The Strange Case of Joan Winterbourne

Dilemmas, #1

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I

CLOSE to the foot of the staircase, the manager of the hotel was giving instructions to a liveried attendant. A little way off five young people, three men and two women, were standing together in an impatient group. It was the height of

the holiday season at this watering-place, and the roar of voices from the dining-room behind the glass doors drowned altogether the thunder of the surf upon the beach.

"Joan was certain to be late," said the hostess of the party as she looked with vexation about the lounge, now alcove after alcove, a wilderness of plush upholstery and oriental tables. "It's part of her present make-up."

At that moment the girl herself came running down the wide staircase, a gleaming slender creature of twenty-two years, with large brown eyes and a fresh face which she had carefully painted a shade of orange. Her lips showed the bright scarlet which women's lips share with the tunics of the Guards. She carried, of course, neither fan nor gloves, but about her slim white throat she wore a string of iridescent beads which might have been pearls had not their enormous size boasted their artificiality. She gave to Bramley, the young surgeon who formed one of the group of five, the amusing impression that she was playing very hard at being the young lady of the dance clubs. She was certainly abrim with eagerness to make a quite complete affair of this evening's enjoyment.

"I am so sorry, Marjorie, that I am late," she cried to her hostess, and so stopped suddenly upon the last shallow tread of the stairs. All her joy was extinguished in an instant. Her hands clenched and then flew upwards to cover her face. But in the moment which intervened Bramley read so stark a terror in the gleam of her eyes and the quiver of her lips that it shocked him. A fluttering wail broke from her lips, and she crumpled as if her bones were suddenly turned to water. She slid down in a heap against the balustrade. Before Bramley could reach her she had fainted.

"What is the number of her room?" he asked.

"Twenty-three, on the first floor," said Marjorie Hastings. "Oh, I hope it's not serious."

"I don't think there's any reason for alarm," the surgeon reassured her. He turned to the manager of the hotel. "You might send a maid;" and lifting the girl up in his arms with an ease which surprised everyone, he carried her up the stairs.

At the landing he called down:

"You'd better all go in to dinner. We'll follow."

But the greater part of an hour had passed before Bramley joined the party at the table; and then he returned alone.

"Joan wants nothing," he explained. "She is asleep now."

"What was the matter?" asked Marjorie Hastings.

"I haven't one idea," replied Bramley. "There's nothing wrong with her really."

"I can explain," said a stout hearty young man who sat on the other side of Marjorie Hastings. "You met Joan for the first time yesterday. But I can tell you she has been overdoin' it for a good few years now. First she was going to be an artist and she splashed on paint all day for months. When that fell down, she splashed ink on paper all night for another set of months. When that fell down, she plumped for the open air and set out to show Miss Leitch how to play golf. When that fell down, she hit the cabarets. Now she has fallen down herself. Joan is a perfect darling, but she wants someone to smack her from time to time."

He sketched her history. No father and no mother, an aunt somewhere—utterly useless—a bachelor flat in Pall Mall, and a sufficient income. “And a little nervous always,” he concluded. “She’s not a case for you, Bramley, at all. She’s meant for the psycho-wanglers.”

Bramley shook his head vigorously. To him, already eminent as an operator and a firm believer that man’s best friend was the knife, psycho-analysis was the heresy of heresies.

“Just jargon. Quacks doctoring the half-baked,” he declared confidently. For like many brilliant men he was a little arrogant in his attitude towards the things which he did not know. He was none the less troubled by Joan Winterbourne’s collapse, and the next morning when the rest of the party went off to the golf course, he stayed behind.

Joan came down at eleven. Her step was firm. There was not even a shadow under her eyes. Her swoon had left no other trace than this: she was dressed for a journey.

“You are going away?” Bramley asked. He saw the door of the luggage lift open and trunks painted with her initials.

“Yes. I have left a note for Marjorie. I am very sorry. I was enjoying myself here very much. But I have got to go.”

“It’s a pity,” Bramley said regretfully. “For I should have liked to have looked after you for a little.”

Joan smiled gratefully.

“That’s very kind,” she answered warmly. “But what happened to me last night has happened three times before; and I never can bear the place where it happened, or anything associated with it afterwards. I couldn’t stay here another day. I can’t give you any reason, but I couldn’t.”

Joan was quite without affectation now. She was not playing at being anything but herself—a girl driven hard by an unaccountable experience and seeking the one only way of relief which her instincts had taught to her. Bramley made no attempt to dissuade her.

“If you’ll send your maid with your luggage on to the station by the omnibus, I’ll walk along with you,” he said.

They went out on to the sea-front together, and in the course of that walk, Joan was persuaded by his mere reticence to reveal more of herself than she ever had done before.

“The first time I behaved in that silly fashion,” she said, “was on the sailing-yacht of Monsieur de Ferraud off Bordeaux two summers ago. In May of the next year came the second time. I was on a motor-trip to the South of France by the Route des Alpes and the car broke down in the Dauphine between La Grave and the Col de Lauteret. I was standing at the side of the road, and crumpled up as I did last night. The third time I was fortunately sitting down. It was in a circus at St. Etienne. I haven’t one idea why it happens. So you see that since I can’t endure a yacht, or a motor-car, or a circus, and now shall shrink from any seaside hotel, my life is becoming a little circumscribed.”

She ended with a smile of humour which did not hide from him that her distress was very real. Bramley put her into a carriage.

“Will you give me a chance?” he asked, as he shook her hand. “It’s all wrong that any girl as young and healthy as you are should go on being attacked in this way. There must be an explanation, and therefore there must be a cure.”

The blood mounted into Joan’s cheeks. Gratitude shone in her eyes. It did Bramley besides no harm in her thoughts that he was a good-looking young man of a tall and sinewy build.

“Of course I shall be ever so thankful if you’ll look after me,” she said; and the train moved out of the station.

Bramley walked back to the hotel and made some inquiries that evening of the ruddy-faced optimist who gave the Winterbourne family a clean bill of health.

“Never heard of any epilepsy. A nervous, kind of artistic lot—that, yes. The father, for instance, would always rather paint a bird than shoot one. Queer taste, isn’t it? But all of them clean-blooded and clear-eyed just like Joan herself. No, no, it’s not your affair, Bramley, so you can keep your penknife in your pocket. Joan ought to go to the psycho-boys.”

This time Bramley did not shake his head in contempt. Certainly if there was anything in the theories of the “psycho-boys,” here was the very patient for them. It was all heresy, to be sure, but none the less he found himself in his perplexity formulating the case from their angle. Thus:

“A girl, by heredity and of her own disposition nervous, passes through an experience which Nature, in its determination to survive, proceeds to bury deep down in the girl’s subconsciousness below the levels of memory. The experience therefore was one terrible enough to shake her reason; and from time to time something, a word perhaps, or an article, associated with that experience reproduces suddenly in a milder form the original terror and shock. The only cure is to be found in restoring this experience to the patient’s memory. For she will then understand; and the trouble will be at an end.”

Thus he reflected, whilst he paid an indifferent attention to the conversation at the dinner-table; so indifferent indeed that he actually began to carry on his formulation aloud:

“It is quite clear, therefore, or would be quite clear, if I accepted these fantastic theories, which I don’t—”

At this point Marjorie Hastings interrupted him.

“My dear man, what are you talking about?”

“Nothing, Marjorie. The idiocy with which I have long been threatened has at last declared itself.”

What was, or would have been quite clear to him, if he had accepted the heresy, amounted simply to this. There was one circumstance, one factor common to all the four occasions upon which Joan had felt the inrush of terror and had swooned away. At first nothing seemed more hopeless to Bramley than to find a link between the lounge of a hotel upon the south coast of England, and a circus at St. Etienne in France, or between a yacht in the Bay of Biscay and a motor-car breakdown in the Dauphine Alps. Yet undoubtedly such a link there must be.

He turned to Marjorie Hastings.

“Do you know St. Etienne?”

“No. Where is it?”

Bramley had drawn a blank there and tried again.

"Monsieur de Ferraud's yacht, I believe, is little short of a palace."

Marjorie Hastings looked at him with sympathy.

"You poor thing!" she cried. "You must hold some ice to your forehead. Try some sarsaparilla! It may be just what you want."

"Silence, woman!" returned Bramley. He had drawn another blank, but he tried again. "Did you ever travel by the Route des Alpes?"

"Don't be silly! Of course I did. I motored to Florence one spring with Joan and—" Marjorie Hastings came to an abrupt stop. "That's curious," she resumed slowly. "I hadn't thought of it until now. Joan had just the same sort of attack and behaved just in the same strange way afterwards. She wouldn't go on with us. She went back in the Diligence to Grenoble and joined us in Nice by train."

This time Bramley had drawn a horse at all events. He turned to Marjorie eagerly.

"Tell me all about it, please."

The car had broken down just beyond a tunnel half an hour or so after passing La Grave. They had sent back to the village for a cart; they turned the car round by hand to have it ready; and after that they had all strolled idly about, admiring the great bastion of the Meije across the valley and the white velvet of its enormous glacier. The cart had emerged from the tunnel. The driver had got down to fix his tow-rope to the axle of the car and without a word Joan dropped in the middle of the road as if she had been shot. "She might have broken her nose or got concussion. I tell you, it was alarming."

"Thank you," said Bramley. The yacht of Monsieur de Ferraud off Bordeaux, the breakdown of the motorcar in the Dauphine, the circus of St. Etienne. It had flashed upon him that these three circumstances had after all a common factor. Did the empty lounge of the hotel last night contain it also? Bramley sought out the manager immediately after dinner.

"You were close to the foot of the stairs when Miss Winterbourne fainted," he said.

"Yes. I was arranging with Alphonse the space we should reserve for dancing."

"Alphonse!" cried Bramwell. "The lounge-attendant. Yes, of course. He is French?"

"But of course, as I am."

"And you were speaking in French?"

"No doubt!" The manager shrugged his shoulders. "I do not remember. But no doubt! We always do. Would you like to see Alphonse, Mr. Bramley?"

"Of all things," Bramley replied; and after a quarter of an hour, and some goings and comings of the lounge-attendant, Bramley left the office with a smile upon his face and a package under his arm. He felt the excitement of an adventurer upon a treasure-hunt who has discovered the first important clue.

Upon his return to London, he wrote to Joan Winterbourne, asking her to play golf with him on the first Saturday at Beaconsfield. She telephoned in reply: "Delighted, if we go down by train," and though she laughed as she spoke, it was clear that she meant what she said. Bramley had planned to put no questions to her at all, but to lure her on to talk about herself in any rambling way she chose. They were much more likely to approach the truth that way. But the pair had not been playing for more than five minutes before he had forgotten all about his plans

and was concerned solely with approaches of quite a different kind. For he found to his surprise and a little to his discomfort that Joan could give him half a stroke a hole.

At the ninth hole, however, when she was six up, she missed the easiest of putts and sat down on a bank with her face between her hands and despair in her brown eyes.

"Look at that!" she cried, and she swore loudly and lustily so that an elderly lady close by left out the next two holes and removed herself to a less vicious part of the course.

"I shall never be any good at anything. It was just the same when I painted. Year after year I used to go in the summer to Normandy with a class and I never got anywhere."

Bramley became aware once more of his attractive patient and forgot the catastrophe of his golf.

"Oho! So you used to go to Normandy?" he repeated with the utmost carelessness.

"Yes. To St.-Vire-en-Pre, a tiny village a mile from the sea. You'll never have heard of it. I went there for three summers, until I was eighteen. Then I hated it. Shall we go on?"

"Yes. You are only five up now. So you hated it? An ugly little village, eh?"

"On the contrary, lovely. I lodged in an old farm with another girl, Mary Cole. I think she's married now."

Joan drove off from the tenth tee with her whole attention concentrated on the stroke. The memory of the summers at St.-Vire-en-Pre meant nothing to her, quite obviously. Bramley's thoughts, however, ran as follows:

"I must find Mary Cole. Marjorie Hastings must help me. I want to know if Joan was on Monsieur de Ferraud's yacht after the last summer at St.-Vire-en-Pre. If after, then we may be very near to the solution of our riddle." With the result that his ball escaped into a patch of rough grass and dug itself in.

Bramley, however, no longer minded. He was indeed rather elated, chiefly on Joan's account, but a little too because he was now minded to demonstrate to the "psycho-boys" that any old surgeon could play their game just as well as they did, if he only took the trouble.

Marjorie Hastings produced Mary Cole in due course. She was a brisk young woman, now married, with a couple of children, who had slipped quite out of the little set in which Joan played so conspicuous a part. Even the summers on the coast of Normandy had become unsubstantial as dreams to her. But she remembered how those visits ceased.

"We were a large party that year. So Joan and I had to find a lodging in a house which was strange to us. We found it at a farm a hundred yards or so beyond the end of the village, the farm of Narcisse Perdoux. The work of the farm was all done by the family and we were charged an extortionate price for our two rooms. We had made up our minds never to go back there in any case. Then came the last night before the party broke up. We had a dance in the studio. Joan and I went back to the farm at about one o'clock in the morning. The door was on the latch—a relief to us, for old Narcisse Perdoux, even with his Sunday manners on, was a grudging inappeasable person. What he would have been if we had waked him out

of his bed to let us in we were afraid to think. We crept upstairs to our rooms, which stood end to end on the first floor, my window looking out towards the sea, Joan's at the back looking out past the barn to the open country. We both went at once to our separate rooms, for we had our packing to do in the morning, and I at all events was more than half-asleep already. I don't suppose that ten minutes had passed before I was in bed. I am certain that fifteen hadn't before I was asleep. I was awakened by someone falling into my room and collapsing with a thud on the floor. I lit my candle. It was Joan. For a moment I thought that she was dead. But her heart was beating and she was breathing. I got her into my bed, chafed her feet, put my salts to her nostrils, did in a word what I could and after a little while she came to. She was sick—terribly sick for a long while. The farm was stirring before she dropped off to sleep, but then she slept heavily for a long time."

"She had no injury?" Bramley asked.

"None at all."

"And how did she explain her rush into your bedroom at two o'clock in the morning," interrupted Marjorie Hastings; "and her swoon?"

"Of course she didn't explain that at all," Bramley replied, and Mary Cole stared at him in surprise.

"How could you know that?" she asked. "But it's true. Nothing might have happened to her at all, beyond that she had slept in my bed instead of her own. She never alluded to it. She went about her packing. The only unusual sign she made was a desperate hurry to get away from the house."

"But why she was in a hurry she didn't know," said Bramley, and again Mary Cole turned to him in surprise.

"That's just it. Joan suddenly hated the place. It made her ill."

"But surely you questioned her?" Marjorie Hastings urged. "I should have been frightened out of my life if anyone had come tumbling about my bedroom in a lonely farmhouse in the middle of the night. My word, I should have asked a question or two and seen that I got the answers."

Marjorie's pretty face was truculent. Bramley was smiling at her truculence when Mary Cole explained:

"I was anxious to get away too, without wasting a moment. For the farm was all upset, and we weren't wanted. You see Charles, Narcisse Perdoux's oldest son, had died during the night.—What in the world's the matter?"

This question was thrown in a startled voice at Bramley, from whose face the smile had suddenly vanished.

"Nothing," he answered gravely and hesitatingly, "except—that we are in deeper waters than ever I imagined us to be."

All Bramley's stipulations were working out in the most dreadful fashion. The first experience of Joan's, terrible enough to shake the reason; Nature's determination to thrust it beyond the reach of memory; the factor common to the original seizure and to each recurrence; and now this revelation by Mary Cole all pointed to some grim and sinister story of the darkness—an outrage upon nature, a horror upon horrors. Bramley remembered the stark look of terror which had shone in Joan's eyes during the moment when she had clung to the balustrade in the hotel lounge and before she had clapped her hands to her face to shut the vision out. He felt a chill as though ice had slipped down his spine. And this story

had to be dragged up in all its dimly seen ugliness into the full light! There was no hope for Joan in any other way. She must be made to remember. After all, he realized with a sudden humility, the "psycho-boys" had their penknives too, though they were different from his.

II

He sent for Joan Winterbourne the next day and she came to him in Harley Street. From her close-fitting hat to her beige stockings and her shiny shoes, she was just one of the pretty young women in the uniform of the day. But there was a tension, a vague anxiety in her face which had already begun to set her a little apart. It would overcloud her altogether unless it was explained to her and thereby dissolved.

"You have been all right since you beat me so disgracefully at Beaconsfield?" he asked.

"Quite. But one never knows…"

"I believe we are going to know this morning," he reassured her; and a sudden wave of confidence and hope brought the colour into her cheeks. He put her into a chair by the side of his table.

"I want you to tell me one or two things."

"Ask away?" said Joan.

"When did you have this attack on Monsieur de Ferraud's yacht?"

"Three years ago."

"I see. After your last visit to St.-Vire-en-Pre?"

"Yes, a year after."

"And in the same month of the year?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps the same day of the month?"

"That I can't remember."

"Sure? Let's see! You left St.-Vire-en-Pre,"—and here Bramley was careful to speak without a hint of emphasis or significance—"the day after Charles Perdoux died at the farm. You don't remember?"

"No."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

And it didn't. The day of the week was of no importance. What did matter was the swift sidelong stare of Joan's eyes when he mentioned Charles Perdoux's name, and the curious foxiness which sharpened her face. She was suddenly disfigured. In another age he would have said that she was possessed by the devil. For the change was horrible. All her grace and youth in a second were gone. Her gaze was perfectly steady, but it was cunning. Yet cunning was too respectable a word. It was leery—as was the smile which distorted her mouth. Bramley had an inspiration that he was wrestling with some obscene spirit ages old for the possession of this girl. The spirit seemed to dare him to make her remember if he could. If he had ever doubted that he was on the right lines, he threw his doubts overboard now. Heresy or no heresy, he knew. The "psycho-boys" were one up.

“Joan,” he said gently. He bent forward and took her hand in his. “Let us get back to the yacht.”

“Yes,” she answered, her features relaxed; she flashed back to her normal self, attentive to his questions, certain of his goodwill, dispossessed of the devil.

She marshalled her memories.

“It was in the morning. I was on deck. The yacht was a schooner. We were going to race that day. The crew were busy with their preparations. Almost over my head a sailor seated on the yard was fitting a new rope through a block. I remember the end of the rope slipping down the side of the mast like a snake. I was for no reason shocked out of my wits and I fainted.”

“Thank you,” Bramley interrupted. “I needn’t bother you any more about the yacht. You saw a rope shaking down the side of the mast, and you passed out. Right! Let’s come now to the breakdown of the motor on the Route des Alpes.”

Joan leaned forward.

“Yes?”

“You were all out of the car on the road.”

“Yes.”

“Across the valley the Meije rose.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a huge mass of a mountain with pinnacles and glaciers flowing down its flank.”

“Yes.”

“But at that moment you weren’t admiring it. You weren’t looking at it at all. Just visualize that exact spot if you can!”

Joan leaned back in her chair and concentrated her thoughts, a little timidly at first lest her experience on the road should be repeated here in Bramley’s consulting-room; and afterwards, since nothing happened, with a greater freedom.

“I had the Meije upon my left,” she resumed slowly. “It’s true. I was not looking at the mountain. I was facing the tunnel through which we had come. The broken-down car was in front of me. A cart had come through the tunnel from La Grave to tow us back. The driver of the car was fixing a rope to the front axle of the car, I remember the same horrible sense of sickness and terror overwhelming me.”

“Exactly,” said Bramley. She was rather white now, but he was smiling at her cheerfully. “It’s all working out. Don’t worry!”

Joan did not answer in words, but the deep breath she drew was sign enough of her desperate need to free herself from the ghastly obsession which was darkening all her life.

“Every time I cross a road,” she said, “I ask myself, ‘Shall I go down here under the wheels?’”

“We shall answer that, Joan, before we have finished,” Bramley replied, with every sign of confidence. “Now let’s see what was happening in the circus at St. Etienne.”

“That wasn’t so inexcusable,” Joan answered. “An acrobat was performing on a trapeze and one of its ropes broke. Luckily he was sitting on the trapeze at rest. He was able to save himself, for the second rope held. But for the moment it gave everyone a jar.”

“So all those three occurrences had one thing in common.”

Joan looked puzzled.

"I don't see… A rope, of course, but—"

"Exactly, a rope," Bramley returned.

"But when I was running down the stairs in the hotel," Joan argued quickly. "I didn't—" and she came to a stop and resumed again in a voice of surprise. "Oh, yes! There was a man in a livery holding a rope."

"Yes. And that rope is the most important of all the ropes. The rope covered with red baize which was usually stretched out to mark off the arena reserved for dancing had been lost."

"But I have seen heaps of ropes," Joan protested. "They have never affected me at all."

"Wait a bit," Bramley returned. "The attendant in the livery was a Frenchman. He produced a rope of his own, a French rope."

"Why should that French rope be the most important?" Joan asked.

"Because I bought it," answered Bramley. "I have got it here."

"Yes?" For more than a second or two Joan hesitated. She shrank back. Bramley used no persuasions. There was something he wanted her to say without any promptings from him. Joan gathered her courage; she shrugged her shoulders.

"I had better see it, hadn't I?"

Bramley said: "Yes, if you'd like to."

"I should like to," answered Joan.

"Good!"

Bramley sprang up and went to his cupboard.

"It's just a rope woven in the French way. It won't affect you at all now. It can't do anything. And you are prepared for it." Whilst he spoke he brought the brown-paper parcel from the cupboard and carried it to his table and untied the string in front of Joan. The movements of his fingers had a surgeon's neatness and precision. Every element of drama was carefully eliminated. He never even looked at Joan, although he was aware of her every gesture. He unwrapped the parcel with no more care than if it had been a box of sweets. But his heart was beating fast enough; and if he did not look at his patient it was lest his face should betray his fear. The fear, however, was now all upon his side.

"A rope?" said Joan. She was merely curious now and wondering.

Bramley opened his parcel. "There it is."

Joan stretched out her hand and drew it back again and then took the rope between her fingers, felt it and looked at it, all with a frowning forehead and perplexed eyes.

"Not very alarming, is it?" said Bramley. "But notice the make of it. English ropes are wound in spirals. In this one the strands cross and recross one another in little diamond patterns. That's the French way. That's why it looked like a snake sliding down the mast."

"Yes, I see."

Joan examined the rope, bending her head over it.

"But why in the world should I or any girl drop down at the sight of a rope even with this pattern? It makes me out a complete fool!"

“Yes, why? That’s just what I want you to tell me,” replied Bramley. He took both her hands in his and held her eyes with an unwavering glance. “What happened at the farm of Narcisse Perdoux at St.-Vire-en-Pre the night before you went away?”

Her hands tightened within his grasp. She flinched away a little. She shook her head.

“What did you see after you and Mary Cole separated for the night?”

The darkness within her was troubled. The tension of her fingers was relaxed. A glimmer of light shone in her eyes and was extinguished. She drew her hands away from Bramley’s, took up the rope again, and played with it. Bramley’s eyes never left hers for the fraction of a second.

“Baril—” she began, and stopped and tried again.

“Barillier. Yes—” She patted the rope. “Barillier’s rope. They borrowed it.”

“From Barillier, the butcher?”

“Yes.”

“They sent for it, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“There was a barn?”

“Oh!”

Joan gasped. She looked up instantly to Bramley’s face, her eyes bright, the blood coming and going in her cheeks. A door was opening and shutting and opening again.

“A barn?” she repeated. “Yes, there was a barn.”

“Where was the barn?”

“Behind the farm-house.”

“Then your bedroom windows looked on to it?”

“Yes.”

Joan was on the edge of a dreaded revelation. She looked at the rope, twisted and pulled at it, and smoothed it. Bramley dared not move. He spoke in a low, even, monotonous voice, but all his will was behind the words.

“How did Charles Perdoux die on that night, Joan?”

Nature had come to Joan’s rescue on that night; had buried deep beyond the reach of her conscious memory an unsettling experience, but had left this one chink. For her reason’s sake she must dig now until that experience was recovered. Nothing was heard in the room for a long time but the swift ticking of a clock upon the mantelpiece. Then she looked up and answered:

“A great crime was committed on that night.”

And at last the story was told.

III

Narcisse Perdoux was thought throughout that district of Normandy to be a warm man, though none except his creditors ever saw the colour of his money. They, however, were scrupulously paid to the last mite on the day when their bills fell due, the old man fetching the exact sum in discoloured notes and coppers from his room upstairs. There were five in the household, Narcisse himself, a gnarled

giant, strong as an ox, with wrinkles on his copper-brown neck like gashes, his wife Angele, a crone before her time, his daughter Clothilde, a plain, hard-featured young woman with a shrill quarrelsome voice, and two sons Charles and Desire. They lived meagrely in the vast smoke-grimed kitchen, like the poorest of peasants, and slaved upon the farm from the dark of the morning to long after nightfall, tasting neither amusement, nor books, nor any grace of life. For they were greedy, with a sort of passion of ill will towards every one of their neighbours. They could never get it out of their heads that they were being robbed. Someone more cunning was always getting the better of them.

But even within the household there was ill will and rancour too. Charles by some freak of nature was a slender good-looking lad, eager for such poor pleasures as came his way. Occasionally he would run up a bill in Caen for a fine suit of clothes and another for a dinner and a bottle of wine enjoyed in company with a girl. On such occasions you would have thought that the whole family was ruined, such shrill lamentations broke from the women, such tirades of abuse from Narcisse and Desire. Charles was the simpleton, the spendthrift; gaol would be the end of him and bankruptcy the lot of the family. Nevertheless, in that primitive society he retained the rights of the first-born, though Desire, a brutish counterpart of his father, watched him with a sullen jealousy and rancour.

Thus it was Charles's privilege to drive in the high gig to Caen with thirty-two pounds in his pocket for the payment of some bills on the afternoon of the Studio Ball. Joan saw him drive off, looking as smart as could be in his best clothes, with his hat cocked on the side of his head and a rapturous smile upon his face, like a schoolboy going home.

"Mind you walk the horse up the hills!" said Narcisse, and "Take care you are back before nine!" screamed Clothilde; and with a flourish of his whip, Charles Perdoux drove off. That was at three o'clock in the afternoon. At one o'clock in the morning, on their return from the studio, Joan said good night to Mary Cole in a whisper, for the house was all quiet and dark, and went into her room. But once in her room, being hot and dusty from the dance, she suddenly felt that she must have some hot water to wash in before she went to bed. There was always a great kettle simmering on the kitchen fire; and what with the early risings and the late retirings of that laborious household, the fire was seldom out.

Joan accordingly crept down the stairs with her can in one hand and her lighted candle in the other. She put the can silently down and gently unlatched the kitchen door. To her amazement the lamp was still burning and about the fire Narcisse, Angele, Clothilde and Desire were grouped. They were sitting bolt upright, quite silent and quite motionless. Joan closed the door again with an unaccountable chill of fear at her heart. There was something dreadfully sinister in the aspect of that silent group. They had the look of a pitiless tribunal.

Not one of them had seen her. She went upstairs to her room, and had hardly closed the door before she heard a horse's hoofs and the creak of wheels. The sounds stopped at the gate of the yard which her window overlooked. She extinguished her candle, and looked out of her window which was open and the blind not lowered. The night was clear and lit by stars. She could see Charles Perdoux lead in the horse, unharness and stable it, and wheel the gig into its shed. He did everything very quietly so that the household might not be aroused.

Then he stood in front of the door for a few moments, as if he was afraid, before he raised the latch and went in. Almost at once Joan heard the voice of Narcisse. That too, for a wonder, was very quiet, and it daunted Joan as the loud tones which he used when in a passion could not have done. She pictured to herself the luckless youth creeping towards the stairs and the old man confronting him in the doorway of the kitchen and asking for the reason of his tardiness. The voice died away as the door of the kitchen was closed. There was not after all to be a quarrel then, and Joan, greatly relieved, went to bed and fell asleep.

But very soon afterwards she was awakened by the slamming of a gate. She got out of bed and looked again from her window; she was astonished to see by certain chinks in the wall, that the great barn opposite was lit up. Someone crossed the yard from the gate to the barn door. As he opened it and the light fell upon his face, she saw that it was Desire and that he carried a coil of rope in his hand. She might have thought that the household was just beginning its day's work, but there was a clumsy stealthiness in Desire's movements which alarmed her. He opened one of the great doors only just enough to enable him to slip through and he closed it carefully and noiselessly behind him. As he closed it, terror seized upon Joan and held her a prisoner by the window. Desire came out again into the courtyard and disappeared amongst the shadows. But the light still burned within the barn, and Joan still clung to the window-sill.

But she was not the only one to be uneasy that night in St.-Vire-en-Pre. For she heard the sound of a man running in heavy shoes which rang upon the road. He at all events was making no effort to be secret. The sound of his running grew louder and louder. He stopped at the gate and even then Joan could hear the noise of his breathing. He was panting as though his heart would burst. He pushed open the gate and entered the courtyard. He looked first up at the darkened windows of the house, and only afterwards caught sight of the rays of light streaming out from the barn. Then in his turn he crept across the yard towards it and, as one shaft touched his face, Joan recognized him for Barillier, the village butcher, who lived at the nearest house down the road to the sea.

He peered between the great leaves of the door and with a loud cry dragged them open. They were wide, high doors reaching upwards to the edge of the roof-tiles. They clattered back against the walls, and the interior of the barn was exposed to Joan's eyes, brightly lit by a hissing petrol lamp, like a scene of a theatre. Joan was paralysed by horror. For Charles Perdoux was jerking and dangling from a rope thrown over a crossbeam, whilst the family stood below and watched him. Their shadows were thrown upon the walls in monstrous and misshapen exaggerations; whilst by some freak of the lamp's position, the shadow of the dangling figure showed like that of a little doll. At the clatter of the doors, Narcisse turned and with a bellow of rage ran at Barillier.

"What are you doing here, in my barn?" he cried roughly.

Barillier cowered back against the wall.

"I was afraid," he stammered. "I was afraid."

The tremendous fact stood out that Barillier was a coward. Narcisse with his primitive cunning took his immediate profit of it. His voice lost all its truculence, and dropped to a whine: "So are we all afraid. Poor people, what will become of us? Here is my unfortunate boy Charles! He gambles away thirty-two pounds"—and

even at that moment he could hardly mention the sum without a snarl of rage—"in Caen and then in despair hangs himself! What disgrace! What misery!"

"Hangs himself?" repeated Barillier, startled even out of his cowardice. "But it's my rope! Desire woke me up to borrow it… in the middle of the night! That's what frightened me—" and he broke off with a great cry which rang out into the night and trembled away over the empty country. "He is alive! I saw his lips move!"

Joan from her window had seen that too, and the loud cry of Barillier drowned a moan from her. Barillier snatched a great clasp-knife from his pocket and ran, as he opened it, towards the boy dangling in the noose. Narcisse seized his arm and stopped him.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed with amazement in his voice. "You can't cut a good rope like that! It's quite new. You are mad."

Narcisse stared from under his great eyebrows at the butcher, as though he gazed upon a lunatic; and in a hurry to spare his eyes such an outrage, began himself to untie the end of the rope from the foot of one of the roof pillars. "Such a rope!" he said. "It will be of use on the farm. It is clear, my friend Barillier, that you are a rich man."

And then Clothilde spoke. She and her mother had drawn apart and had been sitting side by side upon an old packing-case with no more emotion than a couple of wax figures might have shown. Her voice rose hard and rancorous, whilst Barillier held up in his arms the inert figure of Charles Perdoux.

"Yes, no doubt Barillier can afford to lose thirty-two pounds in an afternoon, just like that," and she snapped her fingers. "But we poor people, when that happens, we have to do something."

"Hold your tongue, Clothilde," Narcisse growled with an angry glance of warning, as he let the rope go. He went to Barillier's side and, loosening the noose, slipped it off the lad's head.

"Now give him to me," he said, and he took Charles Perdoux into his strong arms as if he weighed no more than the shadow of the doll upon the wall.

"He wants air," said Narcisse, and turning his back upon Barillier he carried the boy towards the open doors, but he almost knocked against Desire who, alarmed by the noise, had run back to the barn to see how things were getting on. Desire recoiled with a look of stupefaction from his father. He looked round the barn, at Barillier, at his mother, at Clothilde; and in a grating voice which seemed to hold all the venom in the world, he cried:

"You have taken him down—you cowards!"

But Narcisse spoke to him in an undertone and he drew aside. Narcisse sat down upon a truss of hay in the wide doorway with his face to the courtyard and his back to the petrol lamp, and laid Charles across his knees.

"It is of no use," he said. "Go home, Barillier! It is of no use. The boy's dead. Go home and hold your tongue."

Barillier, now that his one audacity had been accomplished, was shaking with fear like a man in a fever.

"Yes, yes! But what will you say, Perdoux, to-day? Where will they find Charles?"

“They will find him hanging in the barn,” Narcisse interrupted. “We shall find him. He is dead, Barillier. Go home!” And he repeated with a harsh menace in his voice: “And hold your tongue!”

Barillier, the coward, went, without another word.

Desire escorted him to the gate and this time he locked it when Barillier had passed out. He stood listening whilst the heavy shoes which had rung so loudly and quickly on the road a few minutes ago, now dragged away, the footsteps of a man without heart or decision. Desire came back to the barn.

“He has gone, the fool. But we must be quick. We shall have the morning on us before we know it.”

And then Narcisse leaned forward. The lad struggled ever so slightly on his knees.

“Good God!” cried Narcisse. “The dirty pig wants to come to life again.”

Clothilde at the back added with a savage laugh:

“He would! After robbing us!” And Joan saw the immense corded hands of Narcisse move and move horribly.

His back was towards the barn and the lamp was behind him. Joan could only see that his arms were moving, but she had not a doubt what his fingers were doing. They were upon the lad’s throat. And his struggles ceased.

The old woman, Angele, from beginning to end, had not said one word.

IV

It was at this moment that Joan had torn herself from the window and rushed into Mary Cole’s room and dropped upon the floor in a swoon which had drowned all memory of the affair, until now when she sat in Bramley’s room.

“I am ashamed of myself,” she said, springing up from her chair. “For four years those murderers have walked about their farm, and I have done nothing.”

Bramley held up his hand.

“There is no need to do anything. When Mary Cole told me what she knew, the name of Perdoux sounded familiar to me. And that night I remembered a curious story which I had read carelessly in a newspaper. I found the paper.” He took a cutting from a drawer in his table.

“The sequel is as astounding as anything you have told me. Listen! Last year Barillier, under the pressure of a growing remorse for his cowardice, began to drop dark hints. Finally he whispered that young Charles Perdoux had not committed suicide at all, but had been murdered by his father. The Perdoux family began to be looked at askance and the old man, Narcisse, who clung to his respectability as closely as he did to his money, actually brought an action for slander against Barillier, thinking no doubt that a coward once would be a coward a second time. But Barillier told his story, glad to rid his conscience of the burden, and told it with so much circumstance that no one in court doubted its truth. Narcisse Perdoux was arrested and the night before he was to be brought into the presence of the examining magistrate, he in fact did hang himself with his braces from the window-bars of his cell.”

Bramley handed to Joan the cutting which came from a newspaper six weeks old.

"We can leave it there," he said.

Joan nodded her head. She took up the rope, and looked at it curiously. Then she turned and held out both her hands.

"I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me," she said. "I am free."