

TIME PASSES

I

It grew darker. Clouds covered the moon; in the early hours of the morning a thin rain drummed on the roof, and starlight and moonlight and all light on sky and earth was quenched. Nothing could survive the flood, the profusion, the downpouring of the immense darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round the window blinds, came in to the bedrooms, and swallowed up, here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; but there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say 'this is he' or 'this is she'; but from the many bodies lying asleep either in the rigid attitudes of the old passively creased in the creases of the beds, or easily lying scarcely covered, in if a cloud lightly curved under them, there rose, to break silvery on the surface, thoughts, dreams, impulses, of which the sleepers by day knew nothing. Now a hand was raised as if to clutch something or perhaps ward off something; now the anguish which

is forbidden to cry out for comfort parted the lips of the sleepers; now and then somebody laughed out loud, as if sharing a joke with nothingness.

It seemed almost as if there must be ghostly confidantes about, sharers, comforters, who, stooping by the bedside, gravely treasured up and engulfed in the folds of their cloaks, in their compassionate hearts, what was murmured and cried, accepted and understood those changes from torture to calm, from hate to indifference, which came and went and came again upon the sleepers' faces. It seemed, at least, as if each reached out and found standing at the foot of his bed the counterpart of his thoughts, the sharer of his deeds, found in sleep a completeness denied him by day, and to that cried and to that confided and laughed the senseless wild laughter which, had the waking heard it, would have startled them. To each a sharer, to each thought an answer, and in this knowledge content—it might be so. It might be that dreaming and sleeping each put off the cumber and trouble of flesh and left the house and paced the beach and asked of the wave and the sky: is the sharp-edged furniture all, and the flower; is the day all; is our duty to the day?

The waves breaking seemed like night shaking her head back and letting despairingly her dark down, and musing and mourning

as if she lamented the doom which drowned the earth and extinguished its lights and of all ships and towns left nothing. The wave sweeps up the beach; the night mourns human sorrow; the sea's beauty consoles; so the wind may have answered the sleepers, the dreamers, pacing the sand and asking, Why wrap us about in the sea's beauty, why console us with the lamentation of the breaking waves, if in truth we only spin this clothing from terror, weave this garment for nothingness?

II

Meanwhile, nothing stirred in the drawing room, or in the dining room, or on the staircase. Only, through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened wood-work certain airs, detached from the body of the wind, crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them questioning, wondering, as they gently attempted the flap of hanging wall paper—would it, they seemed to ask, hang much longer; when would it fall? Then, smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on, musingly, as if asking the red and yellow flowers on the wall paper whether they would fade, and questioning, (gently—there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which

were now open to them, in communion with them, and softly illumined, now and then, by a beam from the light house. So wandering through the rooms and reaching the kitchen they paused to ask of the table and the silver-tailed saucepans ranged orderly on the shelf, the same question; how long would *they* endure, of what nature were they? Were they made of wind and rain, allies, with whom in the darkness, wind and rain might commune? Were they obdurate? Time would show.

So, the light directing them with its pale footfall, on step, on mat, on wall, the little airs passed, paused, mounted the staircase, nosed at the bedroom doors. Here, one might think, surely they must cease. Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is steadfast. Here, one might say to those sliding lights on the ceiling, those grey airs of midnight that bend over the bed itself, here you can neither touch nor destroy. Upon which, wearily, ghostlily, as if they had feather-light fingers and the light persistency of feathers, they would look, once, on the shut eyes, and the loosely clasping fingers, and fold their garments, wearily, and disappear.

They took themselves off now (but after all it would soon be winter) to the window on the staircase, which they rubbed and fumbled; shook a wandering light upstairs in the servants' bedrooms

among boxes in the attics; descended to ripple the cloaks outside the dining room; to meditate among the apples on the table, to blanch and nibble their redness and hardness,—how could one tarnish them?—next reached the roses in the jar and tried there too, with their vapid fumbling, how petal could be nipped from petal, the stalk swollen, the pallor stained, tried the picture on the easel and brushed the mat and blew a little sand along the floor.

At last, desisting, like spies called back to the army they gathered in the middle of the hall. All ceased together; all sighed together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; banged to. There was silence.

Then as if to refresh the failing powers of destruction, they spread their garments, they rose up and the wind rose and the waves rose and through the house there lifted itself one sullen wave of doom which curled and crashed and the whole earth seemed ruining and washing away in water.

III

But what after all, is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings, a cock crows,

or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave. Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers. They lengthen; they darken. Some of them hold aloft clear planets, plates of brightness. The autumn trees, ravaged as they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves where gold letters and marble pages describe death in battle and how bones far away bleach and burn in Indian sands. The autumn trees gleam in the yellow moonlight, in the light of harvest moons, the light which mellows the energy of labour, and smooths the stubble, and brings the wave lapping blue to the beach.

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had drawn the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect, the wave falling, the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them should be ours always. But alas—divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain: it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them, that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return, or from their fragments we should ever compose again the whole, the truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only, our toil respite only.

The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their dishonoured leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses and breaks itself, and should any escaped soul, any sleeper, who fancies that in sleep he has grasped the hand of a sharer walk the edge of the sea, no image with divine promptitude and semblance of serving comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the sea reflect the compass of the soul. He may pace by the hour on the midnight beach but the hand dwindles in his hand; the voice bellows in his ear. Almost, one would have thought, it is vain, in such confusion, to ask the night those questions: what, why? which roused the sleeper from his dreams, and sent him running, to the waves, to seek, it seemed, a comforter.

Now again, since autumn was far advanced, it was possible to attempt the house. All the beds were empty; the stray airs, spies, advance guard of great armies, brushed bare mattresses and as they nibbled and moistened and fanned this way and that, met nothing that wholly resisted them, but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes,

a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking glass had held a face, leaning, looking; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children; rushing and tumbling; went out again. Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water, its sharp image on the wall opposite. Only the shadows of the trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance on the wall, and for a moment darkened the pool in which light reflected itself; or birds, flying, made a soft spot flutter across the bedroom floor.

So loveliness reigned and stillness reigned, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen. Stillness and loveliness clasped hands in the bedroom; among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs, even the prying of the wind, the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating and reiterating their questions—“Will you fade? Will you perish?” scarcely disturbed this peace, this

indifference, this air of integrity, where there is no compromise, truth were there undraped, as if the question they asked needed no answering: we remain.

Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that Innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence. Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as, after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing in the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro. Then again peace descended; and the shadow wavered; light bent to its own image in adoration on the bedroom wall and lingering, mixed with moonlight and with water and with silence.

Suddenly, tearing the veil of silence with hands that had stood in the washtub, grinding it with boots that had crunched the shingle, old Mrs. McNab came as directed to open all windows and dust the bedrooms.

IV

As she lurched (for she rolled like a ship at sea) and leered (for her eyes fell on nothing directly, but with a sidelong glance that deprecated the scorn and anger of the world—she was witless, she knew it), as she clutched the bannisters and hauled herself upstairs and rolled from room to room, she sang. Rubbing the glass of the long looking glass and leering sideways at her swinging figure a sound issued from her lips—something that had been gay twenty years before on the stage perhaps, had been hummed and danced to, but now coming from the toothless, bonneted, care-taking woman was rubbed of meaning, was like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself trodden down but springing up again, so that as she lurched, dusting, wiping, she seemed to say how it was one long sorrow and trouble, how it was getting up and going to bed again, and bringing things out and putting them away again. It was not easy or snug this world she had known for close on eighty years. Bowed down she was with weariness. How long, she asked, creaking and groaning on her knees under the bed dusting the boards, how long shall it endure? but hobbled to her feet again, pulled herself up and again, with her sidelong leer which slipped and turned aside

even from her own face, and her own sorrows, stood and gaped in the glass, actually smiling, and began again the old amble and hobble (taking up mats, putting down china) granting, as she stood the chair straight by the dressing table, her forgiveness of it all, leaning her bony breast on the hard thorn.

Was it then that she had her consolations, when, with the breeze in the west and the clouds white in the sun she stood at her cottage door? For what reason did there twine about her dirge this incorrigible hope? and why, with no gift to bestow and no gift to take did she yet prefer to live; singing, dusting? Were there then for Mrs. McNab who had been trampled into the mud for generations, had been a mat for King and Kaiser, moments of illumination, visions of joy, at the wash tub, say, with her children? (Yet two had been base born and one had deserted her) At the public house, drinking? Turning over scraps in her drawers? Some cleavage of the dark there must have been, some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued to twist her face, smiling in the glass, and make her, turning to her job again, mumble out the old Music hall song.

Walking the beach the mystic, the visionary, were possessed of intervals of comprehension perhaps; suddenly, unexpectedly,

looking at a stone, stirring a puddle with a stick, heard an absolute answer, so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert. The truth had been made known to them. But Mrs. McNab was none of these. She was no skeleton lover, who voluntarily surrenders and makes abstract and reduces the multiplicity of the world to unity and its volume and anguish to one voice piping clear and sweet an unmistakable message. The inspired, the lofty minded, might walk the beach, hear in the lull of the storm a voice, behold in some serene clearing a vision, and so mount the pulpit and make public how it is simple, it is certain, our duty, our hope; we are one. Mrs. McNab continued to drink and gossip as before.

She was toothless almost; she had pains in all her limbs. She never divulged her reasons for opening windows and dusting bedrooms, and singing, when her voice was gone, her old silly song. Her message to a world now beginning to break into the voluntary and irrepressible loveliness of spring was transmitted by the lurch of her body and the leer of her smile and in them no less than in the bleat of lamb and the bud of cowslip were the broken syllables of a revelation more confused but more profound (could one have read it) than any accorded to solitary watchers, pacing the beach at

midnight, and receiving as they stirred the pool, revelations of an extraordinary kind.

V

For to them, as the evenings lengthened came the strangest imaginations, the most authentic beckonings, in the sunset, on the moonlit evenings when it seemed as if they were haled from their flesh and that flesh were turned to atoms which drove before the wind, and they must needs fly with arms stretched and hair blowing to the wild shining west or the flashing stars, or the tumbling waves. For it was as if the waves broke in them; the stars flashed in their hearts; and the trees' strength, the cliffs' nobility, the clouds' majesty were so brought together purposely to assemble the scattered parts of the vision within.

For a week perhaps towards the end of May this unity persisted, The spring without a leaf to toss, bare and bright, like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields wide eyed and watchful, entirely careless of what was done or thought by the beholders. Nevertheless in those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the

strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules, or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure. Moreover, softened and acquiescent, the spring with her bees humming and gnats dancing threw her cloak about her, and veiled her eyes and averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind.

In this warmth, the wind sent its spies about the house again. Flies wove a web in the sunny rooms; weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window pane. When darkness fell, the stroke of the lighthouse which had laid itself when nights were dark with authority upon the carpet, tracing its pattern, came now mixed with moonlight gliding gently and stealthily as if it laid its caress and lingered and looked and came lovingly again. But in the very lull of this loving caress, as the long stroke leant upon the bed, the rock was rent asunder; another fold

of the shawl loosened; there it hung, and swayed. Through the short summer nights and the long summer days when the empty rooms seemed to murmur with the echoes of the fields and the hum of flies the long streamer waved gently, swayed aimlessly; while the sun so striped and barred the rooms and filled them with yellow haze that Mrs. McNab when she broke in and lurched about looked like a tropical fish oaring its way through sun-lanced waters.

But slumber and sleep though it might there came later in the summer ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which, with their repeated shocks still further loosened the shawl and cracked the tea cups. Now and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard as if a giant voice had shrieked so loud in its agony that tumblers stood inside a cupboard vibrated too. Then again silence fell; and then, night after night, and sometimes in plain midday when the roses were bright and light turned on the wall its shape clearly there seemed to drop into this silence and indifference and clarity the thud of something falling.

At that season those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty—for instance the sunset on the sea, the pallor of dawn, the

moon rising, fishing boats against the moon, something isolated, out of harmony with this serenity; the silent apparition of an ashen coloured ship for instance; a froth and stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had foamed and boiled and bled beneath. This intrusion into a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions stayed their pacing. It was difficult blandly to overlook them; to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within.

Did nature supplement what man advanced? did she complete what he began? With equal benignancy she saw his misery, condoned his meanness, acquiesced in his torture. That dream—of sharing, of finding outside the house completion—was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath. Impatient, despairing, yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations) to pace the beach was impossible: contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken.

VI

Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrowlike stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been anyone to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself.

In spring the garden urns casually filled with wind blown plants were gay as ever. Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible.

VII

Thinking no harm, for the family would not come, never again, some said, and the house would be sold at Michaelmas perhaps, Mrs. McNab stooped and picked a bunch of flowers to take home with her. She laid them on the table while she dusted. She was fond of flowers. It was a pity to let them waste. Suppose the house was sold (she stood arms akimbo in front of the looking glass) it would want seeing to—it would. There it had stood all these years without a soul in it. The books and things were mouldy, for what with the war and help being hard to get, the house had not been cleaned as she could have wished. It was beyond one person's strength to get it straight now. She was too old. Her legs pained her. All those books needed to be laid out on the grass in the sun; there was plaster fallen in the hall; the rain pipe had blocked over the study window and let the water in; the carpet was ruined quite. But people should come themselves; they should have sent somebody down to see. For there were clothes in the cupboards; they had left clothes in all the bedrooms. What was she to do with them? They had the moth in them—Mrs. Ramsay's things. Poor lady! She would never want *them* again. She was dead they said; years ago, in London. There was the

old grey cloak she wore gardening (Mrs. McNab fingered it). She could see her, as she came up the drive with the washing, stooping over her flowers (the garden was a pitiful sight now, all run to riot, and rabbits scuttling at you out of the beds)—she could see her with one of the children by her, in that grey cloak. There were boots and shoes there, and a brush and comb left on the dressing table for all the world as if she expected to come back to-morrow. (She had died very sudden at the end, they said.) And once they had been coming, but had put off coming, what with the war, and travel being so difficult these days; they had never come all these years; just sent her money; but never wrote, never came and expected to find things as they had left them, ah dear! Why the dressing table drawers were full of things (she pulled them open) handkerchiefs, bits of ribbon. Yes, she could see Mrs. Ramsay as she came up the drive with the washing.

“Good evening, Mrs. McNab,” she would say.

She had a pleasant way with her. The girls all liked her. But dear, many things had changed since then (she shut the drawer); many families had lost their dearest. So she was dead; and Mr.

Andrew the tall young gentleman killed; and Miss Prue with the fair hair, masses of it twisted round her head, dead too they said,

with her first baby; but everyone had lost someone these years. Prices had gone up shamefully, and didn't come down again neither. She could well remember her in her grey cloak.

"Good evening, Mrs. McNab," she would say, and told cook to keep a plate of milk soup for her, quite thought she wanted it, carrying that heavy basket all the way up from town. She could see her now, stooping over her flowers, with a little boy there, (faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping, over her flowers went flickering, wandering, over the bedroom wall, across the washstand, as Mrs. McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening.)

And cook's name now? Mildred? Marian?—some name like that. Ah, she had forgotten—she did forget things. Fiery, like all red haired women. Many a laugh they had had. She was always welcome in the kitchen. She made them laugh, she did. Things were better then than now.

She sighed; there was too much work for one woman. She wagged her head this side and that. Why, it was all damp in here; the plaster was falling. What ever did they want to hang a beast's skull there? gone mouldy too. And rats in all the attics. The rain came in. But they never sent; never came. Some of the locks had

gone, so the doors banged. She didn't like to be up here at dusk alone neither. It was too much for one woman, too much, too much. She creaked, she moaned. She banged the door. She turned the key in the lock, and left the house alone, shut up, locked.

VIII

The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it. The long night seemed to have set in; the trifling airs, nibbling, the clammy breaths fumbling seemed to have triumphed. The saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed. Toads had nosed their way in. Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro. A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovel fulls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots. Tortoise shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis, and pattered their life out on the window pane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass; giant artichokes towered among roses; a fringed carnation flowered among the cabbages; while the gentle tapping of a weed at the window had become, on winters' nights, a drumming from sturdy

trees and thorned briars which made the whole room green in summer.

What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature? Mrs. McNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup, like a spot of sunlight, it had wavered over the walls and vanished. She had locked the door; she had gone. It was beyond the work of one woman, she said. They never sent. They never wrote. There were things up there rotting in the drawers—it was a shame to leave things so, she said. The place was gone to rack and ruin.

Only the lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden glare into the drawing room or bedroom, over bed and wall, looked at the thistle and the swallow, the rat and the straw, severely when the night was dark, caressed them lovingly in the soft nights of spring.

As for the spirits, who in sleep had left their bodies, and dreamed of some communion, had dreamed that grasping the hand of a sharer, they might complete, down on the beach alone, in the presence of sea and sky, that pattern that vision, that beginning which sought fulfilment, either they had been woken by that prodigious cannonading which made the wine glasses tinkle in the cupboards, or the snout protruding, the stain bleeding, had so

gravely damaged the picture that they had fled. They had dashed the mirror to the ground. They saw nothing now. They stumbled and strove, blindly pulling one foot out of the mud, blindly stamping the other in. Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself, and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the arm chair. Let the broken glass and china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries.

For now had come that moment, that hesitation when dawn trembles and night pauses, when if a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness. In the ruined room, picknickers would have lit their kettles; lovers sought shelter there, lying on the bare boards; and the shepherd stored his dinner on the fallen bricks, and the tramp slept with his coat round him to ward off the cold. Then the roof would have fallen; briars and hemlocks burgeoning, curving, would have blotted out path, step, window, would have grown, unequally but lustily over the mound, until some trespasser, losing his way, could have told only by a red hot poker among nettles, or a scrap of china

in the hemlock, that here once someone had lived; there had been a house.

If the feather had fallen, if it had tipped the scale downwards, the whole house would have plunged to the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion. But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting. Mrs. McNab groaned; Mrs. Bast, her crony, creaked. They were old; they were stiff; their legs ached. They came with their brooms and pails at last; they got to work. All of a sudden, would Mrs. McNab see that the house was ready, one of the young ladies wrote; would she get this done: would she get that done; all in a hurry. They might be coming for the summer; had left everything to the last; expected to find things as they had left them. Slowly and painfully, with broom and pail, mopping, scouring, Mrs. McNab, Mrs. Bast stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; fetched up from oblivion all the Waverley novels and a tea set one morning; in the afternoon restored to sun and air a brass fender and a set of steel fire irons. George, Mrs. Bast's son, hammered nails, cut grass. They had the builders. Attended with

the creaking of hinges and the screeching of bolts, the slamming and banging of damp-swollen wood-work some rusty laborious birth seemed to be taking place, as the women, stooping, rising, groaning, singing, slapped and slammed, up stairs now, now down in the cellars. Oh, they said, the work!

They drank their tea in the bedroom sometimes, or in the study; breaking off work at midday with the smudge on their faces, and their old hands clasped and cramped with the broom handles. Flopped on chairs they contemplated now the magnificent conquest over taps and bath; now the more arduous, more partial triumph over long rows of philosophy, black as ravens once, now white-stained, breeding pale mushrooms and secreting furtive spiders. Once more, as she felt the tea warm in her, the telescope fitted itself to Mrs. McNab's eyes, and in a ring of light she saw the old gentleman, lean as a rake, wagging his head, as she came up with the washing, talking to himself, she supposed, on the lawn. Never noticed her. Some said he was dead; some said she was dead. Which was it? Mrs. Bast didn't know for certain either. The young gentleman was dead. That she was sure. She had read his name in the papers.

There was the cook now, Mildred, Marian, some such name as that—a red headed woman, quick tempered like all her sort, but kind, too, if you knew the way with her. Many a laugh they had had together. She saved a plate of soup for Maggie; a bite of ham, sometimes; whatever was over. They lived well in those days. They had everything they wanted (glibly, jovially, with the tea hot in her, she unwound her ball of memories, sitting in the wicker arm chair). There was always plenty doing, people in the house, twenty staying sometimes, and washing up till long past midnight.

Mrs. Bast (she had never known them; had lived in Glasgow at that time) wondered, putting her cup down, whatever they hung that beast's skull there for? Shot in foreign parts no doubt.

It might well be, said Mrs. McNab, wantoning on with her memories; they had friends in eastern countries; gentlemen staying there; cook had to make curries for them; she had seen them once through the dining room door (she crept up behind the French girl who waited at table). She could see them now sitting at dinner, twenty she dared say all in their jewellery, and she stayed to help wash up till after midnight.

Ah, said Mrs. Bast, they'd find it changed. She leant out of the window. She watched her son George cutting the grass. They might

well ask, what had been done to it? seeing how old Kennedy was supposed to have the charge of it, and then his leg got so bad after he fell from the cart; and perhaps then no one for a year; or the better part of one, and then Tommie Curwen, and seeds might be sent, but who should say if they were ever planted?

George was a great one for work. He was one of those quiet ones. On he went, like a machine, scything, scything, wet or fine, great one for work. Well, they must be getting along with the cupboards, she supposed.

At last, after days of labour within, of cutting, raking sweeping digging without, dusters were flicked out of the windows; the windows were shut fast; keys were turned all over the house; the front door was banged; it was finished.

And now, as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned them, there rose that half heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall, a bark, a bleat, irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related—the jar of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging, the hum of a dor beetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related, which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonising; but they are never quite heard,

never fully harmonised, and at last, in the evening, one after another the one sound dies and another dies, and the harmony falters and the silence is complete. With the sunset sharpness was lost, and like mist rising, quiet rose, the rooks settled the grass settled. Loosely the world shook itself down to sleep, darkly here without a light to it, save what came suffused through leaves or pale on flowers.

IX

Then indeed peace had come. Messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore. Never to break its sleep any more, to lull it rather more deeply to rest and whatever the dreamers dreamt wisely, dreamt holily, to confirm—what else was it murmuring? And behold, our message, our wisdom, it seemed to say, is clothed in splendour. The wave sweeps dark up the beach. Our peace is a brooding peace, our beauty a conscious beauty. We lie at your door wishing you well.

Who, waking in the depths of this dark, this holy, this restful night whose darkness was a veil, whose murmur was of secrets too deep to be fully uttered, could, even now, after the damp and the spies, after the toad and the rat, resist the desire to walk there on the beach on the pale sand, with the waves breaking, and only a light in

the harbour a light on some mast head, a light on the waves, and ask again, What and why?

Yet seeing how often they had asked, how much had suffered, how often been mocked, it were wiser perhaps to lie there in the dark; to listen only; to let it say what it would—to chant, to croon, that it was a marvellous night, and the moon burnt through the blue like a rose. Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring, too softly for them to hear exactly what it said—but what matter if they caught the meaning?—how again and again the wave sweeps in splendour up the beach. The voice entreated the sleepers, if they would not actually come to the beach itself, at least to lift the blind and look out. They would see how the robes of the august God flowed down; his head was crowned; his sceptre jewelled; and in his eyes a child might look. And if the sleepers still faltered, and said, No: that it was vapour this splendour of his, and the dew had more power than he, without complaint without argument, the voice would sing its song. Gently the waves would break; tenderly the light would beam. And everything in the room—cupboards, basins, tables,—freshly ordered, straitly ranged—seemed to lie under the enchantment, placed more statelily

to-night, conscious more gravely to-night of an order, of a purpose, which when day broke would be revealed.

Indeed, the voice might resume, as the leaves of the passion flower tapped the window, and the mazy pattern of leaf, chair, table all waved on the floor, he was content with this; it was enough this—to fold the sleepers round in blue, to be, should they need him, waiting them there.

After all then why not agree? accept? Without losing their scepticism or sinking into the depths of acquiescence, they might, half turned, look out: assume some look that was not any longer rapture; lie watchfully awake and see how through a chink of the blind the splendid monarch flowed down; hear the vast sigh of all the waves breaking in measure round the isles; hear the birds begin and the dawn weave their thin voices into its white garment; hear the wheels begin and at last, forgetting to discriminate between wheel and bird, and letting at last the blue and purple fold itself about them, sink into night, sink into blue, and resign, and forget . . .

But ah! As falling, the faller shrieks and grasps the turf on the cliffs edge and saves himself, so, even as they fell, they were waked

wide; they were raised upright; their eyes were opened ; now it was day.