

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

ply all the dynamics, we need laws to break in order to give our vitality exercise.

MONTE CARLO

December.—Beside the train at the station red geraniums dripped over the wall. The sea was purple; a broad band of vermilion barricaded the sky, and, as we poured from the train, there was an even cry from somewhere of "ascenseur, ascenseur!"—raucous, unchanging. I think that on some who knew Monte Carlo very well that cry would be permanently marked.

Behind the station, a white sweep of steps curved up into a garden of palms. Little constellations of lights glittered through the trees.

The horses swept me up the steep hill. Their blood, too, was going fast; the whole atmosphere was quick.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The inflation of its mood held me up till dinner. When I walked alone into the dining-room, I came face to face for the first time in my life with the open world; the room gaped with snakes' heads. My body turned to flame under my clothes.

And then, when I was alone, I faced it. I could be held on the spikes of their sneers. I closed my eyes against the memory of how they had looked at me.

I pressed my lips to the carpet as though it could save me; I clung to the chairs, to the cold iron of the bed; I sobbed to be let free.

But I got myself steadied enough to listen to fact at last. Why have I dreamt and theorised and planned and decided?

What was the use of thinking things if I couldn't do them? I had said I was ready to pay any price for what I wanted. Did I then lack the courage? I got up

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

and looked at myself in the glass, at my bloodshot eyes, and my cheeks red from the floor.

But the extremes of agony exhaust, so that when I stepped out of the hotel, the air sweet from the flowers, the sight of the palms, silent against the stars, wrapped me suddenly in the quiet of its beauty, gave me the armour, the knowledge of the safety I carry against pain.

And, after all, why not take it more easily? People who know me, or people I might know, would understand. What did the others matter, more than the nastiness of creeping things in the grass?

Have I a temperament blessed or accursed that, even as I walked across the little space of trees and flower-beds, the perfume, the blue radiance of the sky, the sparkle of the white Casino, the pulse of light, as the wide doors swung backwards

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

and forwards, lit up jet by jet the illumination of my blood, till my brain and senses were glittering, like vast halls blazing with crystal chandeliers?

I went down on the Terrace to-night, to wash out the memory of the faces—just to blend the glamour of the excitement with the beauty of the night.

The Terrace was empty; it was cold; the lights outlined the half hoop. Monaco was a fairy drop curtain from a theatre. A lantern, hung on the black line of masts, trembled against the rocks; the dark cliff with its palace was painted against a soft, purple sky; an icy moon bent over the purple sea; the water made soft hushed noises against the stones. It was aloof, restricted, exquisite. When I walked close to the bushes, the wet smell of the hawthorn—English hawthorn—swam over me. I leaned back against the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

balustrade, over the sea, and let the white palace behind, and the trembling sky, and the brooding sea, take me in their arms. They were Life, Fate, Beauty incarnate.

All that I wanted was held in the rooms poised on the cliff. Africa was just on the other side of the sea. The air was sibilant with excitement. The very palms had fingers that quivered in the grasp of the sky.

Thursday.—This morning is so peculiarly morning—all opening out, fresh and undiscovered. The perfume of the flowers is so tremulous in the breeze that it comes to me almost like a laugh.

How absurd to bring down Nietzsche to read in this scintillating daylight! It was just as ridiculous as all the other parade of pretence-life I have saturated myself with.

Monte Carlo is so sincerely false, frank

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

in its denial of all naturalness. I feel myself rested, because there is no strain after effect.

It is the first time that I have ever seen anything completely itself.

The gardens are openly exotic; the Casino is brazenly for the excitement. The very birds that murmur around the cornices are merely alive because they happen to have escaped from a shooting-match. There is no poverty, no ugliness. The flowers are kept moist and wet in spite of the sun. It is supremely unnatural, completely satisfying.

I have followed the artificial all my life, and now I have found its temple. One's mind is hot-housed, under glass, at Monte Carlo. It is all posed. The rocks are grey and dusty, and everything here is gilt and filigreed whiteness. I have found the climax of all the posed moods, and now there is nothing left but to find

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

the climax of the spontaneous. I must follow the natural to its source.

Tuesday.—The system went wrong last night. Of course, I knew I couldn't always win. I calculated to lose one or two of my banks: but the callous raking in of one's money puts a despairing futility over any plans. So this afternoon I thought I might as well arrange for any future vindictiveness on the part of Fate.

At the end of the road that runs by the sea there is a little hidden villa, and the wall is hung with climbing pink geraniums and heliotrope. The shore is heaped up with big rocks just there, and the living sapphire of the waves breaks all over them like showers of white chrysanthemums. If one had to drown oneself—and it's against all my principles to remain alive—should I find any difficulty in the affair? One would soon be brained

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

against these rocks. The first shock would stun—I didn't fill in the details. I never bother my mind with filling in details. Fate attends to that more or less satisfactorily after you have given her the broad outlines.

I went up there immediately after lunch. There may have been some faint feeling at the back of my mind that Fate would see me, be sorry for last night, be frightened at what I might do if she pressed me too far.

But I was going to be stern with Fate, and go right up and inspect the probable scene of my probable and deeply to be lamented death.

So young, so clever, so charming—a life so full of promise! The waves sighed against the little stones as I walked slowly along the dusty yellow road. I looked at them with tears. What a brute Fate was! A wave of perfume from the flower-cov-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

ered wall came to me as I neared it—the heliotrope was shining from the spray. It was a well-chosen place. I forgot my high-heeled, fragile slippers, and, catching up my skirts, stumbled to the very edge of the rocks, where the clear blue waves pounded in. It made one half in love with death.

And then I got the fume of a sewer, saw that on the waves floated scraps of orange-peel and strips of melon. It was the opening of a drain.

Fate had filled in the details.

The superb Terrace and I have it all to ourselves. The perfume from the hawthorn; the smell of the sea; the superb, trembling sea; the low trembling clouds; the sweet clear empty air. Nobody but a fool like myself would walk or sit out here in this intermittent drizzle. Such green on the slant side of Monaco, and

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

the quivering, swaying mists, settling down on the mountains leading the way to Italy. It is the sea that touches Africa. And, oh, the smell of everything! It is the perfume that goes to my head and compels me to feel it completely—this sodden sweet insistence of flowers and wet earth. A smell as oppressive as tuberoses and musk, as intoxicating as the reel of air that fills you, as you stagger up on deck, for the first time on a stormy day at sea.

Nature is always in love, and I am tired of philosophies and theories; I am tired of acting, of living up to the inflated disappointments of great men. I am not disappointed, and I am not a man.

And yet, to-night, when I folded up the new 1000-franc notes in a kind of rapture—I could feel the lace they would buy, see the houses where I would be, feel under

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

me again the purr of the thick wheels under the trees in the park—it suddenly came to me, as a thing I knew, but refused to say in my mind, that really all this mattered very little. I had known it with those people in that way once. I had a motive for repeating the scene, or else I would spend my money on luxury in other settings. I had enough money now to take me to the Orient, if I should choose that.

The Orient of myself first. What is the use of all the inconvenience, and restricted mind of being a woman, if I don't use all the opportunity of sex to give me what amusement it can?

I feel myself burking it, hushing myself away, in the liquid jewel of the night Mediterranean, overset by a brazen, red moon. That's the kind of effect one wants to put into existence—this passion of the cosmos, where even moons that are dead

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

can draw the living sea; and we are only human. I don't suppose there are really any incubi. I shall have to put up with what I can get, be satisfied with mere humanity: complete my humanity, much as I despise it, in the only way possible. And Oscar is the most complete man I know. He is the most man. He is more or less a brute, and he is so remorsefully, so almost pathetically, aware of the fact. He is so blatantly masculine, in his heavy, dark ponderousness, that I almost feel as amused at him as I would at a child, or a toy elephant. But at the present moment what I want from him is a jolt to my mind, a practical demonstration of Art.

A woman really cannot understand painting or music or books, till she has had the actual experience of those laboriously concealed things which are evidently the foundation of them all. As a mat-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

ter of fact, I suppose it's part of one's education.

But considering the money and—other things—I am going to spend on it, my post-graduate course will come rather expensive.

To-night I flung myself out of the Casino, and fled to the Terrace—my Terrace, my place with Fate. The moon, the trembling stars, the moving sea, the blue air and blue sky and blue sea. Monaco pierced the night with its lights. The palms sharpened against the sky, and showed the stars between; and I walked up and down, up and down, to drown with physical weariness the pain to go back, and find out how it was going to end.

London! London! I looked at the stark line of Monaco, and my whole existence was straining to the velvet lights around Westminster.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

No grey South and bleak hard sun, but the gentleness, the glamour, the completeness of London.

I am sick of subtleties, and half-expressed vagueness, of all the symphonies I have heard, and pictures I have seen, and books I have read.

January 15th.—It seemed so ridiculous to think of going to the Brahms Second Symphony at the Concert Classique—the Dance of Death Andante—when all the time I knew that to-night I am going to play for the last time. Just one more thousand francs to get, just one more. I feel already the cold sweat around my mouth.

But I can't start again, once more, the slow, long climbing up by way of ten francs and louis to hundreds of pounds. I haven't the nerve any more, I haven't the nerve.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

For six weeks I have lived with life and death and Fate spinning daily to that ball. I have risked what I am going to risk to-night again and again; but this is for the last time, it means more. I can't watch my life any more spin endlessly in that inexorable circle. I can't hear any more "*Faites vos jeux.*" God, haven't I played the game? Can't I rest now?

I won't play by daylight. I keep to that, though every nerve drags and strains and pierces me to the tables. I stayed on the Terrace all morning—leaning over the balustrade by the steps, tenting myself in by the frills of my parasol, but seeing all the changing, swaying, moving world of the people stir underneath, domed by an oval of sea and sky.

The flower shops tempted me as I went back to breakfast, and I bought great bunches of violets and lilies—lilies for my

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

room—the perfume makes me forget—and violets for myself for the concert.

Then tea at Ciro's. I could look through the palms from my table to the Mediterranean, turning violet now, with little quivers of rose in the air above it, from the sunset. And the orchestra there played that thing of Heine's—"Treu sein sollst du mir am Tage, und mich lieben in den Nächten." Yes, Fate, I have been true to you!

Midnight.—I have won. I have gained life. I have won.

It is real, though I don't understand it. I have won.

When I gathered up the gold and notes, I felt as though I were gathering up rainbow gold into my hands. It is life, and this was the price. But the gold was real.

I walked slowly out of the rooms as though something would hold me back,

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

prove it a dream; but the mocking, unending cry went on—the doors swung softly together—they closed out the last "*Le jeu est fait*"—and then I got to the night, the living night. I had escaped, I was free.

I sprang down the steps at the side of the Casino as though I were mad. The perfume of the night gathered me up. The heat and fever and the torture were all inside, all past. I got down to the Terrace—the bland, moon-green, shimmering Terrace, Terrace of the perfume, of the wavering shadows of the palms, of the translucent moon, of the borders of Africa, of the skirts of life and beauty and delight.

I clung to it as though it were something living. The Terrace had held me in such gentleness—palms and moonlight and flowers—when I had lost; and now that the play was over, I came to it to say

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

good-bye. I kissed the thought of it. The very soft cry of the sea on the rocks far below. I ran my hands over the balustrade. It had cooled them when they had been burning with fever in the unrest of the other nights.

But it is over, the pain is over. I have won. And now I am going to get the power of life, grasp it, know it, plunge into it. It is mine, my life, my humanity, my world. I am going to know all the joy that living life means.

SECOND PART

THE VOYAGE