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ON an easy chair on the lounge deck of the *Taj Mahal* as it crept throbbing up the Hongkong strait, Tristram sat in great comfort. At the same instant his wife, in the *Haitori Maru*, was encountering heavy seas a day or so west of Honolulu. He had seen her but once before they sailed—a painful, but reserved encounter. She was sunk in an apathy, from which she roused herself just sufficiently to agree to accept from him a small quarterly remittance; the prospect of getting something for nothing was a powerful stimulant.

Sheepshanks had been struck with horror at the change in her face; old age had settled in rings under pouched eyes, parentheses about the mouth and looseness of the skin; paint and powder had failed to quell the greyish death-light, a kind of oily gleam, that appeared to emanate from the skull that in a year would be naked. She had the look of mortality, although the doctors gave her the sporting chance of several years, if she were careful and abstemious. But even the fright that now made her look wistful would be but a feeble deterrent, as feeble as the prohibition laws of the country whither she was bound.

Tristram viewed this wreckage with impersonal sorrow; he grieved merely that any human creature should be so caught and doomed by the universal spirit of destruction. But nothing could be helped or prevented once the engines of fate were in motion.

The seamed hills of orange rock, indigo-blue where

the foliage shone through moisture-laden air, rose about him in elegantly grooved cones. He noticed with pleasure and wonder the business of man ; a junk would pass him with a high poop, adorned with little gods and gardens, and a cage of ducks who quacked, once and for all, in and out of this life. An ugly Chinese woman would be propelling it with a long oar in a sling, while the baby on her back gazed enigmatically at the sliding water through its narrow eyes. Launches hustled, bubbling and hooting, out from wharves where derricks clanked wearily ; a portly English stevedore or agent would flash by in a company's tender, white from his topee to his 'blanco'd' boots, save for the red, supercilious and fleshy face ; a couple of Chinese flappers on a ferry looked attractive for a second in their dark, fluttering silk trousers and neat slippers, their pigtailed slung provocatively over one shoulder. Then again a lean, grey shape would grow substantial on the port bow—the light cruiser *Wembley*, attempting vainly to look pacific with its brilliant awnings ; hence, his eye travelled up the peak, tier by tier, of solid houses—not quite English indeed, but leagues removed from the flimsy wooden untidiness and drabness of Totsuka suburbs ; up to the wisps of autumn cloud crowning the summit.

In Japan the old-style holiday makers were out maple-viewing, while the moderns in leggings, plus-fours and bandoliers, took their gun-cases and pointers from Shinjuku station, after the snipe, the green-finch, the pheasant, the stoat and other game animals. It was good to have set between himself and this slipshod country many a gulf, blue with clear Arctic currents or faecal yellow with the great rivers of China. Before him stretched a vista of happy tropical weeks, of shark-haunted tides, milky green and tepid, sluicing the

coconuts to and fro beneath Malayan hovels bestriding musky creeks on their frail piles. After all, it would be *he* who would be taking curry at Colombo, to the accompaniment of the parboiled Indian surf. How delightful, too, to behold once more a good-looking race. The Cinghalese ran to beauty, especially between the ages of ten to twenty. How charming were the youths who flung water-lilies into the motor of the kind tourist, and the little girls of fourteen, some of them mothers, who sold at fabulous prices the lace that showed up so exquisitely against their plum-coloured flesh.

Mr. Sheepshanks was recalled to the present by the dropping of the anchor, and the arrival on board of a few passengers. One of these tripped along the lounge deck with a brisk confidence which suggested that, although a new-comer, his surroundings were not unfamiliar. He was on the short side, and respectably clad in grey; his pince-nez and small chin-tuft suggested rather vaguely a connection with art, or some mild branch of radicalism. Instead of fussing officiously about his cabin and luggage he approached Tristram and, with no word of apology or introduction, seated himself in a vacant chair. After regarding him benignly for a few seconds, he observed,

‘And how is our fugitive from justice?’

For a moment the curtain of dimension parted to reveal the icy emptiness that lies outside time and space; and Tristram was conveyed beyond fear into the bleak certainty of inevitable disaster. Thereafter surprise ceased to exist for him, and the conversation that followed became the most natural thing in the world.

‘It would be scarcely correct to call me a fugitive from justice; you should say more accurately, one who is returning home after taking an automatic part in an act of justice’.

“Automatic” is good, but I doubt whether it is strictly true. Let us test it as exhaustively as we can’.

‘What test do you propose to apply?’

‘To begin with, your panic at the insinuations of M. Fabre. I grant that on the fatal morning upon which you embarked in the *Caccubioni* with the late J. Podler you were conscious of little but the steadfast determination to take your own life. But subconsciously you were hating and desiring the death of Podler, whom you pretended—believed, in fact, you had forgiven as a final and noble gesture. Subconsciously you turned the boat over by means of a gybe, in such a manner that he and not you, should fall in—and should so fall in that he was likely to come up under the sail or the hull of the boat. Next, the wily subconscious, or unconscious, had planned that you should omit, when shipping the tiller, to fasten it with the pin, so that in your violent efforts to preserve your balance it came loose in your right hand’.

‘Such an accident certainly happened’.

‘Consciously, an accident; in every other name, a design. The loosening of the tiller jerked you forward so abruptly that your right arm, the hand of which was clutching this formidable weapon, struck with great force upon the surface of the now horizontal sail. Do you or do you not recollect’ (here the stranger wagged his forefinger with something of forensic aggressiveness) ‘do you or do you not recollect whether an image of Mr. Podler’s head, subsiding into the water after a good sound crack, formed itself in your mind?’

‘Yes, it did. And I see that you’re trying to prove that this will-to-murder did for an instant flash into the plane of consciousness, and for this reason M. Fabre, arriving, like the child of nature that he is, instinctively at the truth (because my act was a natural one), scared me with a suggestion that he only half credited. Your

hypothesis of the momentary encroachment of my destructive emotion on the conscious plane is, I regret to say, borne out by the fact that I deliberately replaced the tiller, to avoid suspicion, before I came into the range of vision of my rescuers. But there is no particle of evidence that any court would accept, and so, I am bound to confess, the possibility of retribution does not alarm me'.

' Well ! upon my word ! You take the matter pretty coolly. I suppose that your moral scruples are quiescent, and that if I ordered you to " give yourself up " on reaching England, you would laugh at me ; but that, on the contrary, you are in a mild state of cock-a-whoop self-congratulation at having killed the villain, driven the guilty woman within a few months of the grave, and that you yourself, smug little hero and functionary of the Unwritten Law, have, for the first time in your life, performed a virile act '.

' To take your points in order : I must protest that my scruples are by no means quiescent, but that my failure to control the reflex impulse that prompts the male of the herd to destroy, if he can, his rival, fills me with the gravest concern. But it does not seem to be a matter for the police, inasmuch as though, at an unfortunate crisis, I became aware of this impulse, I am wholly unable to say whether I did in fact hit Mr. Podler on the head, or whether he struck some portion of the boat, unaided by me. My " subconscious " planning and execution of the tragedy, you might argue, entitles me to such supervision or even confinement as is exercised over epileptics who unwittingly attack persons after a seizure, and on homicidal maniacs ; but no doctor, I feel confident, would place me in either category of defective. My behaviour was a reaction to circumstances, and as man never does anything else but react to circumstances, it would be

necessary to confine with me, the whole human race. There is no thought, no pure reason ; the most perfectly-argued statement is but a disguised belief ; and belief is the reaction to some circumstance or other.

‘ To return to my case : I can confidently predict that the circumstances in question will never again involve me. It is not merely that I shall never again love a woman so deeply that this emotion, hurled back upon me, must find other and more sinister outlets ; it is that I know now, at last, that no woman is worth the expenditure of such extreme passion. I am cured of love, and of such follies ’.

‘ When you talk like that, you can hardly be said to have been cured of the malady arising out of slighted love ’.

‘ If I made the statement bitterly, no. But I feel no bitterness, no mortification ; merely the radiant calm that follows the catharsis. I was going to say when you interrupted me : regarding, therefore, my past love and its resultant acts as foolish, I cannot consider myself to be a hero, nor (regarding it again as the uncontrollable urge to primitive mating and the contingent sex-rivalry) to be the fulfiller of an Unwritten Law, since I must necessarily deny the ethical connotation of the phrase ; the sanction for destroying an adulterer is no law of any kind, but an animal instinct.

‘ Nor do I look either upon Podler as the justly punished villain, nor Alba as the guilty woman consuming the ashen fruits of her misconduct. True, they have consumed fruits that seemed to be of their own sowing. But they are for this and for other reasons deserving of the warmest sympathy ; wretched victims of the loss of equilibrium, they have surrendered miserably to forces that they might, under happier circumstances, have controlled. Lastly, I can scarcely be called

cock-a-whoop as long as I lament, as I do, the fatality by which inner discord curtails the prosecution of a long and fortunate life ?

‘ Define inner discord ’.

‘ The possession of certain peculiarities, or “ humours ”, which are at variance with one another ; or of one insubordinate and alien tendency which upsets equilibrium, and succeeds in perverting the beauty and efficiency of the ultimate form which, but for the presence of this unassimilable element, a person’s character would have taken. Podler was designed to be a strong and slightly piratical business man, a mighty wench and a reckless raker at the fences of life ; instead of which he permitted the deadly sin of *accidia*, or the dilatory humour, to fasten like some pale parasite on his entrails, and so to stultify his natural initiatives that he drifted into the Consular service and met his death in a pitifully abortive attempt at cuckoldry and abduction. Poor crippled Alexander ; what Orients might have been his. Alba, again, was torn by a perpetual inward conflict ; planned originally as some fecund nature-goddess, who would accept with impartial grace the homage of her numerous and wealthy admirers, she nurtured a morbid idealism, largely upon the crude publications of the Cincinnati Vital Thought Syndicate, and so frustrated her golden destiny. Born to be the brilliant mistress of an hundred lovers, she is perishing miserably as the discarded wife of one. These are melancholy thoughts ; these are events whose progression, marshalled by powers more than human, I can but watch, and mourn at the ineluctable course into which they are directed. For the principle of discord, of unreconciled crotchets, extends, I am convinced, throughout the universe, intensifying as it approaches the origin of being ; in man it may be amiably capricious,

in nature, an anomalous cruelty, in the gods, the harmless (relatively speaking) antic of a dement ; but in fate, which is behind all being and not-being, it is the bitter, savage mania of a law that is fundamentally and unalterably wrong'.

'You are severe ; you speak like a person with a grievance against fate ; is it that you also find yourself a victim of internal discord ?'

'Less than many ; because I have been (I flatter myself) moderately and consistently discreet. In good and ill fortune alike, I have survived, where others have succumbed. I am a little, unnoticeable man ; and as a Mr. Takamatsu—a friend of mine—rightly assumes, the little man is the most likely to survive and receive the heritage of the earth. This miniature consistency of mine may be a poor kind of harmony, but it is at least the shadow of that celestial principle which causes, as Confucius tells us, "all things to be nourished and to flourish"'. .

'Yet in the instance of Mrs. Fargo have we not one who, conspicuously deficient in this admirable quality, has nevertheless managed to achieve the solid happiness of matrimony ?'

'The solid happiness of matrimony ? Really, you forget yourself. And have you never seriously considered the amenities of divorce in America ? For my part I give her no more than a year of her present bliss'.

'Very possibly ; but we are wandering. Now this principle of equilibrium ; has it not some power in the Universe as well as your malignant, destructive power ?'

'Yes, but the contest is unequal. Harmony and equilibrium die at the point at which discord or destruction begins to be eternal, that is, to identify itself with Negativity. Discord is the path to Nothing. Thither we all tend ; the progress of civilisation is an illusive

enticement to build higher that disaster may be all the more calamitous. We of the West are so terrified of this Nothing that we fabricate heavens between ourselves and it ; but the Orientals have glimpsed it, now in their religion, now in what seems to be a race characteristic, like Japanese suicide. It may also help to explain the rooted *incuria* which combats the attempt of the Japanese to modernise themselves ; deep down, and perhaps unrecognised within them, is the inborn knowledgt that cruisers and Budgets don't really matter, and that they cannot stave off the ultimate Negation '.

' If you really believe that life is a horrible illusion of this kind why, may I ask, did you not commit suicide according to plan, instead of sacrificing Podler and spoiling a truly passionate, if not very noble or creditable love affair ? Why did you not make a greater effort to control your savage instincts ? You find fault with the fierce and licentious conduct of Japanese rustics at a Matsuri ; but you, who profess to be of a superior race, are worse yourself '.

' How can a man foretell his deportment on the field of battle ? Theory will be the first thing to go over board. I don't consider myself to be of a superior race ; I recognise now that all men are about equally beastly, equally near the marsh of animality—with a few individual exceptions.

' I was caught in the toils, but not so hopelessly as poor Alba, now starting, I fear, from some tragic necrophilous dream to find her doom creeping an inch, a cold yet burning inch, nearer her heart ; nor as the miserable Podler, whom the great Nothingness claimed swiftly and inexorably. I was but " the fell sergeant ", a poor instrument in the hands of " divine " justice. You ask me " why did you not control . . . " Who can resist the decrees of the Élan Mortel ? '

‘ Anyone would think you’ve been reading Hardy from the way you talk ’.

‘ No : listen to my creed. I believe in a madness and a malignancy that transcends intelligence—supermania for the superman, increasing till we come to the supreme horror—Nothing ’.

‘ Why live then ? ’

‘ For the bribe, harmony—for the lesser good permitted with *malice prepense* by the greater evil ; it is worth living in order to acquire the technique of the tightrope acrobat, and, so balanced, to register a protest at the curse of creation. Elegantly, in flesh tights, I will poise myself before but a few spectators—but these shall be as select as Landor’s *corvives*. On this precarious height I will sway for a brief hour in the sun before I vanish. *Orcus, pulvis et umbra*, let them come ; and let there be stoic calm to welcome them. And now, permit me to ask you a question ’.

‘ I shall be delighted to reply to the best of my ability ’.

‘ What is your name ? ’

‘ My name is Sknahspehs Martsirt, sole confessor of you, mine onlie begetter ’.

The gentleman immediately vanished away.