

SIXTH DAY

THE trouble with Othello and the tragic people of the world is that they take themselves and their sentiments too seriously. Human beings are not worth killing. We can't eat them, and we don't stuff them for our halls; and so the objects of killing them, as far as sensible beings could practise it, are eliminated.

Othello was a beast, and it shows how little we have advanced from the brute pleasure of the savage, that we can go to such a play, and call the strangling of a woman Art.

I remember I tried it once. It was that afternoon when the blankness of usual things was beginning to flow around me again. We stood ready to go, and he had

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

put my long white boa around my neck, then, smiling at me with sudden meaning, he twisted it a second time about my throat like a chain, a muffler. "Now, when you get home you must lie down till dinner time," he said. The commonplace solicitude, the quiet, the simplicity of it all maddened me. Hadn't I just inverted the world, set the universe at defiance, flung my all to the gods?

I see him yet—his face, as it appeared to me at that moment, his heavy overcoat flung back, his calm, clean-shaven face tense and white, the half smile on his lips. But there were black lines under his eyes, and I felt from him some mood of tragedy that I knew he saw I did not understand.

"I shall certainly kill you some day," I said, choking in the fury of incomprehension; "I think I may as well kill you now." I slipped my hands around his throat under his collar, and dug my fin-

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

gers into his neck with all my strength. Strangle him? He only kept on smiling, in his ponderous conventionality. I might as well have tried to choke a statue. I dropped my hands. I felt like a frightened savage.

"I am afraid you have hurt your fingers," was all he said; and then, in his superior English way of merely doing the proper thing, he gently kissed the palms of my hands.

The sea-gulls wheel there, above the foamless water, as though they were the vultures of thought, waiting to devour murdered dreams. A cry comes from them now and then, as darkness creeps nearer, bringing no promise of another day.

Love touches the borders of its opposites. A woman gives herself up in ignorance to the first man who possesses

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

her; and she feels he must make life afterwards seem as newly great as when it had the glamour given by virginity.

There is no hate in Hell deeper than the hate that balances a woman's first surrender of herself.

I can imagine the pleasure of playing the gods to the man who has struck us from our world; to send them reeling into eternities of other unalterable things. What he has taken can only be matched by life.

Still, the uncle of Héloïse understood better the shrewd depths of agony hate can give. They are deeper than any grave could reach.

Revenge is the one immortal passion of humanity. It is the passion of the gods—the reserved passion of the gods.

I understand the savage insensate wish to test your full power, to wreak your

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

complete strength on anyone you hate, and have loved—not doing it hastily, stupidly, but to run the scale of the pleasures they could give you; the excitement, the love, the pallor of waiting moments; and then, when you had learned all they had to give, your last gift to make them the earth of which their brute bodies are made. You transfigured them, they said. Well, you would transfigure them again—a transfiguration that would tip them over the edge of the universe, and leave them only fallen stars to clutch at, with their grasping hands. Hands you have kissed—well, let infinity and corruption have them now!

One may possibly be a factor in some stupendous scheme of cosmic proportion; but, with our limited knowledge of the two eternities that gulf us, of the space that makes our planet a speck in the universe, we are appalled by the impotence of our own lives for our own gain, by the

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

grotesque humour of our forced service to an unknown end.

We suffer that a world may be inhabited. I wonder if each grain of dust suffers, as it is shovelled and piled and dug, to make the foundations of buildings of men? It is redistributed, reused. In one age on the summit of a mountain; in another, slimed with vermin in dirty cellars; and again it rests in the bed of unfathomable seas. Human dust, human agony, human impotence! But our one marvellous, princely gift is that we die. Life must set us loose at last.

And even difficult and hedged by Nature, as it is, Death is always open to us if Life cuts too hard. Why endure what is only pain, or—worse than active suffering—the knowledge that by our very temperament we are barred from success? To be defeated by yourself, to see

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

yourself hopelessly dictated to by a trick of the blood, to know yourself all your life at the mercy of your own inexorable impotence to carry out your own desires. What, then, if Fate has not given you what you want, is the use of your attempting to struggle for it? To do so only means the chill of failure, the agony of futile effort.

But it takes some strength, too, some final courage, to turn to Death, since Life we do know—its placid sweetness, if we choose to be satisfied with that, the canopy of clouds on a summer's day across an immaculate sky, the smell of flowers, the sound of the woods when the wind stirs the trees, the white ecstasy of snow and sunlight. These we know, are sure of. It takes some courage to slip out into a blackness and a silence that may be absolute and eternal.

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Of nothing else could one have any fear. A God would understand and be more just than any ignorant creed of man imagines.