



IV

IN the garden of Sheepshanks's villa at Osakai a giant tamarisk raised its fine hairy plumage to heaven. A row of frail morning glories still displayed fully their claret-stained or glaucous cups at the verandah posts; above them there clung, screaming, to a brass ring, a large blue and yellow parrot—a present to Alba from Mr. Hattori, the cotton magnate, who fancied he had bought a group of lugubrious John peasants pretty cheap. It was called Osbert, but croaked villainous improprieties in Japanese.

Tristram sat beneath the tamarisk trying not to think of the hopelessness of life and the cruel extinction that consummated it. This hot-house July day ripened such morbid reflections—a season for orchids rather than men. The sad sea wind, charged with a clammy and equatorial moisture, wailing through the crown of the tree, seemed that morning to carry none but the Horatian refrain 'pulvis et umbra'. It distressed him to see in another bamboo chair Professor McGonigle, who had a way of dropping in to breakfast, and of giving barbarous breakfast parties, a habit only fit for undergraduates, so fat and red and obviously eupeptic, smoking a huge briar and chuckling over the mixture of pidgin English and American in which the *Argus* was printed.

'Pulvis et umbra', and scarcely that. Was umbra a mere superstition, the rationalisation of that belief with which the West had attempted to mitigate the painful

shock of prospective annihilation? Or did something, after all, say, the 'Unconscious', prevail over the centrifugal impulse of decay? But the consolation afforded by the possibility of continuing life on an unconscious plane was mere fruit of Sodom. To be conscious, to remember, is the only true pleasure vouchsafed to man. Pleasure perhaps, pain certainly. Soon, probably, a time would come when sleep and forgetfulness were more desirable. Even now there were times . . .

'Where's it hurting you, Sheepshanks? Are you feeling it's time for a little of the mixture—seeing, sirs, that it is but the umpteenth hour? Why so tristful, Tristram? Tell us the trouble, little man'.

'My liver was making me wonder what are the chief reasons for continuing life'.

'State briefly and in your own language; use one side of the paper only. Tell it not to, then. Threaten it with a Beecham's Pill and tell it that all communications henceforth must take place through your solicitor'.

'No, on the whole I think not; my liveriness is a good offset to your appalling euphoria. When people are hideously healthy like you they can't think seriously, if at all. While you were wasting your time over Mr. Hoot Pugmeyer's leading article I was coming to the conclusion that there's only one thing that stands really firm between man and self-destruction, and that's the fear of losing our precious consciousness, however much it may torment us. Otherwise everyone with a touch of liver would . . .'

'Coil off the mortal shuffle; and a darned good thing too?'

'Don't interrupt. I was going to say that the Japanese, taken as a whole, have overcome this obstacle which still gives to the West, with its desperate adherence to personality, a craven look. The Japanese

secretly think we're cowards because we cling to life and condemn suicide. They certainly are brave ; Nichiren, when about to be decapitated, gave a shout of defiance which dismayed the executioner ; but what courage is echoed in the plangent beauty of these lines :

“ Toll on the passing bell,
Ring out the doleful knell,

For I must die,
There is no remedy ” ?’

‘ Oh, I’ll grant you they’re brave enough in some ways. Yet after all is it genuine bravery ? I can’t help thinking that your Westerner with his clinging to personality that you’ve been prattling about faces death more bravely than the Oriental ; because he’s had to combat and overcome the horror of death, while the Oriental hasn’t. It’s been done for him by generations of nihilistic thought. The little yellow brother finds it easier to die than the European, and by Jove, he does too. He jumps down chasms and eviscerates himself on pretexts that seem slight to us, I mean unsatisfactory love-affairs, domestic troubles and that sort of thing. Insults, too ; you remember after the American Immigration Act how one good gentleman cut himself open as a protest at the affront to Japan, on the doorstep of the Oil Trust Building, which he believed, not without good reason, to be the American Embassy. Then again they do it simply because they see no particular cause for going on living. It’s so easy ; a child can do it, as the advertisement says ’.

‘ Well, but aren’t you implying that all the European “ Suicides while of unsound mind ” are acts of supreme courage ?’

‘ No, I’m not. You might say it was natural to the Japanese to “plunge razors and carving-knives into their gizzards”, but it’s confoundedly unnatural in us. We don’t do it till we’ve worked ourselves up or let ourselves drift into a state of hysteria; in short, till we’ve got a few kangaroos in the campanile, alias bats in the belfry. That’s the ethical difference, laddie, you take my word for it’.

‘ Very well; let us endeavour by sanity to overcome our terror of death. Mankind will then be on a perfectly logical footing, with two courses open to it—either to commit suicide, or conquer disease, death and social disorganisation’.

‘ I take you; either extinction, or Bernard Shaw plus H. G. Wells. Some dilemma. Take a little Fruit Salt, my friend, take a little Fruit Salt. Hullo! I seem to recognise yon solar topee. Beneath it you will observe the manly features of James Pugin Aloysius Podler, D.D., P.D.Q. What ho without there! Without what? Without bound, without dimension. Milton!’

The lean and lined bronzen face of Mr. Podler peered at them from the lane. ‘ I knew it was you, McGonigle, when I heard someone being hearty over the fence. I wish you weren’t so matutinal. Poor Sheepshanks! You must be wanting a bathe. What about it, everybody? Mrs. Sheepshanks coming too?’

‘ Oh yes, I’ll tell her, and go and change. Come in, won’t you, and have a drink while you’re waiting.’

‘ Thank you’, said McGonigle, counterfeiting the person who always answers remarks addressed to somebody else, ‘ I will’.

Mr. Podler was not feeling in a particularly jocular mood, and McGonigle’s facetiousness grated on him more than he showed—for McGonigle was a good creature, and no one would wish to snub him. That

sensation of being on edge, to which Tristram had referred, was very bad this morning. He felt lonely, restless and pessimistic and inclined to accuse Tristram of being a disguised Mephistopheles, and of putting unwholesome ideas into his head. That wish that he would occasionally yield to temptation, now. But possibly there was something in it; too rigid a celibacy might not be advisable in these latitudes. Doctors disagreed about it; there had been quite a controversy in the *Lancet* some years ago.

McGonigle, who always made himself thoroughly at home, returned from the house with a whisky bottle, some ice and 'tansan', a local mineral water.

'This is stuff you can trust. Tristram has it out by the barrel', he said, waiting politely for the last-comer to help himself first.

If, Mr. Podler argued, he found he could stand the strain no longer, and were forced to commit himself to Heaven knows what imprudence, the responsibility would lie altogether with Tristram. He forgot for the moment that he had been so affected by Inez Cavara as to blush slightly at the sudden mention of her name; but this was because he had not yet admitted such aspirations to take a fully conscious form.

'A was sayin',' articulated Mr. McGonigle, very loudly and distinctly, in the character of the stage Scotchman, one of his favourite rôles, 'yon's a varra dependable whusky that our gude host imports by the barrel. Say when'.

'When'. A golden oily trickle over the ice-nuggets. The hiss and spume of carbonated water; beautiful.

Mr. and Mrs. Sheepshanks came down the garden path clad for bathing; the beach was only a hundred yards off at the bottom of the lane, and at Osakai one wore what one pleased. Alba's costume, a woolly

carmine confection, fitted her like a glove and increased the joy of her husband, who felt proud of being married to so desirable a creature. He regretted mildly that his was too long in the leg and too baggy about the trunk, making him look, he was sure, both dowdy and poorly shaped ; if only his muscles were a little more developed. Mr. Podler was long, strong and sinewy ; his wolf-like action had twice won him the ' Muddiford ', the great cross-country event at Roodhurst, a Benedictine Public School ; whereas Sheepshanks II, that ' puny little abortion ' of Huyghens' house at Silchester—Mr. Huggins had spelt his name thus ever since his ordination—had often been flogged by sadic young prefects for cutting games.

Lacking the moral force to continue the payment of so grave a penalty—ten red and, later, blue and green parallels on either posterior—for default, he had given up with reluctance those dreamy afternoons in the school library with an illustrated Vasari ; but his boredom with athletics had never diminished.

' Now, McGonigle ', crowed Alba, ' are you going to be a dirty boy, or are you going to change and come in with us ? '

' Oh, ze perfide Eengleesh ; always wash zemselves. " Wash and pray " say your hymn ; ze motto of Albion '.

' Oh, come on ; don't be sillier than you can help, will you ! ' Seeing whisky on the garden table, she poured herself a stiff peg, using, Podler noted with dismay, the tumbler he had just emptied.

Professor McGonigle struck an histrionic attitude, and strode tragically through the garden gate, one hand in the coat-breast.

Mr. Sheepshanks felt no envy while witnessing the superb swallow-dives and porpoise-like behaviour of Podler near the end of a small wooden jetty ; it was a

pleasant addition to the movement of limbs that graced the margin of this bay of the Pacific—a cup, one might say, of bubbling and crystal-blue champagne. The high day seemed to chime a glassy aubade from its dome, that looked to be finding support on fat, baluster-shaped cloudlets of quartz marble; the horns of red volcanic rock burnt luridly in the morning light, like the red and fierce-moustached demons who guard temple precincts, a comparison suggested all the more forcibly by bristling fringes of pines blown upward by the sea-gales.

‘How gorgeous the sea looks; I could simply kiss it’, Alba cried and, with a run along the jetty, hot to the soles of the feet, she took thunderously to the water with the impact as of some enchanting leviathan, some cetaceous oceanid; she smacked, as a rule, rather than kissed it. Foam, the lace edging a peacock-bright pillow, obscured her whitely for a second, and she rose laughing to clasp Inez, in tangerine silky material that clung, about the waist. Mr. Podler wished he was doing that, as he pushed the dragged front hair out of his eyes to see better. He noticed with concern that M. Fabre, of the Crédit Commercial Belge, was floating near by on his back, with a possessive smile, as though he had actually done so. The man was a mere womaniser; he confessed so himself, and deserved to be cut out.

The round and now gaudily-striped abdomen of Mr. Takamatsu appeared like some futurist island in the surf; beside him gambolled his two lissom and entrancing daughters, Noriko and Yoshiko, whose laughter the breeze carried, frail and clear as the wing-flash of the ringed plover darting hither and thither, to the ears of several lounging young men who knew, alas! that the marriage affairs of these two radiantly pretty girls were arranged already on a sound economic basis. Yoshiko was to wed the Mitsukochi Bank, Noriko the Goto

Electric Company, both of which, run on strictly nepotic principles, paid the most astounding dividends, as Mr. Podler knew, Mr. Takamatsu having let him in for one of these good things that must be disposed of at the psychological moment.

Tristram Sheepshanks bobbed up and down amidst breaking waves, unconscious of the regard of a fat Japanese lady, who seemed to find him more than interesting.

‘Hullo, you naughty man! I’ll tell your wife about you’. Lulu Miles in black and yellow seemed to have risen foam-born from the sea beside him. ‘Do come and dine with us to-night and meet a rich Yank who collects early Victorian bric-a-brac’.

The early Victorian craze, epidemic in England about 1920, had now passed over to Boston.

‘Yes’, shouted Mr. Miles, around whose large, sun-reddened shoulders a shoal of mackerel seemed to be leaping, ‘he’s a great fool; he’s been to Oxford. You ought to nail him easily. Sell him some rubbish, mind’.

Tristram chirped in his antique, spinet-like manner, ‘Your charms are quite enough inducement . . .’

‘Now, now, Tristram, don’t you begin falling a victim to my charms in your old age. Tell Alba to come along and chaperone you, or you’ll be getting into trouble, I can see’.

‘Thanks so much; we shall both be delighted’.

‘Good. Well, the vampire must be trotting now. Eight o’clock sharp then. So long’. A pearly thigh flamed in the midst of an emerald and flower-like breaker, and she was gone.

On the dull grey sand, suggesting powdered platinum—for the brilliance in white and gold of an English littoral is here unknown, he warmed his person, choosing a spot free of the rubbish that disfigures the beach

of every Japanese seaside town. There passed him unnoticed, Madame Cavara and M. Fabre, beneath the same Madonna-blue paper umbrella, relieved by one spray of white bamboo. The voice of the English nurse of the French Counsellor's children came scoldingly across the levels where the heat danced, betraying her origins in Brixton, and later, Sydney. 'Master Ongree and Miss Eyevonne; stop plyein with them nyetives and come 'ere at once, Master Ongree and Miss Eyevonne; did jew 'ear me? If you downt do as you're told, as soon as I get 'ome I'll tike yer bowth up inter the bedroom and give yer such a whippin'!' Henri, insolent little brat, replied in a couple of words, one of which is generally associated more with Cambronne than with St. Aulaire. Where on earth could he have picked up such language?

The flute-like tones of Mr. Gordon Gomperz might be heard as he sported with Chester and Orpheus, the charming sons, aged fifteen and fourteen, of the American Commercial Attaché. He looked like an over-ripe apoxyomenos, except his face, which was inexplicably elvish and inhuman; they were chasing some harassed insect with cries: 'Gew away, gew away *quickly*, you naughty, *naughty* little creature', he piped, while the children roared with laughter. Professor McGonigle joined in the chase with a good deal of comic business, tripping himself up and falling on the sand, which the younger people believed to be the acme of wit.

And Tristram's mind reverted to the doctrine of illusion which, after all, was merely another kind of jam, this time Oriental, to enclose death's bitter cathartic, the drug that made one void one's very soul into the cloacal nothing. Life is real and precious, if not earnest, death is annihilation. Face those facts—but nobody did. Instead, they fought against the richness and variety of

this priceless thing ; they persecuted heresies, derided eccentricities—valuable things that increased rather than diminished life. We should be thanking heaven for quips and cranks, especially the latter, instead of trying to suppress them. It was taboo, ever since it had ceased to preserve the life of the community by protecting the tribe-soul incarnate in a tortoise, a mongoose, or a king, that had become destructive, and was diminishing the valuable assets of man. One should not laugh at Gomperz or McGonigle, but build temples to them ; but who could expect humanity to be sensible ? No, martyrs would continue to be made, perverts to be imprisoned, and no one would live any the longer for that.

Alba joined him, her lashes starrier than ever from the water ; Stella Maris, he thought. ‘ You’re looking more beautiful than ever this morning, dear. Are you in love with anybody ? ’

She stretched herself supine, at full length on her back in the hot sand. Raising one arm to heaven she declaimed :

‘ Midi. L’air brûle, et sous la terrible lumière
Le vieux fleuve alanguie roule des flots de plomb ;
Du zénith aveuglant le jour tombe d’aplomb
Et l’implacable Phré couvre l’Égypte entière ’.

‘ With life ’, she added somewhat cheaply, deigning at length to reply. ‘ Come along, let’s go home, and have some of your sherry ’. The particular brand was old brown and glutinous, with that delightful faint bouquet of coconut matting, boot-leather and burnt cedarwood, of which old men dream in the chimney corner.

‘ Can you dine with the Mileses to-night ? ’

‘ I should shay sho ’, she replied with a demoded catch-word—an annoying trick of hers. ‘ Do you think

I'd look nice in the silver, or is my skin getting too black? She's a dear and Miles is really a wonderful man, although you do despise him for being a lumber merchant. I don't see any difference myself between being clever about lumber and being clever about Tiepolo'.

'My dear, I don't think I ever sneered at him; I merely said that he and I belonged to different herds, that's all'.

'I never say cutting things like that. One ought to think kind thoughts about everyone, that's what I say. Create an aura of joy and love and you'll be welcome wherever you go'. That was gleaned from Mrs. Furtwaengler, but this from Mr. Ditchling: 'I believe in being centrifugal. The trouble with you is that you're too centripetal'.

'Quite'.

'When you say "quite" I know perfectly well you're not listening, and you know it too. I think you might pay me the compliment of dropping that childish deception; try some other word next time. Oh look! there's that quaint Gomperz amusing the children as usual, like Dodgson. What a pity he has none of his own'.

Tristram did not feel able to cope with the task of inventing a suitable reply. Alba walked on before him, humming to herself and decapitating the taller weeds with her parasol. 'There', she thought, with a vicious swish; 'let the psycho-analysts interpret *that* in their disgusting manner—and that, and that'. She felt thoroughly pleased with herself, having beaten Podler on a twenty yards handicap, though her heart was not what it was, and her muscles running to fat. Nevertheless, the prestige of woman, on which she had a 'vast' of balderdash to throw up, had been maintained. She was a bad loser, and cooked the score at tennis and other

games if she seemed to be getting the worst of it. It never occurred to her that the wily Podler had lost on purpose ; partly on purpose, that is, and partly because his attention was riveted on the backs of Madame Cavara and the Belgian banker, as they receded towards vanishing point with their blue umbrella. He determined to drop in at the Cavara bungalow this or tomorrow afternoon at about tea-time, and reconnoitre the ground. He would ask her to play something subtly erotic, by Florent Schmitt, perhaps, or Albeniz. M. Cavara was conducting a ticklish correspondence at Totsuka about the proposed Japanese Immigration Scheme to Central America—or more probably fore-gathering with Messrs. Kondo and Yanagita, those gay, gilded sparks, at some geisha resort. He was reputed to be rather a loose fish himself, and certainly sometimes made Inez unhappy.

The heart of James Podler was now definitely crying to be lost, and coming more and more into conflict with his habitual caution. But needs must when the devil drives ; anyhow he would make no attempt to force circumstances. If it was fated that he should find consolation, he must submit. As it was, there seemed to be a certain liveliness in heaven on his behalf. Another husband was due to leave next week, when Alfred Miles would have business in Shanghai. Supposing Inez proved to be unassailable—though passionate, musical Latins with peccant husbands should not be so—Lulu was quite ready for him to get off with her at any time, he could see that.

In a white pongee suit Mr. Podler looked lithe and athletic, his dark face intriguingly saturnine. He studied it in the glass. Why should he be barred out of love. He was a fair enough figure of a man ; but his wife had done it. She had made him suffer when she was

there, and now she was making him suffer in her absence.

'I'm wretched', he said aloud to the reflection. It opened its mouth to show white teeth and a scarlet tongue beneath the thin black moustache. Did not sombre, virile fires, the glow of pain in a crucified man, lurk at the back of his eyes? It might be the illusion of conceit. But surely he was more interesting than that dried-up little Cavara, with his vulgar Piccadilly Circus views on women, or that lump of golf-playing beef, Alfred Miles. Gods! what a name. He had as much right to be relieved from pain as they had, anyhow.

In the afternoon he called at the Cavara bungalow, and was rather disappointed to learn that Inez was not at home. Never mind; to-morrow would do just as well.

