

THE GEORGE AND THE CROWN

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THE GEORGE AND THE CROWN

PROLOGUE

HIS name was Thomas Sheather, and he was born in the Ouse Valley of Sussex, between Lewes and Newhaven—her name was Kitty le Couteur, and she lived at the Pêche à Agneau, in the island of Sark; so it was strange that they should have met and married. Nevertheless, their marriage took place in the little island church of Peter the Fisherman, among the memorials of the drowned, with their refrain: "*Ta voie a été par la mer et tes sentiers dans les grosses eaux.*"

Tom had come to Guernsey in a coaster from Deal, a tramp which had butted her way along the coasts of Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, and Dorset, and then adventured south in the tomato season. There had been a longish wait for repairs at St. Sampson's—the *Queen of the May* had been built for coasting, and the coasts of England, even at Land's End, have no weather like the weather of the Casquets and the Burhous. Tom had spent a great deal of his time ashore, exploring this new island of forts and greenhouses, and he had met Kitty le Couteur at the home of her cousins, the le Cheminants, who kept an eating house in St. Peter Port.

Kitty was small and slim and dark, with big black eyes burning in her pointed face. She wore little dark modest garments with long tight sleeves, and demure aprons of which she was not ashamed. She had never seen a railway, and was afraid to go in a tram-car. She was quite unlike

the girls at home, and her voice was unlike their voices, with its pretty Frenchy accent like the twitter of a bird. She called him Mister Sheeter very sedately, and it was quite three days before he could persuade her to come with him for a walk, and then nothing would make her go out of town. But she told him more about herself this time, about her home in Sark, right away at the Pêche à Agneau, beyond the road's end—about her father who kept the farm, and her brothers Eugene and Philip who sailed the cutter, about her own life, lived between sea and sky, in which this visit to Guernsey was the first adventure.

“My father he not mind me come before, but my brother Eugene and my brother Philip say ‘if you go to Guernsey you meet strangers, and perhaps you marry a stranger, or even an Englishman.’”

Tom cared nothing for brother Eugene nor for brother Philip. Kitty's pale face and dark eyes now held the magic which the sea was beginning to lose. When the *Queen of the May* started north with pounding paddle-boxes and a cargo of tomatoes, she left Tom Sheather behind in the island of forts and greenhouses, taking in his stead a Cornishman who wanted to see his home after ten years of gathering *vraic*. . . . Tom stayed behind as an extra hand for the tomato-picking. He worked on an estate near Torteval, and once a week he crossed over to Sark in the Saturday excursion steamer, and walked along Sark's high backbone to its granite horns, to where Helier le Couteur's house looks over the sloping bracken to Rouge Caneau and Moie de la Bretagne.

He was well received by the old man himself, a kindly, simple creature who loved his daughter and was proud of the admiration she had kindled in the stranger's breast. He could speak very little English, so their intercourse consisted chiefly of bowings and smiles. The brothers were unfortunately more fluent, as a part of their business was to take visitors fishing and sailing, and they were not slow to let Tom hear their disapproval of his courtship.

"Our sister never marry a Guernseyman or an Englishman," said Philip.

"Oh, my gar! she do not," said Eugene.

But she did.

Old Helier was ruler of his household, and when he saw that not only did the stranger love Kitty but that Kitty loved the stranger, he refused to let the island prejudices against England and Guernsey stand in her light. Besides, it was not true, he told his sons, that the stranger was *vagabond*. His parents lived in a comfortable house near the big town of Sussex, and had written the bride's father a very aristocratic letter, which *le ministre* had read to him, and in which they told him of their intention to do well for the young couple. Then why did he go to sea in a dirty coaster and turn tomato-picker, says Eugene? Why, because there are horse-races in England, just as there are in Guernsey, and the young man lost his money at them, just as they do in Guernsey, and ran away to sea rather than face his father afterwards—which shows he had been well brought up. But his father was now ready to forgive him, and was delighted that he should be marrying a good pretty girl like Kitty, whose photograph, taken by a lady visitor, had been sent over for him to see.

So Tom and Kitty were married, in spite of the grumblings of Eugene and Philip, and settled down in one of the outlying cottages of La Belle Hautgarde. Tom helped the old man on his farm, living once more, there in the midst of the sea, a landsman's life; for the brothers would never let him come into their boat.

Time passed, and two children were born, both boys, and both with their mother's black eyes. Tom created illfeeling by the names he chose for them, first Leonard, then Daniel. They were English names—no such names had ever been given to babies in Sark. There every boy was either Peter or William or John if he was not Philip or Eugene or Helier—large clumps of Peters and Williams existing bewilderingly among swarms of Hamons and Carrés. The Sheathers

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already had a foreign surname by the misfortune of their birth, and now their father had doubled their strangerhood at the font.

Then, after five years, Helier le Couteur died, and his farm became the property of Eugene, who had lately married a Hamon and begotten a Peter. Tom Sheather found his position untenable. In his own words, he was fed up. It was all very well to be on your guard with strangers—at home in the farms between Lewes and Newhaven foreigners were generally on trial for a year or two before being absorbed into the local life—but these Sarkies were just about the limit . . . when it came to making foreigners of your own kin. . . . Ever since his marriage, Eugene and Philip had mysteriously forgotten the English language, and as he couldn't learn their outlandish speech, it was impossible even to have a good quarrel. They refused to take him out in the cutter, though everyone knew he was handier with a sail than anyone in this island of toy-boats—they had persisted in treating him, their sister's husband for five years, as an outsider and interloper; and now when the old man, his only friend, was dead, he confessed himself sick of it. Life wasn't worth living in these damned islands. . . . He asked Kitty if she would go home with him to England, and she agreed—for she loved her stranger.

Nevertheless, she would have liked her third child to be born like the others in the little room whose windows were full of the sea; and when he came it was hard to persuade her that he had not taken his fair hair and blue eyes from the new pale country, instead of from his father. She could never quite get used to the pale, clear colours of the downs, to the white cliffs by Newhaven, and the grey, calm sea. But she said she would never go back to Sark—"I never go back now. It is not my country any more." Perhaps this was because—or perhaps it was why—she loved the flaxen child better than either of the black-eyed children born in her father's house.

The old Sheathers had a farm in the parish of Piddinghoe,

almost in the suburbs of Newhaven. The backward growth of the port into the Ouse Valley had greatly improved the value of their land, and they were able to do well for their prodigal, whose return they welcomed. They offered to set him up on a small farm; but Tom had grown tired of farming, just as he had grown tired of the sea—he thought he would like to be an innkeeper for a change. Since his parents were anxious to provide for him, wouldn't they put him into a nice pub? He would like the Crown at Bullockdean, for choice . . . the landlord had just died.

But the price of the Crown, which was a free house with a substantial piece of land attached to it, was too high even for a farmer whose fields are being turned into streets. Another place must be found, and after a time the George Inn, the other public house in Bullockdean, came into the market. It stood almost opposite the Crown, which was certainly a superior concern in every way . . . still, the old George wasn't so bad. It was a tied house, of course, but some people said it was none the worse for that. Tom thought it would be rather fun to see if he couldn't bust the Crown. Also, he had set his heart on establishing himself near Lewes, for he had once again begun to frequent the races, the dim first cause of his romance. Bullockdean was almost midway between Lewes and Newhaven, and Tom saw the George becoming famous as a house of call for sailors and racing men. After all, the Crown was much too high-class for him—too much like a country hotel instead of an honest pub. He liked something livelier.

So after six years beyond the sea, Tom Sheather settled down as landlord of the George at Bullockdean, and had soon forgotten the islands between England and France. The mists of the Ouse Valley blotted out the cliffs of Sark. He never thought of the unfriendly island, of Rouge Terrier or Moie Fans, of the sunset red and black behind Brecqhou, or of Eugene and Philip le Couteur mending their nets and talking to each other in their throaty foreign tongue.

PART I
THE VALLEY

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

THE George was King George the Third, and the Crown was Queen Anne's Crown, and they faced each other across the street of Bullockdean. The George had a face of stucco, cracked and discoloured with age and the mists of the Ouse Valley, and a parapet behind which its old roof rose rakish and wrinkled. The Crown's face was of ruddy brick, gashed with long, deep-set windows, and topped by a huge pediment of new-painted whiteness.

So close and friendly were they that from one bar-parlour you could almost see what was going on in the other—that is, if you cared to look; but on the whole the doings in the bar of the George had very little interest for the bar of the Crown, and contrariwise. The Crown catered chiefly for sedate farmers and good-class visitors from Lewes, Newhaven, and Eastbourne—the George catered for the rowdied elements of all three towns, which frequented it at race-time, and the more disreputable, poaching class of farm labourer. The only occasion when the two inns had had any manner of warfare was when Mr. Munk, the landlord of the Crown, sent over a dignified protest at the noise made by the George's dispersing drunks at closing time; whereat Mr. Sheather, the landlord of the George, had retorted that the sight of the Crown's lady-visitors undressing with the blind up was demoralising his family.

On the whole the neighbourhood disapproved of the George and approved of the Crown, though both were equally frequented by different elements of local society. The stain on the George's sign was drunkenness, and, it was whispered, betting too. Still, as everyone said, what

could you expect from a man like Tom Sheather, who had gone roving in his youth and brought back a wife from foreign parts? It was his own fault if the George was but a sorry pub, while the Crown was very nearly a hotel, with visitors staying all the summer. Visitors would never stay at the George, even if there was room for them, which there was not. Tom Sheather filled the place up with his roughs, such as decent farmers would not drink with. He'd have racing-men from Lewes, a drunken, sharky lot—he'd have sailormen from Newhaven, making a night of it in a hired shay. The Oddfellows had given up meeting at the George ever since the crew of a Margate trawler had insisted on playing their piano for them; and if the Buffaloes still met there it was only because Mr. Batup, their grandmaster, had a liking for old Tom in spite of his rotten ales.

As a matter of fact, most people liked Tom Sheather, though it was agreed that you could never quite trust him, and that you felt sorry for his second boy Daniel, who was always having to play policeman to his dad. The eldest son was married, and had a sad little farm over at Brakey Bottom, beyond Telscombe, while the third boy, Christopher, was no good to anybody. His mother spoilt him, and gossip accused her of having kept him at home by disreputable means, when other women's sons and her own elder boys had gone to the war.

The war had dealt hardly with the George. The suspension of racing, the limitation of the hours in which liquor could be sold, the no-treating order—all had been bad for the George's particular constitution, whereas the Crown had thriven on high prices and a congested population. Also, James Munk had money come to him through his wife, who at her death had left her entire fortune to his enjoyment and disposal. While Tom Sheather had none, for his parents at their death, shortly before the war, were shown not to have dealt very wisely with the landlords of streets, and of the little that they left, nothing remained after a few years' fluency in Tom's hands. It was obvious

that he had not realised his ambition of busting the Crown. But if there was little comfort in the thought that he owed his failure largely to his own mismanagement, there was considerable alleviation in the fact that it troubled him not at all. He still thought the George was a better pub than the Crown—he would rather be in debt to his brewer and have a good crowd of boys round him, than be solvent and honourable like James Munk, and have nothing but a couple of old maids dozing in his parlour—which he had let off to them, so that he and his son Ernley had to sit in the kitchen.

Anyhow Tom was better off in his home and family than poor Munk, whose wife was dead and whose elder son had been killed in the war, leaving him with no one but Ernley, whom everybody knew was rotten—an officer and a gentleman, but rotten. Whereas Tom had a tidy little wife—even if she was growing a bit sharp-tongued these days and inclined to snap her old man's head off—and three spanking boys: Len, who was clever as you made 'em, for all he hadn't been educated at Lancing College like some folks' sons; Dan who was the stoutest, handiest chap between Lewes and the sea; and Kit who was the handsomest . . . He was glad they'd all three come safe through the war, and if ever he wished that the old George was a better paying concern, it was for their sakes . . . He'd have liked to be able to buy Len some new machinery for that farm of his, which wouldn't produce more than one quarter to the acre—and Chris had been badgering him for months because he wanted new breeches and leggings—and it wouldn't have been a bad thing if old Dan could have had a boy to help him in the yard . . . But there you were—times were bad for innkeepers, unless they were foxy like old Munk—and anyhow, it was good to have his three boys under his roof, even if he couldn't give them all he and they wanted. He liked to see them sitting in his bar.

§ 2

They were all three sitting there that evening in February, just twenty minutes before six and opening-time. Len had come over from Telscombe to an auction at Tarring Neville, and was on his way back, disappointed because of high prices. Dan had just come back from Batchelors' Hall over by the Dicker—where he had gone ostensibly to sell a pig, but really, as everyone knew, to court Belle Shackford. Now he was helping Christopher and his mother polish glasses in readiness for six o'clock. The three young Sheathers were much of a middle-size, but they were very different in face and colouring. Leonard and Daniel were both dark, but whereas the former had his mother's sharp nose and chin, the latter had the broad face, short nose, and wide mouth of his Saxon fathers. Christopher was blue-eyed and flaxen, with a weaker version of Dan's blunt nose, and a sulky, inviting mouth.

There was a shuffling, scurrying sound outside, followed by a rap on the door.

"Go see who that is, Dan," said Kitty. "We aren't open yet."

Dan unlocked the door, and revealed an ancient shepherd in charge of some muddy tegs.

"Hullo, Mr. Gadgett! What brings you round at this time?"

"'Tis gone six o'clock, Maas' Sheather."

"Not for half-an-hour," called Kitty from the bar.

Mr. Gadgett consulted an elderly turnip.

"My watch says three o'clock, which means ten minutes past six," he affirmed.

"And my clock says half-past five, which means half-past five," said Kitty.

The old man heaved a deep sigh.

"I comed all the way from Brakey Bottom, and there's a wunnerful lot of mud on the roads. Leastways it wur wunst on the roads—reckon it's all on my boots now."

"Poor old chap," said Tom—"I can't see any harm in serving him. It's nearly opening time."

"Oh, no, Dad, it isn't," said Daniel.

"Besides, if it was," said Len, "even if it was only two minutes to six, you'd be breaking the damn law just the same. The law's a fine thing, ain't it, Mr. Gadgett?"

The shepherd looked confused and weary.

"Wot wud six o'clock, and two o'clock and ten o'clock, I'm wunnerful muddled."

Dan felt sorry for him.

"Maybe we could let you have a cup of tea since it's too early for beer," he suggested.

"Well, you go into the kitchen and make it," said his mother, "since you're the only one who's doing nothing."

This statement was open to challenge, but Dan accepted it good-humouredly.

"I'm a fine handy one with the tea, ain't I, Mum? . . . You come around to the kitchen door, Mr. Gadgett, and I'll give you as good as ale."

When he was gone, Leonard took his pipe out of his mouth.

"This is an all-fool's game with the clock. I wonder you stick it, Dad. If I was you I'd kick for my right to sell my own beer at my own time."

"It ain't my own beer, seeing I haven't paid for it yet."

"Maybe you could pay for it easy enough if they didn't tie you hand and foot in your trade. I tell you, this sort of thing makes me sick. Us working like slaves, and getting nothing but abuse and interference . . . they said, 'Come and fight for your country and we'll give you a country fit for heroes.' Now they say, 'You've fought for your country—thanks—now get out of it.' They tell us strong chaps to go and emigrate, and I'm——"

"Well, I'd do it for two pins."

"Don't you make him think of it," cried Kitty.

"He won't be such a fool. Besides, it isn't the same