

LONDON

June.—In order to strike the keynote of the life that I must live I am squandering what money I have on a setting worthy of me. My letters of introduction placed me at once. As for the future—it must make terms with me. I can buy a few months of magnificence; the world must give me the rest.

The pomp and historic dignity of the picture here enchant me who am, in this passion for our ancestral splendours, a true Colonial. The scent of English flowers has always brooded in my blood: I recognised it at once. The Palace of Westminster completes my dream, but offers no

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

new vision. Against that background of sonorous arches stands Oscar Elliott. Day before yesterday he met me in the Park. The white hawthorn was in bloom, the elms seemed to stand at the rosy edge of the world. Oscar Elliott is an M. P., impassive, dark, subtle. But yesterday he looked troubled. Something had shaken that slightly imperial calm.

“It is useless to deny,” he said, “that I came here in the hope of meeting you.”

Just then his wife passed swiftly in her victoria, and my frank gentleman’s face grew even more perturbed. He began to talk about Jane Austen. . . . I asked him to button my long glove. The tips of his fingers burned on the silken skin of my arm. I asked him whether he had a fever. Then he laughed.

“You witch!”

“I don’t see how I deserve that epithet,” I answered simply.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

He looked at me keenly from under that ivory forehead of his.

"I am going to pay you a serious compliment," he said. "You have in you the 'daemonic' element of which Goethe speaks. I am not accustomed to being drawn out of my orbit. . . . And now . . . I am going to be at the Savoy to-morrow evening."

"How did you know?"

"Because I must know." His voice had a ring of finality, almost of sternness. "You understand," he went on, "that I don't love in the ordinary romantic, sentimental way. But I feel that you are necessary to me. Therefore, I must possess you."

I laughed ironically and then said without a tinge of colour in my voice:

"And the lady in the victoria?"

"Is the lady in the victoria, at the head of the table, on the Committees of the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Charity Bazaars—no more. Are you coming to the House to-morrow morning?"

"Perhaps."

He crushed my fingers in his hand.

"Are you coming?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

I went. The attendant asked me to write on a card the object of my visit. I wonder what he would have said had I written the truth. Oscar and I walked through the solemn corridors dimly illuminated by the windows of stained glass. He was taciturn and his lips were slightly compressed. He opened strange, old books almost at random and showed them to me. Outside the birds were murmuring. Petals from the red roses at my breast fell strangely upon Oscar Elliott's hands. At six o'clock the chimes beat out their immemorial harmony through the suave evening air. . . . We stepped out into a sunset world; we walked in

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

silence, but I heard the moaning of his blood; I saw the trembling of his hands; I saw the broken pride of his strength.

"To-night?" he said, and his voice choked.

"Oh, at the Savoy," I answered lightly, "perhaps."

He is strong and fine at once; and, since I am done with austerity and restraint it is well to know that he could give me orchids and pomegranates and myrrh; marble and diamond and chrysoprase; that he can set the bare melody of life to a rich and subtle orchestration. . . . He doesn't excite me personally, but I don't want to be excited. I want my life to be a garden full of gorgeous flowers having the peal of bells. I want to walk there and see the terrible loveliness and hear the strange vibrations. . . .

June 3.—We dined at the Savoy last

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

evening. At first everything enchanted me in this beautiful, fragile, wholly and adorably artificial world. Beneath us trembled the lights that bind the river and splash the gloom of the water with pallor. Afar, as in another world, we heard the roar and boom of the city. But we were here, deliciously isolated from all grind and vulgarity. The coarseness and brutality of Nature were excluded here; this was a refuge and a Paradise of Man. All my civilised, all my sophisticated instincts, drank in the atmosphere and the glamour greedily. White lights and gold; hot-house roses; strange, delicate foods and the glitter of precious vintages, how they satisfy with their fair allurements my subtler senses.

Oscar Elliott was to come, but he was detained at the House. The message seemed to darken the lights, to make the food like earth, the wine like hyssop. I

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

felt my face shrink and the lines grow under my eyes; my very breasts fell; I had to tighten the lace over them. I felt like a pricked soap-bubble. My God, do I love him? Have I sold my freedom so early to an alien strength? No! But a grey fear crept into my heart that he was breaking the bonds of his own desire. . . . Then, in a week, I saw myself in the Inferno of Bloomsbury, awakened by a scullery maid with a tallow dip. I saw myself giving music lessons at three shillings, or in the end . . .

Just as the pallid dawn threatened to quench the light of our artificial loveliness, just as the babble about me became unendurable—he came. Heavens! The emotion is so execrably old and hackneyed. *Vieux jeu* like all the rest. But it came upon me with a freshness as of the winds of Spring, white and jubilant from space. He didn't speak to me, he chatted with

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

the others. But the flames of his two eyes were upon my eyes, my lips, my arms, my bosom—those consuming flames. He avoided even the brushing of my skirts against him as if the intolerably poignant touch would cause some catastrophe. At the door of the carriage he held out his hand dumbly, like a beggar, and I dropped into it one red rose.

June 10.—It has come, the cataclysmic moment for which I have kept my lips pure and my hands unsullied. I am disappointed, shocked, bored. . . .

We were all at the Sayces, for the week-end. Their balconies and terraces and their Italian garden are like a picture—blue and gold and purple—a picture of the Renaissance. The tall poplars seemed spangled with the stars; the white statues glimmered in the thickets, immemorial dreams in their unseeing eyes.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The lake sleeps so terribly still that the image of the moon lies in it like a silver cup. We had danced until a madness seemed to impel our feet, until we seemed moved by an external power through the mazes of an immortal dance. The night was warm and Oscar Elliott took me out upon the terrace. The winds were dead. I looked at him and saw that he was pale. Something in me yearned toward the cooler greenery of the garden, and we walked slowly among the poplars, the beautiful trees of the night. It was all dreamlike—a picture from an Italian madrigal. We came upon a statue of Hermes and Oscar leaned his forehead against the cool marble, and all about us was silent. I stood beside him when, suddenly, a nightingale began to sing so wildly, so passionately, with such a terrible insistence as though the mighty pulsations of sound must burst its little

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

throat. Oscar looked up. He came so near me that his eyes seemed to melt into mine.

“Our doom is upon us,” he said in a voice shaken by strange sobs, as the trees are shaken by the winds, “our doom is upon us.”

We walked swiftly to an arbour and I sank upon a bench of marble. He took my hand.

“Let me touch you.”

I drew away, but he forced me toward him.

“Let me touch you,” he gasped, “your flesh is so white. . . .”

His fingers sank into my arm, and my body, as he held me beside him, seemed to match his, muscle by muscle, like the grooves of a puzzle. He pressed back my head as if to cut my throat and mangled my lips under his. A cold fever shook me with monstrous tremours. I trembled like

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

grass and my teeth chattered in my head. . . .

Then we heard voices, soft and distant yet. He released me and we sat beside each other movelessly as stones. By the faint glimmer of the light I saw the pebbles upon the path at our feet and I tried, hazily, to count them. But I lost my count again and again. After a while I heard his voice sounding abruptly.

"Come."

We went back into the glitter of many lights among the crowd of faces, but all these persons seemed small and strange and irrelevant. . . .

That night I slipped into the cooling waters of a bath. I put handfuls of lavender into it, lavender with its clean, pure odour. I looked upon the whiteness of my body, for it seemed to me that his touch must have left wounds upon it—the indelible stigmata of his terrible passion.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

But I found nothing save a blue spot on my left arm. I was glad to lie between the cool sheets of my bed and to feel them against my burning body.

And this was the climax of being young, the climax of love—this brutal trick of Nature's to insure population, this tremour of ice-flame madness. I have lost Oscar Elliott and found, in his place, that eternal beast—Man. What is the use of loving any one if passion transforms him and my washerwoman's "bloke" into the identical animal with the identical ruthless appetites; if all the artificial beauty of life cracks at one blow of that eternal hammer; if the same mechanical gibber of instinct has made apes and then man and builds its universe continually anew out of the dust of perished kisses? But we are helpless under the yoke of creation. The romance is dead, the delicate pose shattered, the love fled. And yet . . . and

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

yet . . . were he to stretch out his hand again my flesh would hasten to the stroke. But I don't want to do that. For a space, at least, I want my beautiful illusion, my delicate pantomime. I want to pose with my fairylike frocks and the June nights and the Terrace of the House of Commons as a background. I wanted this man, so much older, so grave and so noted, to break through all laws for me and say: "I love you." It is too early for the rest. I will not become the instrument of the reproductive impulse until I have lived long enough in my strange garden of the sonant flowers.

He came as soon as he could after our return to town. He was again strong, smooth, immaculate. But I remembered the sensual mask that had been his face that night under the poplars and I shuddered. He saw the change in me at once.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

"I see you have repented of the other night. You wish it to end then?"

The words struck a cold flame from me.

"Repent? Do you think I am one of the fools who do what they never intended, who let life betray them? I do a thing because it is a part of myself, because it is inconceivable that, given the circumstances, it could touch my temperament in any other way. I can no more repent of my deliberate acts than I could repent of my height or the shape of my mouth."

"In that case I do not understand."

Then I spoke slowly.

"I expected to find the smile of a god, not the grin of a satyr."

He rested his chin on his hand and looked at me with an old, old smile.

"Dear child, you might as well try to escape the sun as the clutches of the satyr. You will be so tame under his touch—so soon. But I will tell you for your con-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

solution that he, even he, is one of the servants of the divine Eros, whose face you may one day see."

"I am going away," I said coldly, but he was not to be put off.

"Do you think that you love me?"

"I like you to kiss me," I answered, and my voice was now clear and steady. "But why can't you—be gentle about it, and just imagine for the moment that you are engaged to be married to me?"

He laughed a rich, sonorous, sensual laugh.

"If I imagined—that, if I imagined myself engaged to be married to you—I would think of the time when I would be . . ."

God! Why did he say that?

I turned my back to him and his voice came to me from behind, stern, compelling and yet—sweet.

"You may go away, but I think that you

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

will come back. You cannot forget my kisses in the garden, for they awakened you to life. And if you are far away and hungry for my kisses, hungry for the clutch of the undying satyr—send for me and I will come."

I hate him, for it is possible that he speaks the execrable truth. But he wrongs the woman that I really am, the woman who can die but who cannot be compelled.

And now? Well, I have invested my few pounds in judicious luxury. People are glad to have me. I think I shall accept one of my many invitations. I think I shall go to the pearl-grey sky, the pale-green sea, the austere mountains of the North. After that flame of passion has so seared me, I shall step into a symphony of pallid shades and elemental sounds. I shall dip my wrists in the cool waves of the unimpassioned seas; I shall watch the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

flight of the desolate sea-gulls over the icy waters. I shall go to regions where Nature, eternally virginal, sleeps under an enduring veil of snow.

CHRISTIANIA

THE Dunnes' yacht Pythia.

August.—I have got back to the fairytale. The facts of life, the meaning of words, no longer touch me. I was in another universe, another life, amidst another humanity. Now I am empty-hearted, glad, sunfilled.

I would like to sculpture this moment—the broad noon, the emerald sea, the pale sky. Everything is crystalline, young, unmoved. The silence of the winter has hardly left it; it is August; yet the woods are coloured under foot with buds and delicate leaves that come with spring. The wind is vibrant with the smell of pine trees, and one hears the ceaseless music of forests.