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The Four Beauties



Contents

The Simple Life	7
The Four Beauties	47
The Chords of Youth	108
The White Wind	162

The Simple Life

WINTER began in August: or so it always seemed to her.

Always, from the very first sight of it, she hated the cottage. She loathed the plain square red-brick box, its blue slate roof, the squalid confusion of currant bushes, black hen-coops, falling fences and apple trees in sprawling decay that passed for a garden, the muddy pond at the foot of it and the three withered willows sticking nakedly up from the water, like grey arms caught and fossilised in the act of drowning. Above all she hated the quiet clenching cold.

‘Must get down to the cottage. Must go down for the week-end.’ For two years and more she had listened to the same repeated cry. ‘God, I don’t know what I’d do without the cottage.’

She hated too the long Friday evening drive out of town, to what her husband fondly called the simple life. As the big motorway gave way to narrower country lanes and then to the flat almost treeless spaces of marshland and finally to a gated track across fields crossed by endless dykes feathered by brown reeds in which watching

herons stood poised under a great width of empty sky, apparently fossiled too, she found herself increasingly imprisoned in a grey cage of impotent anger.

Perhaps above all she hated the voice of her husband, for ever reminding her of the joys that awaited them on arrival, at the little place in the country:

‘The simplicity of it all – that’s what gets me. That’s the thing. No telephone, no television, no radio. No rat race. No appointments. Just you and the sky and, my God, the air.’

With certainty she knew, every Friday, as they came to the end of the field track and within sight of the cottage, what his first syllable, first gesture, would be:

‘Ah! that air.’ The fattish frame always seemed to broaden itself still further in the act of respiration. The immense exhaled sigh blew itself from his big loose mouth like a breath of sea wind. The well-manicured city-hands slapped his chest with a gusto not unlike that of an ape revelling in possession of its given square of territory. ‘By God, you can fairly taste the sea in that air.’

The air, winter and summer, always seemed to her like ice. Always, from across the flat grey dykes, came the quiet clenching cold and always, five minutes after arriving, she started steadily drinking.

The Simple Life

After the first reviving juniper lick of gin across her dry mouth she gave a great expanding sigh of her own. Often she didn't bother to take off her fur coat but merely wandered about in it, unpacking, powdering her face, smoking, staring out of the windows at the desolation of marshland, her drink never far away.

Her first immediate pleasure after the stimulating lick of gin was to draw the curtains and put on all the lights. The privacy of the world thus secured, together with the gin, made her for a time quite affable, even good humoured. The outer desolation she so hated was first shut out, men forgotten and finally replaced by a warm rosy glow in which she felt, at last, and for another hour or two, civilized.

Always, by ten o'clock or so, the last trace of affability, even civility, was dead. She began to be loose-lipped, strident, oily-eyed, hostile, bitter.

'I tell you once and for all, Mr Barty Bartholomew, this is the last time I come down to this rotten, stinking hole. This bloody fly trap. I've said it before and I won't say it again – I don't live in privies. I'm not used to buckets in the yard. You keep your lousy simple life – strangle it for me, will you, with love from Stella –'

The Simple Life

Once, in a fit of gibbering fury, she let a burning cigarette fall from her lips and lodge in the collar of her fur coat, where it incredibly set up a fire which she allowed to burn for fully a minute before he realized the danger and started swiping it out with both hands.

‘Oh! for Jesus’ sake let me burn – I might just as well burn. I tell you, let me bloody well burn –’

In such scenes her face became an old grey-green mask covered by a sort of powdery mould. Her eyes, naturally green too, took on a dilation not only discoloured but both opaque and lost. It began to be impossible to tell how old she was. Her thirty-five years became forty-five, fifty, lost too between one arid meaningless decade and another. Her hair, tinted a new shade every week but varying not much from its own natural autumn to a fierier, fluffier squirrel red, became a mere dishevelled bundle, giving her the look of some spiritless moulting hen.

Somewhere beyond the drawn curtains, four or five miles away, was the sea. Some distance along the coast a new power station brooded like a windowless concrete castle. You could hear, from time to time, both day and night, the moaning bleat of fog-horns. These sometimes woke her in the

The Simple Life

night and she lay listening to them as if they were the echoes of something moaning inside herself, tearlessly.

All day, for the rest of every week-end, Bartholomew found his refuge in the simple life: chopping sticks, sawing wood, digging up strips of black marshland earth, pruning apple trees, occasionally fishing, sometimes merely walking, watching the gulls, the moorhens, the heron ghosts poised along the dykes. These unshared pleasures drove him too further and further into himself, into a bleak privacy of his own out of which, one crisp March day when he found her sprawled blind-eyed across the kitchen table, her mouth cut and bleeding from the broken glass on which she had fallen face first, he could only utter his own bleak impotent moan:

‘I loved you once but what it was all in aid of – God, I wouldn’t know.’

‘Some rotten charity,’ she said. ‘Some rotten bloody charity.’

She woke at midday next day to an unexpected, astonishing sight: a deep late March snow. Thickly, a foot or more, it lay smooth on everything, a pure level crust, as much blue as white in the strong March sun, transforming garden, bushes, fossiled willows and the fields between the normally

grey and desolate dykes with an amazingly tranquil and uplifting beauty.

With cold disbelief she stood and stared at it from the bed-room window. Already the hot March sun had begun to melt it on the southward side of the house. The roof was dripping like a running spring.

From outside she heard, presently, the sound of voices and then of scraping shovels. She looked down to see, below, on the garden path, a rosy and perspiring Bartholomew heartily shovelling snow and with him a dark-haired boy of seventeen or so, sweeping behind him with a birch broom. The boy was someone she had never seen before.

Wearing her fur coat over her nightgown against the cold she went downstairs. As she started to boil a kettle for coffee Bartholomew put his head round the kitchen door with cheer-ful explanations:

‘It’s Mrs Blackburn’s son. Roger. His mother slipped down and busted a small bone in her foot. She sent him along to see if he could help at all. It’s a hell of a snow.’

She said she was sorry about Mrs. Blackburn, who came in twice at week-ends and once in the week to sweep up, scrub, wash up and light fires. It was very civil of her to be so thoughtful as to send the boy.

‘Ah! coffee. Smells marvellous. It’s what we could do with. The boy’s been shovelling

and sweeping since eight o'clock. He's strong as a horse.'

'I expect he could do with breakfast too. Ask him, will you? I'll cook him eggs or something.'

The reflected light of snow on her face, as yet without make-up, made it seem excessively pallid but at the same time tranquil. Her manner too had neither the brittle tension nor the morbid gloom that were habitually hers in the mornings. Snow seemed to have had on her a redeeming and calming effect of which she was totally unconscious. Even the offer to cook eggs at that impossible and sickening hour was something which failed to strike her as exceptional.

Bartholomew went out into the yard and came back to say yes, the boy would like breakfast. He himself would have some too: eggs, sausages, bacon, anything; the lot. It was heavy work out there. The snow was of the wet kind. They were both hellish hungry.

A quarter of an hour later the three of them were sitting at the kitchen table, the two men scooping ravenously at plates of fried breakfast, she with nothing but a cup of black coffee in her hands, her elbows crooked on the table.

The penetration of the boy's exceptionally bright blue eyes was the first thing that

struck her about him. His forehead was massive for someone of his age, the dark eyelashes so thick and curled that they formed a sort of nest in which the eyes lay like two birds' eggs, brilliantly pure.

She found her gaze constantly drawn back to the eyes without consciously directing it. In return the boy offered only sudden sensitive glances of embarrassment, eating quickly.

'Let me cook you some more,' she said at last. 'It won't take a moment. There are more sausages. They have to be eaten.'

'No, thank you, Mrs Bartholomew. I really –'

'Oh! come on,' Bartholomew said. 'You need it. God, if we're going to clear the track as far as the garage –'

She went back to the stove. While fresh slices of bacon sizzled in the frying-pan with eggs and sausages she hovered over the table, pouring coffee, almost briskly. This exceptional behaviour for one who normally went about at that hour of the day in a kind of sour post-alcoholic lethargy so astonished Bartholomew that he was actually moved to make jokes about it.

'We're very chipper this morning, aren't we? Bright as a skylark.'

Was she? she said. She hadn't noticed it. She supposed it was the snow.

The word skylark suddenly caused the boy to stop eating. Shyly he said that in fact skylarks were singing already. He'd heard one only yesterday.

'I thought skylarks only sang in summer,' she said.

'Oh! no, they're beginning now.'

'What do they look like?' she said, 'I've never seen one.'

Sheer disbelief at this confession of hers kept him, for some moments, from giving any answer. Then he said that he wouldn't be surprised if they even sang today, in the snow. The sun was warm enough.

'I should have thought the poor things would get frozen to death.'

Oh! no, he said. It was quite likely they might hear one. If they did he'd point it out to her.

'That would be marvellous,' she said.

Bartholomew laughed. 'We'll be having you take up ornithology any moment now,' he said, 'under Roger's tuition. Eh, Roger?'

'You don't see many birds here,' she said.

Oh! there she was wrong, the boy said. The marsh was full of birds. All kinds of birds. Waders, sea-birds, herons, kingfishers, even wild geese sometimes.

She laughed too. She had to confess she'd never seen anything but a sparrow all the time they'd lived in the house. But then

she'd no doubt that his eyes were keener than hers.

Bartholomew, drinking the last of his coffee and getting up from the table, seized the moment as an opportunity for another joke.

'Well, we must be off. Any more for the Skylark -?'

'Roger hasn't finished his breakfast yet. Don't rush the boy.'

'Can't wait. Must off. I'll start in by the garage.'

For some ten minutes more she remained alone with the boy, she with her back to the window, he facing her. The continued fascination wrought by the brilliant birds' egg eyes actually started to make her unsure of herself. She started to light a cigarette, fingers trembling as they so often did in the morning, and promptly dropped the box of matches on the kitchen floor.

The boy got up from the table and rushed to pick it up. The cigarette trembled in her lips and in a sudden impulse he struck a match and lit it for her.

'Thank you, Roger. That's very sweet of you.'

He went back to his plate quickly, without a word.

'Does your mother have to go to hospital?'

He said he thought for X-ray. Tomorrow.

‘Do tell her how sorry I am. She won’t be able to work for some time?’

No, but that was all right. She needn’t worry about that. He would come in instead.

‘Yes? You mean for scrubbing and washing up and all that?’

Oh! yes, he could do all those things. Cooking too. And even, if she wanted, he could wait at table. He’d done it several times for Colonel Blakeney, when he had big parties and things.

‘Well, that’s nice to know.’

He at last finished his breakfast and went outside, saying as he did so that he would call her if and when he heard the skylark.

‘Do I need boots out there?’ she said.

Oh! no, he said, the path was clear. In fact it was drying already in the sun.

Suddenly she felt impelled to go upstairs and dress. Normally she slouched about all morning half-dressed, in a smoky dream. Now she found herself putting on a green tweed costume, brushing and spraying her hair, making up and even, at this very last moment, putting on a pair of small pearl ear-rings and a single row of pearls.

In doing so she forgot the dirty dishes left from breakfast. Facing them with the realisation that she had done something

stupid she felt a spasm of self-vexation, followed by a sudden craving for the first drink of the day. She had already started to pour out a half tumbler of gin when she heard the boy's voice call from the yard:

‘Mrs Bartholomew!’

She went outside. The strong clear March sun was already hot. Snow was melting and dripping everywhere. The power and brilliance of this sun had also a curious effect of magnification. Framed against snow and the clearest of clear blue skies the boy seemed to be altogether taller, bigger in frame, than when sitting at the breakfast table. Snow light also heightened remarkably the remorseless young brilliance of the eyes.

He raised a hand to the sky. ‘Up there. Straight overhead. See him?’

She lifted her face, eyes dazzled.

‘Can’t see a thing.’

‘Straight up. You can hear him anyway, can’t you?’

She stood for some moments staring and listening, eyes dazzled by sun, neither seeing nor hearing a thing. Then she finally managed to tune her ears to the thin trembling of lark song, cascading down, as it were, from a great vacuum.

‘Oh! I hear it now. Marvellous. But I still can’t see a thing.’

The Simple Life

He dropped his snow shovel on the path, walked down the path to join her and pointed to the sky.

‘You’re not looking in the right direction.’ He stood close by her, holding her right arm just below the elbow. ‘No, not that way. Overhead. More overhead.’

She stared into the sky with eyes screwed up, again seeing nothing.

‘I said your eyes were keener than mine.’

‘It’s farther up than you’re looking, Mrs. Bartholomew. Look farther up.’

She laughed. ‘I’m looking a million miles up now.’

‘Perhaps you’re looking too much against the sun.’

‘I’m just plain stupid, that’s what.’

Suddenly she gave a cry. In a moment of unexpected revelation both sound and sight of the lark, from a height that seemed to her impossibly distant, merged together. She became conscious of a moment of great, simple, exquisite pleasure and in the unremitting thrill of it she actually threw up both hands.

‘It’s the most beautiful thing in the world,’ she said, ‘it’s the most beautiful sound I ever heard.’

This moment of snow and skylark crystallized itself in her mind in

imperishable fashion. For the first time she found herself actually extracting pleasure from the cottage, the isolation, the marsh and the entire simplicity of it all.

‘Roger tells me he can do things. Chores and so on. Cooking. He paints and hangs wall-paper and does gardening and all mat. He can even wait at table.’

‘Don’t tell me we’re about to give grand dinner parties with butlers and caviare. We’ve got this place for escape –’

‘I’m not talking about that. I just thought I’d ask him to paint and paper the kitchen. It’s never been done. The window frames have got cracks you could put a mouse through. I thought something simple and clean – just plain red and white. To make it brighter.’

‘Far be it from me to do anything to come between you and the house.’

‘I’d like to do it.’

‘Good. You’ll be telling me next you’ve cooked up some affection for the place.’

Some time later she appeared to change her mind about this. She was uneasy, she said, about leaving the boy alone in the house. You never knew quite with these people. You didn’t know whether to trust them with the key.

‘You trust Mrs Blackburn.’

She knew that, but somehow –

The Simple Life

‘Solution’s easy. Stay down here for the week. You can then superintend. Keep the watchful eye.’

She agreed, after some hesitation, that this was a likely solution. But she would need the car. She would have to drive into Seahaven to get paint and things. Not that she was all that fond of driving in snow.

‘The snow will have gone by tomorrow. They’re forecasting rain.’

She said she hoped the snow would stay for a time. She really loved the snow.

The next day the boy prepared to decorate the kitchen. Snow still covered the landscape outside except for occasional dark islands melted by sun. The strong reflected light of it showed up unmercifully every shabby crack, every smoky shadow, in the cramped brick-floored room and she said:

‘You feel you want to push the walls out six feet or so. You think red’s too strong?’

The boy said he thought green would be better. Red was too strong, too fussy.

‘I believe you’ve got taste,’ she said.

Wearing a pair of old chamois gloves she spent the greater part of the first day rubbing down the old paint with sandpaper while the boy, wearing a thick tattered blue sweater with a heavy rolled collar, filled the many cracks in the walls with new plaster.

‘There’s a strange smell of fish about the place,’ she said once.

He at once flushed sharply and apologized. He was afraid it was his old sweater she could smell. It was the one he went sea-fishing in.

‘Oh! you go fishing? You don’t mean you actually catch things?’

Oh! yes, he went almost every night. He mostly caught small cod and plaice and occasionally soles.

She marvelled. ‘You clever thing. You fish from a boat?’

No, he said, from the shore. He wasn’t always lucky, of course, but seven or eight times out of ten he caught something or other. Did she like fish? He’d bring her something, a sole perhaps, next time he had any luck.

‘That’s terribly sweet of you. Yes, I adore fish. I suppose you never get lobster?’

No, he never got lobster. But he knew a boatman who often did. She had only to ask and he would get her lobster any day.

‘You marvellous man.’

These casual utterances of hers, apparently effusive but in reality nothing of the kind, had on him the disturbing effect of pure open flattery. It was only natural that, as the day went on, he began to feel that he had aroused in her something like affection.

Sensitively anxious to do nothing to offend her in any way he also threw off the sweater, with its slightly rank odour of fish, and worked in his shirt sleeves, revealing dark muscular arms sun-brown to the elbows.

At intervals she made tea for him and poured a drink for herself. 'I'll get some beer in tomorrow for you if you'd prefer it instead of tea.'

No, he was all right with tea. He was a great tea man.

Sometimes in these conversations she found herself caught up again, unwittingly trapped, by the intense vividness of the strong blue eyes, disturbingly limpid under the equally strong black brows. Once or twice he looked at her in the same precise moment, his gaze caught and held by hers, uneasily.

By the end of the afternoon she confessed to being tired, in fact absolutely worn out. 'Aren't you tired? You've worked like a black.'

No, he wasn't tired. He never got tired.

'Ah! but you're young,' she said. 'You're young.'

The next morning he arrived with a basket of fish, two fair-sized plaice, a sole and a small cod. Again she marvelled. He'd fished, he told her, until two in the morning.

He didn't get his first bite until almost one o'clock.

'Oh! you poor lamb. You must have been frozen.'

Hadn't noticed it, he said, and again she marvelled.

'What am I going to do with all this fish?' she said once. 'It's enough to keep me going for weeks. I hardly eat a thing.'

He would, he said, cook it for her if she liked. He loved to cook. The sole would be better kept a day or two but the plaice were better fresh. He'd be glad to cook them for lunch for her.

'It's awfully sweet of you but I don't think I could eat fish with the kitchen in this mess.'

Let him cook them for dinner then, he said.

'Oh! would you? That would be marvellously nice of you. But even then I couldn't manage the half of it. You'd have to eat too and help me out.'

By seven o'clock that evening, he was grilling the two plaice for her and preparing to fry four cod steaks for himself. He had put on a sort of white mess jacket in which to do the cooking and it gave him a correct, professional air. He had also cooked potatoes, made a salad and *sauce tartare*.

'I marvel at the way you do things,' she said. 'You're so calm. You never get