presently there loomed above him a great torii, the flat-headed arch, twenty feet high, that warned him he was treading on holy ground—a temple precinct, chill with tree-shade and the chant of clear water that bubbled in the 'piscina' beneath a roof carved with vermilion and turquoise dragons, and thence down a rock-bordered conduit where irises bloomed in the late spring. The tall, copper-horned gable of the main shrine rose, ship-like, from the gloom. Possibly an unwelcome thought suggested by this sacred symbolism diverted Mr.

Sheepshanks into an alley running at right angles to the approach, as well as the fact that the narrowness of this path and the height of the neighbouring vegetation suited his agoraphobic mood. From straightness it began to roam randomly among boulders, until he found himself arrested by the face of the cliff on a terrace of which the temple was built. A few grave-stones, remotely columnar, guarded the ashes and shades of the dead; a rubbish-heap of withered blossoms and other temple refuse emphasised the note of mortality. Water dripped in sad minor arpeggios to the burden of concealed tree-frogs, while from the north a night-wind surged through the leaves of maples with a more deeply funereal accent, as though it had risen out of the Stygian plains. It was music insidious, persuasive, a fugue subtly repeating in many voices the despair of an Eastern creed. 'Poor mortal fool, you are already nothing. Why must you maintain the unhappy pretence of flesh and blood? You are nothing; become nothing'. The odour of decaying wood, the damp, atonic Japanese air, strengthened and substantiated the fast-gathering presence of death.

Tristram felt himself to be transported an immense distance from whence life, seen in perspective, appeared as a passing nightmare, the distress of a moment, an incidental convulsion in the vast process of re-adjustment from one non-existence into another. It was unthinkable that there should be such a thing as positivity. He saw with relief the gradual approach toward negation, the balance of worlds, the force that held them apart slowly giving way so that on a sudden they crashed together furiously alight and burst into fountains of dust that drifted across space. This now thinned by disintegration to an impalpable jelly of atoms. Then began the decay of the three remaining elements of

reality, the electron, space and time. Time wavered, dimensions became uncertain, and all creation fermented in the travail of death. He was scattered far and wide on the turmoil; he had long been nothing, and the lost units of his now forgotten synthesis would very soon be nothing also. 'Very soon'; but time was dismembering itself the while, and 'shortly' and 'in a long time' were scarcely distinguishable. Soon all would sink, through absolute inertia, to that Nothing which is not even darkness, which has neither space nor time. . . .

The shrill barking of a fox, that humorous demon which deludes travellers and possesses women, brought him back from beyond infinity to the haunted little graveyard, but in the strong conviction that he was no longer of this world. Aiba with her pottering infidelities was the frailest foam, the unstable wreckage of a wave; he and she were already dissolving with all mankind, their insignificance well on its way to extermination—to dignity at last. There remained but one unimportant act, the achievement of his own death. He knew now the reason why the Japanese committed suicide so easily; the secret was out. It lay deeper than an 'honourable tradition'; the country, the air, the water and trees, were but the mark of the spirit of annihilation, inviting all that fell into that mood, and artfully contributing atmosphere and other circumstances to deepen it. Low feeding, no less than mental suffering, a deficiency in vitamins or in happiness—his mind arrived in the course of its rabid oscillations at the normal channel of seeking for physical causes in every act—these would make a person readily susceptible to the sinister influence of this nature-mask. A masked demon; he thought of the old Noh-play of Do-Jo-Ji, of the temple bell, and of the sadly serene woman's mask that the ghost-devil wears as she glides forward to haul the great bell, before,

exorcised by abbot and monks, she flees in all the grinning, gapt-toothed extravagance of her true infernal character. But nature hid something more terrible and at the same time more splendid than a gapt-toothed fiend ; she concealed the truth of negation. The frigid agonies of death, whether experienced by the criminal struggling and screaming as the warders enter his cell to pin him for the gallows, the soldier half-shot to pieces, and howling for his mother, or the consumptive watching with dismay the upward steepening of his temperature-chart, were, not parts of this mask, but the guardians set before it by the vital principle, the illusion of life and increase, to scare away seekers after truth—the truth of Nothing. This vital principle was none other than that arch-mountebank, Satan, the great illusionist. In a more literal sense than that of his cheerfully atheistic days, he realised the meaning of the equation, ‘God equals Nothing’.

And now for death ; it should be tactful, altruistic, so devised as to attach to Alba no particle of blame. It must therefore take place before her elopement, and an explanatory letter must demonstrate that the atmosphere of Japan had, as not uncommonly happened, reduced him to an insupportable state of neurasthenia—hint even at premonitory symptoms of lunacy. Or better than that, an accident, preferably at sea, since it was common knowledge that he could not swim. He would sail his little boat to the middle ocean into which, attaching a weight to his feet, he would leap towards that freedom which alone could slake the feverish longings of his imprisoned mind. A lump of iron ballast would answer the purpose admirably. He pictured himself plunging down, trailing upwards a white streak of bubbles through the green as water replaced the air in his lungs. An agony of choking and bursting, and then entire

surrender. He might sway or drift a little in submarine currents, but his body would never rise again. Sad-ducismus Triumphatus! No one but a fool would desire the resurrection.

As he stumbled homeward through the night, he found that his grief was changing in quality and was no longer a pure element; a noticeable adulteration of anger troubled him, and further, the craving for a final gesture, a display in the act of suicide. All his life he had been, despite his rather childish garrulity, self-effacing. Surely he might be permitted the luxury of at least one flourish before the end. Then there was Podler, into whose saccharine cup he felt strongly tempted to instil a drop or so of bitterness. Why should this ungracious, boorish cad be allowed to have everything his own way? How complacently he had swallowed all Podler's 'soft soap' about the sanctity of marriage, his habitual and unshakeable chastity, and his preference for male society over that of women. The success of all this clumsy lying rankled, and reclaimed him further from his nostalgic dream of the marsh of extinction. Alba was different; she must—poor, impulsive girl—have been carried off her feet by Podler's wolfish onslaught—though he was rather an hyaena. The wolf is not wholly ignoble. One thing though; Podler was mistaken if he thought Alba would stick to him; having once broken loose, she would take care to remain fancy-free. In a year's time. . . .

But before he was gone he must give Podler one for himself—a blow flourished at his head in the grand manner, in the style of Hyacinthe Rigaud; the recollection that he had driven a man to self-destruction might, it was to be hoped, sometimes hover awkwardly between him and the prosecution of his amours, whether at Colombo or elsewhere. So the original plan must be

revised, an opportunity seized on for this dramatic martyrdom—unless the two fled sooner than was probable from their recent dialogue. If they did, well, it must be suicide plain instead of coloured.

It was nearly half-past ten by the time he turned into the homeward lane. By a rare street-lamp a figure could be seen approaching him with vagulous gait, humming mournfully to itself. If it were Podler—no, he never walked so crookedly. It proved, at close quarters, to be merely 'Captain' Moss in all the dolorous throes of a certain stage of lower-deck conviviality. On meeting Tristram he became all brightness and intellectual chat.

'Ullo, old Pirandeaasy', he began with light allusiveness. 'Ere you see me aht fer ? nevenin' stroll from me earthnome, strite ferm a baht wiv Holdus Ukley. Gord ! them ighbrars ! Allersime. Mithanthropishts an' endrogynes', by which he seemed to mean 'mysogynists'.

A great weariness desolated Tristram's soul. The life-illusion was returning in the shape of a bore, a sodden beast who pawed at his stinging wounds. But it wasn't for long after all ; what did these things matter ?

'Which book are you reading ?' he muttered.

'O, all in a genral wye ; gettn a sten'point, gen'l arspect, ch'know. Wo's is last ? See, Conscious Pilate, Jestng Pontius, or somethink. 'll tell yer wot', in a fruity, confidential undertone, 'tween younme e's got a ruddy complex. Sort we don't mention. I'd purrim righ ; I'm eggspers' psycho'list ; purrim righ no time. Sort we don' mention even tweent fre'. Leave it tha'. You len' me arferdorrer, ole cock, 'n we leave it tha'. Uach !'

He took Tristram by the elbow and breathed, as in a benediction, second-hand alcohol.

It was patent that release could only be won by

ransom. Having drunk his pocket empty, 'Captain' Moss required urgently a further sum to round off the evening. Tristram found a couple of yen notes.

'That's all I have on me, I'm afraid'.

'Tha'z or-righ'. Man witin' tome f'my s' scripshn shoshal shervish shiety. 'Omely lil group 'shcush shoshl queshun: Bern Shor, Golsh-worshy, Tolshtoi, schcush 'em all. Pye yer back morrer. Come tcher 'ouse arpasnine morn'. He sheered off, steering a zig-zag course and warbling to an obligato of hiccups:

'F'm er desert I cumter thee

Wivme shtallion shod wif fy-er. . . .'

Tristram viewed without any comfort the lights of home beckoning him up the paved way to a blaze in the midst of which his wife, in cultural opposition to Captain Moss, was singing from Dryden and Purcell. A dinner-party with bridge and music had been driven by the catastrophe from his head. He could see through the verandah little Mr. Nishimura shaking his greasy locks at the piano, which he made to tinkle satisfactorily in harpsichord fashion, with his manicured, womanish fingers.

'Oh, there you are, are you?' said Alba at the close of the song, turning from him to the strip of mirror and settling her side hair. 'We haven't had to wait for you long—only two and a half hours'.

'I was kept, I was kept'.

'Sorry to hear it', came the piquant little baby voice of Malvina Bugbird from a cushioned re-entrant. She loved to fancy herself risquée. 'I thought you were up to no good'.

Pale earthy, scratched with bamboo edges, Tristram seated himself away from the light. Yes, Alba was getting brusque à la Podler already. . . . He was not

greatly offended at the jokes of this concourse, for they seemed remote, unreal, supremely unimportant. Malvina, her bare arm tucked inside Mr. Kurrie-Lewer's elbow, her expression one of blatant cosiness, was clearly in the very infancy of experience, at the stage when she desired applause for an act which would have been instinctive in most girls who 'walked out' with their young men of an evening. He wondered with the arrogance of people who suffer, how he could ever have been interested in this ordinary, complacent lot.

