

# *The Feast of July*

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# I

SHE was looking for a man named Arch Wilson and she was walking south-westward, alone, towards the middle of the country, with another fifty or sixty miles to go.

All day, after two days and nights of rain, water had been rising in the dykes, and now it was creeping rapidly up the five stone arches of the bridge where she stood watching the wide rainy valley up which the tongue of river finally lost itself in a grey country of winter elms.

Down below her was a boat, partly covered by a green tarpaulin. She had some crazy idea that she could sleep in the boat. As far as she could tell there were no oars in it. The mooring chain was padlocked to an ash-stake driven in the mud. It was fifteen or twenty feet from the boat to the water's edge and beyond it, high up, was an open wooden shed. Inside the shed was a second boat and she was wondering if the oars too could be there. She was wondering too how hard a kick it would need to break the ash-stake out of the mud. Fifty or sixty yards beyond the shed was a house, a low yellow-brick blue-slatted house with a big cheese of a grindstone standing in the yard outside, and she was watching that too.

She walked along the bridge, slowly. She was not a tall girl but she walked as a tall girl does, upright, feeling her way, bare head thrown up and backwards. Her hands were small and slender. She was carrying everything she had in a black oilcloth bag she had taken from the cellar of The Three Bells hotel, where she had been working all summer as a bedroom maid, and there was a smell of beer on the bag that the rain had still not washed away.

At the end of the bridge she stood for nearly five minutes watching for a sign from the house. All the time she was thinking that if only she could kick the stake out of the mud the boat would be easy. She could take it upstream for a mile or two and sleep under the tarpaulin. She was used to boats. From the windows of The Three Bells you looked across flat lands, downstream to the sea, and there were sea-fish in the estuary. Men came down from towns in the upper valley for a week or two of fishing in the summer, hiring boats from the hotel, and Arch Wilson had been one of them in July.

'Arch Wilson. I'll be coming down again in a month. I'll drop you a card when I know the day.'

In summer the wide flat lands were blue-grey with sea-thistle. She remembered how the dry spines had pricked the bare gap of her thighs above her black stockings as she lay with him there under a breezy sky.

'You know what colour your eyes are?'

'Green.' She remembered laughing easily, as she always laughed in those days, with her tongue out. 'That's every bit green you can see there.'

'They're black,' he said. 'Black as cherries. That's what they are.'

'They're green,' she said, 'all green when you talk to me.'

'I'll be back in a month and I'll bring you a pair of shoes. Low shoes. Glacé.'

'I bet you'll never be back.'

'August,' he said. 'The second week in August. What size are your feet?'

'You're a shoemaker. You ought to know.'

'God, your eyes are black,' he said and she laughed, again in the warm, easy friendly way she had in those days.

But it was really the feeling of his hands on her stock-

inged feet, she remembered, and then the feeling of soft fresh sea-wind on the bare skin of her legs that really woke her. She remembered beginning to tremble all over. 'Threes,' he said. 'Narrow fitting. No bigger than a doll's.'

She took a last look at the house and slid down the bank. At the foot of the bank she could see the print of earwig bores on the ash-stake that held the boat and she knew that it was rotten. She kicked hard and felt her body wrench sharply as she turned and slipped in the mud but the stake split with a crack that woke a screaming voice from the yard behind the grindstone:

'You git outa there, burn you! I bin watching you! Git out on it!'

Along the bank a big grey woman came swinging a hatchet in one hand and a split white billet of ash in the other.

'You git shut where you belong! You don't belong here, do you? You ain't from here, I know.'

The girl was back up the bank, slithering in mud, running. The woman was running too, with big clubbing strides that shook her skirt, and the white cleft billet came flashing through the rainy air.

'We had boats nicked afore! Git out on it afore you git the chopper at you!'

The woman stood at one end of the bridge, coughing, breathing sharply through her teeth, long heavy arms swinging like a bear's. The girl stood at the other, turning, walking backwards.

'You're a rare looking jinny an' all, ain't you? Where you from? Where's your hat?'

She came a yard or two farther up the crest of the bridge, menacing, coughing, swinging the hatchet.

'Where's your hat? That ain't it, is 't, under your ap'on?'

The girl turned her back, walking in her tall, upright fashion, feeling her way, black head held up.



'Ain't no use turning your back on me either. I can see it's big enough.'


She stood with the hatchet at her side, spitting:

'And you needn't gline back at me neither. You git no pity from me. You go an' lay where you should do afore you drop it in a field.'

Through spits of rain the voice followed the girl for a long time down the road. She stood for some time against a field-gate, panting for breath, holding her body sickly, not caring about the rain. She felt the flooded fields swing about her in the darkening afternoon, blotting out her sense of direction, so that when she began to walk again it was the wrong way, stupidly and blindly, back towards the bridge.

It was only when she reached the bridge that she came to her senses. She was sharply aware then of another sound cutting harshly through the dying February afternoon.

It was the sound of the hatchet, shrill on the grindstone.



Snow began to fall a day later as she came to a higher stretch of pasture country where the fields were no longer divided by water dykes but by walls of stone. There were many sheep in the fields in that part of the country and as the wind sharpened, turning north-westward, spitting at first little frozen bullets of snow, she saw them huddling closer and closer under the lee of the walls, stone and wool the same grey-yellow colour against the pure fresh snow.

By four o'clock in the afternoon the front of her body was like a long curved white apron. Her skirt was of thick heavy black serge that came down to her ankles and her jacket was wide-shouldered, with big sleeves and frogs of braid, black too, across the bodice. The only thing she was wearing about her neck was a pair of black woollen stockings she had taken out of her bag that morning and underneath them a flat jet necklace. She was wearing the necklace because it was something Arch Wilson had given her and because she knew that he liked it.

'You said I wouldn't come back but I did. You said I wouldn't bring the shoes but I did, didn't I?'

She had brought the small shining glacé shoes with her too in the sack. He had made them himself, he said. They had on them small square buckles of silvery metal, with insets of glittering glass that she thought were very beautiful, and in them her feet looked smaller and more delicate than ever.

'And I bought you something else,' he said.

'What else? I don't want nothing else. The shoes are enough. The shoes are wonderful.'

'I'll give it to you tonight,' he said.

Her small slant-sided bedroom was in the top of the hotel; she had told him where it was. That night she could not sleep because she was so excited about the shoes and she remembered how she sat on the edge of the bed and looked at them over and over in the candlelight and how it seemed to her hardly possible to believe that there were such shoes.

Then he was in her room. 'I came to ask you something,' he said.

'You shouldn't come up here. People will hear. The landlord will hear. What is it you want to ask me?'

'I'm coming up again in a fortnight,' he said. 'What say we get married then?'

'Me? Married? You know how old I am? I'm eighteen. I'm only eighteen.'

'You look older. You look like a woman already,' he said.

Some time later she felt something against the cool skin of her throat in the darkness. 'Guess what it is,' he said. In the warm summer air the band of jet was cool on her throat and she began trembling again as he fastened it with his hands. It did not seem to her possible that a girl could be given such things as shoes and a necklace in a single day.

'I want to look at you,' he said and presently she was lying there in the candlelight, with nothing on except the band of jet round her throat, her taut rounded young body stiffening and trembling and relaxing as he kept repeating her name:

'Bella. Bella. Oh! Bella,' he said.

Under snow the afternoon began to darken early and some time after four o'clock she was sitting in a stone hovel that had a half-door and a roof thatched with blackthorn. There were many sheep clustered under the wall outside and under the lee of a haystack that stood beside a pond. Inside there was a bale or two of dry straw and a pile of

swedes and in one wall a stone hearth with a chimney hole where fires had been made.

She had taken matches and candle from her bedroom and presently she was burning the broken slats of a sheep-hurdle, starting the fire with straw. She was afraid to light the candle but as she began to dry her bag and the things she had in it and then her high lace-up boots she felt more confident and no longer afraid. In her bag she had, besides her shoes and a picture of herself, a towel and half a loaf of bread and a knife and part of a bottle of small beer she had drawn from the cask in the cellar at the hotel.

She cut herself a slice of bread and then found a swede and cut a slice from the centre of it and ate it with the bread. She could not hear the snow. Outside there was a queer wiry sound that she could not understand for some time until at last she knew it for the sound of wind scraping together the tall canes of reed that skirted the pond. When she stood by the half-door she could hear too the labouring breath of sheep as they grunted by the wall.

She did not know how late it was when she lay down in front of the fire on a pile of straw. She was not sleepy so much as stupefied and dazed and she could feel sometimes a pull of pain in her side, like a tightening knot, where she had slipped in the mud by the river.

She lay thinking again of Arch Wilson. 'Everybody in Nenweald's a shoemaker,' he said. 'Or a tanner. They get the water from the river.'

'Our river? The same one? This one?'

Yes, he told her, the same river; and it was afterwards when she remembered it that she knew the way she had to go. 'I only have to follow the river,' she thought, 'I shall get to it in time if I follow the river.'

As she remembered this she remembered her mother. 'You git no pity from me. I ain't the pityin' sort. I got no

pity.' Her mother was a prematurely grey round-shouldered woman who had married a second time. Her step-father was an out-of-work carter who had sat for the whole winter with his feet on the steel kitchen fender, smoking a short blackened clay and spitting at the fire while her mother went out and worked at scrubbing. When spring came her sister had left home to get married to a railway clerk and a week later she herself had left to work in the hotel. It was a very good job at the hotel; she was very pleased to get it: sixteen pounds a year and three meals a day and beer if she was a mind to have it every morning at eleven o'clock with her bread and cheese.

Her sister was a placid, gentle, totally unaggressive woman nearly ten years older than herself who cried a great deal when she heard of the baby.

'You can have it here. You can live with us,' she said.

'No: I'll find him. If he doesn't come to me I'll go to him. I'll find him somehow.'

'Yes, but how? - if he don't come? - where?'

'I'll find him.'

'And what about money? You got nothing. You only just started.'

'I'll find him,' she said, 'if I have to walk it every step of the way.'

All the money she had in the end was a little over three pounds, two of which her sister had given her and the rest of which she had saved herself. It was hardly enough for her food and lodging and train-fare if she wanted to come back again. That was why she had taken the train for five miles and then had got out and started to walk, glad that the morning was fine and bright and feeling that if the weather and her luck held she could do the journey in five or six days.

Then the rain came, driven down the valley on a cold

white-wind gale that hit the river into waves. It scoured the flesh of her face as she walked against it. It blew away her hat on the second day and drowned it like a tossed black-sailed boat in a dyke high in flood. It tired her greatly and she faced it as obstinately as she had faced her sister, pleading first with her not to go, and then, if she had to go, always to remember that she could come back to her.

'I'll be here. There'll be a bed for you here. If you don't find him you can always come back here.'

'I'll find him,' she said. 'I'll find him if I have to walk the length of the country.'

There was still another thing she remembered as she lay before the fire. It was the soft, thick, malty way he had of talking. She could still feel the slimy way the syllables folded themselves about her mind and her heart. The lips under the edges of the sharp brown moustache were full and fleshy and yet they hardly moved as they framed his words. The lids of his white-blue brilliant eyes also gave a slurred and casual effect to his way of looking at her. The unflickering too-brilliant pupils seemed always to lock her own eyes in a mesmeric gaze. 'When you look at me like that,' she had said, 'I feel I can't get away. I don't want to. I feel you've always got me.'

It was three or four hours later when she got up for the third time to break another of the hurdle slats to make up the fire. She tried to break the slat by scotching it against the wall and hitting it with her foot. This time the slat was springy and she slipped as she kicked it and a fresh pain stabbed up through her body as if the slat had impaled her.

She lay down by the fire again, half on her face, struggling with the pain, sweating. She felt the pain recede and advance in a series of dragging and regular waves. It was no longer like the gentle pull of the baby turning inside her:

the sensation she had known all winter, discomforting and scaring her as she lay alone at night, really more a pain of the mind. It was now as if part of her body were being dragged away from her and after a time she turned on her back and lay with her feet against the wall, pressing them hard against the stone, moaning in sweat.

Then the fire began to go down and in the half-darkness she crawled about the floor searching for wood to make it up again. A thin drift of snow had blown in under the crack of the door again and she could hear the low wiry whistle of the wind in the pond reeds. The swede she had cut open to eat with her bread lay on the floor, the cut side almost frozen, and as she touched it accidentally it woke a great shudder in her throat and the shudder in turn became the beginning of a great cold wave of fright because she did not know what to do.

'Oh! God. God, oh! God,' she kept saying. Almost without knowing it she kept the swede in her hand, clutching it for the sake of something to hold, and once she bit her teeth into it so that she should not cry.

Then at last she began to cry. She remembered somehow taking off her thick serge skirt and half-covering her face with it and screaming into it, weeping and terrified. She could feel the ooze of blood on her legs and the scorching of her olives through her stockings as she rolled against the fire. The pain of burning was almost a comfort against the pain of her body contracting and convulsing and then presently she could feel even that no longer.

When she came to herself again the fire was out and the thin drift of snow under the doorway had grown to the shape of a scythe three or four inches high. Her face was covered with her skirt. She was still clutching the swede in her hand. Her feet were still pressed against the side of the stone fireplace and in the air, freezing and windless after

snow, there was a sick dry odour of scorching where her stockings had burned.

After she had remembered the knife in the sack she lay there for a long time in the growing daylight, too weak to let it drop from her hands. She stared up at the black canopy of bushes that thatched the hovel and cried again without a sound or even a sensation of grief as she thought of Arch Wilson.

'If you were here I'd kill you,' she thought. She felt the frozen draught of air cutting across the earth floor into her bloodless face. She felt herself sobbing in a stark space of emptiness, still clutching the knife in her hand.

'You did this to me,' she thought. 'You did this to me and if you were here I'd kill you.'

She thought of the shoes and the necklace. She remembered the slurred malty voice talking to her as she lay among the sea-thistle, in the summer, by the mouth of the river, under the waking sea-wind. She remembered crying to him in the darkness 'I'm eighteen. I'm only eighteen,' and the way she had lain in the candlelight with nothing on her body but the jet necklace cool and black round her throat and the way he had called her name.

Outside she could hear, by this time, the sheep stirring and panting in the snow and she was suddenly ashamed and frightened that someone would arrive and find her there.

'I'll find you,' she said. She lay in a pool of weakness where her bitterness was separate, outside of her, darkly and terribly apart. She was so tired that when she struggled first to her knees and then her feet, trying to put on her skirt, she could not hold the skirt and it dropped out of her hands as if they were paper.

'I was proud until this happened,' she thought. 'I had some pride until you did this to me.'

Her sobbing, laboured and choking, was like the echo of



the waking sheep as they coughed dryly and harshly outside, in the snow.

'I'll find you. I'll find you and some day I'll kill you,' she said.

It was more than a week later when she came up the long slope of the valley-side, between five and six in the evening, towards the outskirts of Nenweald. She still gave the impression of being taller than she was, walking with her head back, feeling her way. The snow of the week before had melted in most of the open places but under the high hedgerows it still lay in long pure slices and sometimes out in the open ploughed clay lands it still stretched away in thin white bars.

She had got into a way of walking without thought, mindlessly, not troubling about distances. Her face had been fined down by exhaustion to pure bone with a taut covering of skin that was yellow and transparent, like a worn cake of soap. Her eyes were like a pair of smoky glasses and an unconscious habit of suddenly stabbing forward with her long thin hands, into empty air, made it seem as if she were frightened of falling down.

Walking like this she was surprised suddenly to see the town before her on the crest above the river. It was still not quite dark and in her pride she stopped by a gate to comb her hair. She had nothing to tie the straight mass of it back except a piece of her boot-lace that had broken off two days before and her hands were still so weak that it was a long time before she could tie the knot securely.

Twice she let the lace fall through sheer weakness out of her hands. The second time, as she stooped to pick it up, groping in mud and snow, she felt the blood drain out of her face, leaving her faint and cold. She shut her eyes for a few moments, clinging to the gate, and when she opened