THE NORTHERN LIGHT

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THREE LOVES

GRAND CANARY

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ADVENTURES IN TWO WORLDS

BEYOND THIS PLACE

CRUSADER'S TOMB

THE NORTHERN LIGHT

by

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PART ONE

I

IT WAS PAST EIGHT on St. Mark's church clock that damp February evening when, in the ordinary way, Henry Page said goodnight to Maitland, his chief assistant editor, and came out of the *Northern Light* building. The leading article for Monday had kept him later than usual—even with twenty years' experience his composition was not particularly fluent, and that extraordinary call from Vernon Somerville had delayed and distracted him.

His wife was using the car and he intended walking home—lately Dr. Bard had been urging him towards more exercise of a moderate sort—but now, because of the hour, he decided to take the tram.

As it was Saturday night, not many people were about the Mealmarket—the old, commercial part of Hedleston, a network of narrow wynds and passages converging on Victoria Square where Page's offices and printing plant occupied part of an Adam terrace that betrayed its eighteenth-century origin in a patina of ancient smoke and weather. Free of traffic, its cobbled streets for once so muted that his footsteps echoed down the alleyway behind him, the ancient quarter seemed to Henry, more than ever at this hour, the steady heart of this royal Northumbrian borough where for five generations his family had lived and worked. Instinctively he drew a deep breath of the moist and slightly acrid air.

A shortcut through Dean's Close took him to the main

thoroughfare. At the stopping place there was no queue, the Wooton tram was half empty, yet when Henry counted the *Lights*—a lifetime habit—there were four on view. An artisan with a tool kit at his feet, a man of about sixty, was reading his current editorial through steel-rimmed spectacles, holding it up to the dim electric bulb in the corner, his lips moving on the words. He had actually missed the football match to work overtime, and Henry thought: The old ones are the best. Although he had no illusions about his style—his son David was inclined to smile at his *pronouncements*—he found a comforting warmth in the thought that he did occasionally manage to reach, and influence, the ordinary people of the town, towards whom he had a troubling sense of responsibility.

At Hanley Drive he got off. The villas in this road, all built of red sandstone from the Eldon quarries, had few distinguishing features beyond a common aspiration to half-timbered gables, but the entrance to his house was defaced by two heavily convoluted cast-iron lampposts embossed in gilt with the Hedleston coat of arms, three silver martlets on an azure shield. Page was a man who disliked show of any kind; however, having twice been mayor of the town, he had felt obliged to conform to custom and accept these formidable reminders of his years of office.

The garden in which, with enjoyment, pottering around, he spent most of his spare moments, was beginning to show encouraging signs of spring. Taking the front steps rather slowly, he felt for his latchkey. In the hall, as he hung up his coat, he listened for a moment and was reassured by the absence of sounds of social activities. He went into the dining room, where his place had been left set, and, feeling along the carpet with his foot, pressed the bell. Presently a tall bony woman with a scoured complexion and red, chapped hands, dressed severely in black,

brought in some sliced mutton, potatoes, and cabbage, standing, her head a little to one side, before remarking with a slight elevation of the corner of her mouth and the tart understatement that for twenty years had been the feature of her service:

"I'm afraid it's a trifle overlong in the oven, Mr. Page."

"I'll have a go at it," Henry said.

"I could poach you a couple of eggs," she suggested, after a pause.

"Don't bother, Hannah. But bring me some biscuits and cheese, in case."

Unseen, she directed towards him a glance of ironic sympathy, the look of a privileged servant recognizing that the household owes everything to her discretion, prudence, economy, and hard work, and expressing, between affection and admonition, an exact assessment of her employer's character.

Yet for this desiccated repast Henry held himself entirely to blame—no one, he felt, could cope with a timetable so irregular as his, and he had long ago agreed that seven sharp should be the fixed hour for dinner. In any case, he was not particularly hungry tonight; he managed fairly well with the Cheddar and biscuits and when Hannah had fetched his slippers he went into the library, as he usually did, before going up to work in his study at the top of the house.

Alice, his wife, still wearing her bridge-party hat with the bunch of cherries—she had the habit of sitting absently just as she came in from the street, sometimes even holding her tightly rolled umbrella in one gloved hand—was on the sofa with Dorothy. They were doing the crossword. It pleased Page to see his daughter at home: since she had started travelling to her art classes in Tynecastle, she had been out rather too often and too late for a sixteen-year-old just free of school.

"Dad," she complained without looking up, as he entered, "your crosswords are strictly non-U."

"They're meant for moderately intelligent people. Stooping, Page made up the fire, which had been allowed to go down. "What's your trouble?"

"The South Sea name of Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Try Tusitala . . . and if you read a book occasionally you might know more about him."

She tossed her hair, tied in an exaggerated pony-tail.

"I bet you looked at the answers in the office. And I did see his movie—*Treasure of the Island*."

Henry was silent, wondering, as he often did, how his children could be so totally opposite—David so brilliant and studious, Dorothy a perfect scatterbrain. He had been optimistic, too, in assuming that she had suddenly become domesticated, for his wife remarked:

"Dorrie has an invitation tonight—a television party at the Wellsbys'." In a well-bred manner Alice gave the name its due value—Sir Archibald Wellsby, banker and boot manufacturer, was Hedleston's local knight, and Eleanor, his wife, Alice's chosen intimate.

"But surely . . ." Henry looked at his watch. "It's nearly ten already."

"Don't be a stick, Henry. If you won't let the child have a television set in the house you can't stop her going out to look at one."

Dorothy was already on her way to the door. When she had gone, he couldn't help protesting.

"She's getting out of hand. Why in heaven's name you let her go to that confounded art school . . . These kids do nothing but sit in the Tynecastle cafés, gossip and drink coffee, when they're not idling their time away at the cinema. . . . You know she hasn't a grain of talent."

"Perhaps not. But she meets *nice* young people there . . . some of them from the best county families. Lady Allerton's son is in Dorrie's section . . . and the de Cressy

girl. That's quite important. After all, we don't want another disaster, do we dear?"

As Henry gave no answer she put aside the crossword and took up her needle-point. Presently, between stitches, she began an account of the afternoon party she had attended, describing those present, the dresses, the hats, gloves, and varying hair-dos, an epic to which, through long experience, Page was able to close his ears while giving the appearance of a sympathetic auditor. The business of that telephone call from Vernon Somerville still lay on his mind. It puzzled him. He had been briefly introduced to Somerville at a publishers' dinner in London—it was for the Associated Newsvendors Charities three years ago—yet he had never imagined that so prominent a personality would remember an unimportant provincial editor like himself nor, for that matter, that his opinion of the *Light* should be so favourable. The owner of the *Morning Gazette* ought surely to hold an opposite view.

"Henry, are you listening?"

Page started. "Sorry, my dear."

"Really . . . you are very unkind."

"The truth is," he apologized, "there's something on my mind tonight."

"Your mind? Good gracious . . . what?"

As a rule, Henry never discussed the affairs of the paper at home. In the early days of his marriage he had done so with the weirdest consequences, but this evening he felt a need to confide in someone.

He looked across at Alice, spare and stylish in figure, with the fair, slightly freckled complexion, faded yet still good, that goes with sand-coloured hair. Her vague blue eyes, set in a narrow head under brows arched as though in permanent surprise, were directed towards him with questioning interest, the look of a woman, who by an effort, maintains a qualified forbearance towards her

husband despite the trials and disappointments which, during twenty years of marriage, she is convinced he has imposed on her.

"As a matter of fact, I had an offer for the paper today."

"An offer? To buy it?" She sat up, her cherries quivering, the party forgotten. "But how exciting! Who was it?"

"Somerville of the *Gazette*."

"Vernon Somerville. His wife was Blanche Gilliflower . . . they separated last year." Versed in the genealogy, relationships, and intimate doings of the great, Alice reflected for a moment, then said, in the superior accents of her native Morningside—the best part of Edinburgh—which at her most social moments she always intensified, "Henry, this is rather thrilling. Was the offer . . .?"

She broke off discreetly.

"My dear, since I did not accept, I have no objection to your knowing. It was fifty thousand pounds."

"Goodness! What an amount!" Her eyes became ingenuously remote. "Just think what one could do with that . . . travel . . . see the world. Oh, Henry, you know I've always wanted to see Hawaii."

"I'm sorry, my dear. Hawaii will have to wait."

"You mean, you won't accept."

"Somerville already has three publications—that raffish weekly of his and the *Sunday Argus* in addition to the *Morning Gazette*. I can't see he has any need of another. Besides, he'd"—he checked himself—"be rather too go-ahead for our little property."

There was a pause.

"But it seems such a chance," she resumed, re-threading her needle and taking on a light, persuasive air. "You know you haven't been well lately. And Dr. Bard keeps telling you that high pressure and irregular hours don't suit you."

"You'd like me to retire. To a villa in Torquay perhaps? I'd be unutterably miserable."

"I don't mean that at all. You're still a comparatively young man, and we oughtn't to be stuck all our days in the provinces. With influence you could easily get a post . . . say with the United Nations."

"Shut myself in that Tower of Babel? Never."

"But, Henry . . . I'm not thinking of myself, although you know I'm frightfully tired of Hedleston and everyone in it. Isn't it worth considering . . . a chance? You know you never make the most of your opportunities."

Page shook his head, ignoring this reference to a familiar and indeed justifiable plaint that "if he had really tried" he might have secured a knighthood at the end of his second term of office as mayor.

"My whole life is in the paper, Alice. And I've made it something, too."

"David could take over."

"Don't be absurd, Alice. If Somerville bought? He wouldn't have a look in. And you know how I've built on him . . . once he's fit again."

"But . . . fifty thousand pounds . . ."

"My dear, if that amount dazzles you, let me assure you the property is worth at least double."

Momentarily she was startled.

"Well," she said, after a pause, during which her look of disappointment gave way to a knowing expression, faint image of that shrewdness with which her father had summed up evidence in the Edinburgh High Court, but which in Alice was so naïve it touched Henry. "Perhaps if you hold off he'll offer more."

"No, Alice," he said mildly. "I told him positively I would never sell."

After this she was silent. She resumed her needle-point, turning the news over and over in her mind. While as yet she did not quite know what to make of it, she was both

excited and displeased by the attitude Henry had taken up. The length and stiffness of her silence—strange in one so voluble—the piqued glances she occasionally darted towards him, the appearance of having withdrawn from something of which she could not approve were, as always, the signs of her disaffection.

Page was annoyed with himself. Surely experience should have taught him the futility of opening his heart to Alice. Yet some unfulfilled need in his nature drove him to it, and always with the same result, a lack of understanding and accord, so that he emerged unsatisfied and chagrined, like a bather who, thinking to refresh himself in cool water, finds that he has plunged into a shallow pond.

At last she said, rather shortly:

"Are you going to Sleedon tomorrow?"

"Of course . . . it's the end of the month. Do you want to come?"

She shook her head. He had known that she would refuse. David's marriage had not satisfied her; there remained a smarting sense of disappointment, the aftermath of frustrated ambition, at what she referred to privately as the "disaster." It was one of her good qualities that she had always wanted the best for her children, and Cora, who, in Henry's view, was most things that a woman should be, did not fulfil those exacting requirements which she had looked for in the wife of her son. The shock of that first meeting, when David appeared, unexpectedly, with a strange young woman, tall, pale, and a little frightened, on his arm, had passed, but there still were difficulties and objections—the word "common", in particular, although never spoken, seemed held back only by an effort that demanded all of Alice's ladylike restraint. Now indeed, the irritation of her mood, for which Henry was responsible, made her suddenly exclaim:

"I wish you'd try and get them into town a little oftener.

Let them come to a dance, or a concert. Be seen with us. People do talk, you know. It's so unnatural, living out there in the wilds. What our friends make of it all I shudder to think."

Wisely, he checked the obvious answer.

"Very well, my dear," he said, "I'll mention it."

II

NEXT DAY CAME FINE and fresh with only a few clouds streaking the blue sky—invigorating weather. Although Page's forebears were strongly evangelical in their beliefs he was not a regular churchgoer. Whenever his wife and Dorothy set off for eleven-o'clock service, he cut some early flowers from the back lawn for Cora, picked up a book that had come in for review that he thought would interest David, and got into the car. Driving quietly out of the garage, along the lane behind the houses, so as not to scandalize the neighbours, he nevertheless failed to escape the eye of Mrs. Harbottle, widow of Bob Harbottle, who had been a close friend of his father's, and the old lady, proceeding slowly to St. Mark's in her Sunday grandeur, acknowledged Henry's greeting with a glance of reproof.

But soon he was on the open road to Sleedon. His troubled mood of the previous evening was gone; he felt unusually free. Bound up in his work, Page had few recreations. Neither golf nor tennis interested him; in fact, he was not cut out for games, being inclined now, although only forty-nine, to some sort of heart condition, which, despite Dr. Bard's head-shaking, he dismissed as more annoying than serious. Henry, in fact, was a quiet sort of chap, born with a retiring disposition and disciplined in his youth by parents who believed strictness to be the basis of a good upbringing. Even when he became mayor, public functions were always an ordeal and Alice frequently had reason to reproach him for what she called his "lack of go." He liked his garden, and grew rather fine pelargoniums in his little greenhouse; poking around for

bits of the old Stafford china he collected was another mild diversion; and he took immense pleasure in arranging the autumn orchestral concerts he had introduced to Hedleston and which were now an annual feature of the town. But above all, he did enjoy getting down to the sea occasionally, especially at Sleedon, which, although so near to Hedleston, remained the most unspoiled fishing village on all the north-east coast. He had known it as a boy, and now his son lived there. But beyond the attachment thus created, the charm of the village was spiritualized for him by the fact that here survived a part of the real old England.

This was Henry's passion, his religion, if you like, his obsession: the England that was, and must one day be again. With quiet sincerity he loved his country, the texture of its earth, the very salt of the sea that washed it. He was not blind to the deterioration which, since the war, had changed the structure of the national life. Yet this could only be, must only be, a temporary aftermath of that Homeric struggle. England would rise again. Her history proved that she had survived even more devastating disasters, when the country lay spent and bloodless, when the outlook seemed clouded beyond hope. Somehow, because she was herself, she had generated fresh life, renewed the cycle of her great tradition and, refusing steadfastly to sink into obscurity, had emerged exultant in the end.

Now the low outline of Sleedon lay before him. The spray was smoking against the breakwater of the harbour as he drove along the front, past the moored smacks and the drying nets, round the whitewashed coastguard station and up the cliff to David's cottage.

As he came over the sandy crest he saw Cora waiting at the gate. Bareheaded, blue-black hair flying about windblown cheeks, her dark red dress moulded upon her long limbs, she seemed to radiate that warmth and tenderness

which had been the restoration of his son. She pressed his hand in both of hers, and even before she said it, he knew she was glad to see him.

"How is he?" he asked.

"A proper good week. He's upstairs now . . . at the writing." As they went in she glanced up at the attic window, from which there came the muted sounds of a Bartók concerto. "I'll call him."

But Page was chary of disturbing David. His book, on pre-Islamic poetry, a subject that had interested him since he was at Balliol, was a stiff proposition. In the past six months he had taught himself three Arabic dialects and was now translating *Kital al-Aghani*, the *Book of Songs*. Better not risk breaking his concentration. Cora saw this hesitation. She smiled.

"Dinner won't be no more than half an hour, anyway."

The daffodils pleased her beyond Henry's expectation. When she had admired and arranged them, in too tight a bunch, she led him into the garden, which lay at the back of the house, protected from the prevailing breeze by a dry stone wall, and showed what she had done in the past week. A new vegetable plot had been prepared and neatly laid out in the somewhat stony enclosure.

"And who did the digging?"

"Me of course." She laughed happily.

"Isn't it too much for you? With the house, and the cooking . . . and David."

"Oh no . . . no. I'm strong, I am. And I'm right fond of the garden." She looked at him shyly, with real feeling. "You see, I didn't never have the chance before."

When she left to go into the kitchen Henry paced up and down the narrow ash path, reflecting, without unkindness, on that "I didn't never." Well, what of it? He'd rather have a good-hearted young woman than a perfect grammarian, especially when that woman was Cora. Soon she was calling him from the back door.