

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The South seemed rather empty to me this morning; and strangely, for the first time in weeks the sky is grey, the water like heaving lead, and a cold, ugly rain comes down now and then. I have had a fire built in my room; it warms my heart; it is one of the elements anyway, and I must get back to living with the elements, not to these grasping, disturbing human ties.

It is blanker than I thought, and I am glad to be alone. But suddenly life has come to a standstill. Even when the sun shines it presses on my eyes and pains them. There is an oppression over everything, and the blood of the Southern spring seems thick.

CAIRO

Shepherd's Hotel, May.—I wanted to be so dominated by the sun that there would be no flame in me that it would not consume, and Egypt had meant to me the very centre of the South.

There is no reality of glamour in the world; we must give from ourselves all the glamour existence possesses.

From underneath my window comes the penetrating scream of the pelican, the fountains are standing half waterless in the blazing pallid garden, the air is imprisoned in light, a desert made transparent, and enclosing the world in dry, sun glare. The moisture of life is out of realisation.

The darkened room is wired in by heat;

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the monkey chained to the balcony underneath is sliming its hands in a half-decayed banana, and answers the scream of the pelican now and then with a revolting chuckling cry; a half-naked Arab girl is hanging out red and blue shirts on a roof beside the garden. And this is Egypt!

The sun-gilted, lotus-scented Egypt of dreams, the Egypt of gold barges moving through rivers of iris. Where flamingoes screamed at the sun from banks of osier, where slaves moved weighted by silver anklets and chains of agate and chryso-prase.

A fat Arab is trailing a coil of hose past the brittle flowers with the two stumpy dachshunds snapping at his wet blue smock. His ugly bare feet and scored ankles insult even the dusty grass, the spurt of water frightens the crows from the trees, and they flap their wide wings

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squawking to the roof of the turtle house. And they are not even vultures.

Perhaps up the Nile—with the great temples, the immortal silence—but it would be too hot and it would cost a hundred pounds, and I haven't a hundred pounds.

It is merely ordinary bathos. Two hot tired tears ooze out of my eyes, and I catch them on the tips of my fingers and look at them.

It is the noise I cannot endure, the unending, meaningless, insane noise. When the Arab boys begin that monotonous staccato clang of talk I wait breathless for the gods to strike them dead, and then always at three, in the very heart of the heat, an Arab wedding or funeral passes the hotel. I am stretched out on the huge bed panting as the heat empties the consciousness out of my veins, when the low boom of the sound begins in the

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distance and slowly, infinitely, comes nearer and nearer. It takes so long, it swells from a thing I understand to mad hordes coming to massacre and torture, to search the place. No matter where I might hide I would be found—and I am undressed—I haven't even time to put on clothes. I cower in the pillows with the veins in my forehead binding my head by steel.

Sound—Music, did I leave you? You are having your revenge.

For the first few wonder-struck moments it gave pleasure, the first journey on the desert, the sleek yellow earth beast warming its flanks under unceasing suns, parasited by the reptile-headed camels, stirring only to the blankness of the native voices; but giving the mockery of beauty to the creatures it possesses, the monsters that move near in their human mask.

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Veiled women pattering on donkeys from an empty distance to the empty horizon, the big-muscled men in loose robes.

I saw the first one of these blue-smocked brown things standing rigid on the brow of a sphinx of sand. It was a phrase. A brown organ point of the 'cellos with the shrill piping of the glare of the piccolos.

But the sense of these brown things, these caricatures of humanity, these husks of ourselves, left as life moved to the North, nauseate me like open graves in a deserted cemetery. When I watch them for a while from the Terrace, or after I have forced myself to drive through the bazaars, I come away with the black lines under my eyes half-way down my cheeks, with every nerve in my body trembling with disgust.

The sound and the mutilations and their vile smile, the slime of the native

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streets, the hideous cries, the vagrant eyes, the scored cheeks, the flies matted on the children's faces, the unfathomable beastliness of the smell of alien bodies, the rinds of melon lying in the streets, the wanton bray of the donkeys, the open shirts of the men showing their black glistening chests, the money clinking in cups, the mutilated nostrils and eyes, the dust that penetrates and clings and enfolds with impalpable horror. It is nameless hell—a hell not for any crime or cruelty, but just a hell because existence has set them in one space and let them rot to death; they are caught in a coil of creation from which there is no escape. They seem held in a trap of the sun.

June 1st.—The hard greyness of some future veil seems to settle down on me with the sun in these heat-broken days. The sky slowly closes in on you in an arc of

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burning metal, and tissue by tissue, vein by vein, draws out your senses. In the dust world of sun-pricks there is no feeling left.

My nerve seems to be slipping away from me, as though it were another person, leaving me helpless in front of this heat and clamour. When I close my eyes I only see the flame of the red fez: it spreads over Cairo like masses of putrescent poppies springing from a world of slime.

And even in my room where it is just myself, where just my own mood can dominate, the smell from the orange blossoms and the pink roses the Turk sends me, sicken my blood. Just myself, and these are the things I bring myself. The mood of Egypt that I was curious of, the Orient of the Mind.

1.30 A. M.—I turned on each globe of

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the electric light and studied myself in the glass when I came in. I wanted to be quite sure it was myself. I wanted to see the myself, to be with her, to be sure of her. No, she wasn't changed. I was white; even my lips looked tight and grey, but there was no change in my eyes. I looked for that. Myself, I don't want your eyes to change. I shall take care of you—I shall keep you from the harm touching you.

I thought I had seen the depths, but this was beyond words abomination.

The reek of the incense, the naked contorted women. And Life makes lust this. This is the dance they all so want to see; these things—women like that—what it all in the end means.

Have I been blind, taking rouge when I thought it was fire? Is this then the kind of thing men think passion, sensuality, suggestiveness, women . . .

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I do not even dare to throw that creature's flowers from the window. I mustn't let myself go, I mustn't let myself go.

And I have been so curious, and I thought myself so brave. I thought it was human too, and I would know my humanity. I don't want to be human any more. I am tired, so tired.

The way for the money is beyond my strength.