CHAPTER III. "THE LIGHTED TREE"

It is remarkable how many odd or extraordinary people there are in England. We hear continual complaints of the stodgy dullness of the English. It would be quite as just to complain of their freakish, unusual characters. Only en masse the metal is all Britannia.

In an ugly little mining town we find the odd ones just as distinct as anywhere else. Only it happens that dull people invariably meet dull people, and odd individuals always come across odd individuals, no matter where they may be. So that to each kind society seems all of a piece.

At one end of the dark tree-covered Shottle Lane stood the "Royal Oak" public house; and Mrs. Houseley was certainly an odd woman. At the other end of the lane was Shottle House, where the Bricknells lived; the Bricknells were odd, also. Alfred Bricknell, the old man, was one of the partners in the Colliery firm. His English was incorrect, his accent, broad Derbyshire, and he was not a gentleman in the snobbish sense of the word. Yet he was well-to-do, and very stuck-up. His wife was dead.

Shottle House stood two hundred yards beyond New Brunswick Colliery. The colliery was imbedded in a plantation, whence its burning pit-hill glowed, fumed, and stank sulphur in the nostrils of the Bricknells. Even war-time efforts had not put out this refuse fire. Apart from this,

Shottle House was a pleasant square house, rather old, with shrubberies and lawns. It ended the lane in a dead end. Only a field-path trekked away to the left.

On this particular Christmas Eve Alfred Bricknell had only two of his children at home. Of the others, one daughter was unhappily married, and away in India weeping herself thinner; another was nursing her babies in Streatham. Jim, the hope of the house, and Julia, now married to Robert Cunningham, had come home for Christmas.

The party was seated in the drawing-room, that the grown-up daughters had made very fine during their periods of courtship. Its walls were hung with fine grey canvas, it had a large, silvery grey, silky carpet, and the furniture was covered with dark green silky material. Into this reticence pieces of futurism, Omega cushions and Van-Gogh-like pictures exploded their colours. Such chic would certainly not have been looked for up Shottle Lane.

The old man sat in his high grey arm-chair very near an enormous coal fire. In this house there was no coal-rationing. The finest coal was arranged to obtain a gigantic glow such as a coal-owner may well enjoy, a great, intense mass of pure red fire. At this fire Alfred Bricknell toasted his tan, lambs-wool-lined slippers.

He was a large man, wearing a loose grey suit, and sprawling in the large grey arm-chair. The soft lamp-light fell on his clean, bald,

Michael-Angelo head, across which a few pure hairs glittered. His chin was sunk on his breast, so that his sparse but strong-haired white beard, in which every strand stood distinct, like spun glass lithe and elastic, curved now upwards and inwards, in a curious curve returning upon him. He seemed to be sunk in stern, prophet-like meditation. As a matter of fact, he was asleep after a heavy meal.

Across, seated on a pouffe on the other side of the fire, was a cameo-like girl with neat black hair done tight and bright in the French mode. She had strangely-drawn eyebrows, and her colour was brilliant. She was hot, leaning back behind the shaft of old marble of the mantel-piece, to escape the fire. She wore a simple dress of apple-green satin, with full sleeves and ample skirt and a tiny bodice of green cloth. This was Josephine Ford, the girl Jim was engaged to.

Jim Bricknell himself was a tall big fellow of thirty-eight. He sat in a chair in front of the fire, some distance back, and stretched his long legs far in front of him. His chin too was sunk on his breast, his young forehead was bald, and raised in odd wrinkles, he had a silent half-grin on his face, a little tipsy, a little satyr-like. His small moustache was reddish.

Behind him a round table was covered with cigarettes, sweets, and bottles. It was evident Jim Bricknell drank beer for choice. He wanted to get fat--that was his idea. But he couldn't bring it off: he was thin, though not too thin, except to his own thinking.

His sister Julia was bunched up in a low chair between him and his father. She too was a tall stag of a thing, but she sat bunched up like a witch. She wore a wine-purple dress, her arms seemed to poke out of the sleeves, and she had dragged her brown hair into straight, untidy strands. Yet she had real beauty. She was talking to the young man who was not her husband: a fair, pale, fattish young fellow in pince-nez and dark clothes. This was Cyril Scott, a friend.

The only other person stood at the round table pouring out red wine. He was a fresh, stoutish young Englishman in khaki, Julia's husband, Robert Cunningham, a lieutenant about to be demobilised, when he would become a sculptor once more. He drank red wine in large throatfuls, and his eyes grew a little moist. The room was hot and subdued, everyone was silent.

"I say," said Robert suddenly, from the rear--"anybody have a drink? Don't you find it rather hot?"

"Is there another bottle of beer there?" said Jim, without moving, too settled even to stir an eye-lid.

"Yes--I think there is," said Robert.

"Thanks--don't open it yet," murmured Jim.

"Have a drink, Josephine?" said Robert.

"No thank you," said Josephine, bowing slightly.

Finding the drinks did not go, Robert went round with the cigarettes. Josephine Ford looked at the white rolls.

"Thank you," she said, and taking one, suddenly licked her rather full, dry red lips with the rapid tip of her tongue. It was an odd movement, suggesting a snake's flicker. She put her cigarette between her lips, and waited. Her movements were very quiet and well bred; but perhaps too quiet, they had the dangerous impassivity of the Bohemian, Parisian or American rather than English.

"Cigarette, Julia?" said Robert to his wife.

She seemed to start or twitch, as if dazed. Then she looked up at her husband with a queer smile, puckering the corners of her eyes. He looked at the cigarettes, not at her. His face had the blunt voluptuous gravity of a young lion, a great cat. She kept him standing for some moments impassively. Then suddenly she hung her long, delicate fingers over the box, in doubt, and spasmodically jabbed at the cigarettes, clumsily raking one out at last.

"Thank you, dear--thank you," she cried, rather high, looking up and smiling once more. He turned calmly aside, offering the cigarettes to Scott, who refused.

"Oh!" said Julia, sucking the end of her cigarette. "Robert is so happy with all the good things--aren't you dear?" she sang, breaking into a hurried laugh. "We aren't used to such luxurious living, we aren't--ARE WE DEAR--No, we're not such swells as this, we're not. Oh, ROBBIE, isn't it all right, isn't it just all right?" She tailed off into her hurried, wild, repeated laugh. "We're so happy in a land of plenty, AREN'T WE DEAR?"

"Do you mean I'm greedy, Julia?" said Robert.

"Greedy!--Oh, greedy!--he asks if he's greedy?--no you're not greedy, Robbie, you're not greedy. I want you to be happy."

"I'm quite happy," he returned.

"Oh, he's happy!--Really!--he's happy! Oh, what an accomplishment! Oh, my word!" Julia puckered her eyes and laughed herself into a nervous twitching silence.

Robert went round with the matches. Julia sucked her cigarette.

"Give us a light, Robbie, if you ARE happy!" she cried.

"It's coming," he answered.

Josephine smoked with short, sharp puffs. Julia sucked wildly at her light. Robert returned to his red wine. Jim Bricknell suddenly roused up, looked round on the company, smiling a little vacuously and showing his odd, pointed teeth.

"Where's the beer?" he asked, in deep tones, smiling full into Josephine's face, as if she were going to produce it by some sleight of hand. Then he wheeled round to the table, and was soon pouring beer down his throat as down a pipe. Then he dropped supine again. Cyril Scott was silently absorbing gin and water.

"I say," said Jim, from the remote depths of his sprawling. "Isn't there something we could do to while the time away?"

Everybody suddenly laughed--it sounded so remote and absurd.

"What, play bridge or poker or something conventional of that sort?" said Josephine in her distinct voice, speaking to him as if he were a child.

"Oh, damn bridge," said Jim in his sleep-voice. Then he began pulling his powerful length together. He sat on the edge of his chair-seat, leaning forward, peering into all the faces and grinning.

"Don't look at me like that--so long--" said Josephine, in her self-contained voice. "You make me uncomfortable." She gave an odd

little grunt of a laugh, and the tip of her tongue went over her lips as she glanced sharply, half furtively round the room.

"I like looking at you," said Jim, his smile becoming more malicious.

"But you shouldn't, when I tell you not," she returned.

Jim twisted round to look at the state of the bottles. The father also came awake. He sat up.

"Isn't it time," he said, "that you all put away your glasses and cigarettes and thought of bed?"

Jim rolled slowly round towards his father, sprawling in the long chair.

"Ah, Dad," he said, "tonight's the night! Tonight's some night, Dad.--You can sleep any time--" his grin widened--"but there aren't many nights to sit here--like this--Eh?"

He was looking up all the time into the face of his father, full and nakedly lifting his face to the face of his father, and smiling fixedly. The father, who was perfectly sober, except for the contagion from the young people, felt a wild tremor go through his heart as he gazed on the face of his boy. He rose stiffly.

"You want to stay?" he said. "You want to stay!--Well then--well then,

I'll leave you. But don't be long." The old man rose to his full height, rather majestic. The four younger people also rose respectfully--only Jim lay still prostrate in his chair, twisting up his face towards his father.

"You won't stay long," said the old man, looking round a little bewildered. He was seeking a responsible eye. Josephine was the only one who had any feeling for him.

"No, we won't stay long, Mr. Bricknell," she said gravely.

"Good night, Dad," said Jim, as his father left the room.

Josephine went to the window. She had rather a stiff, poupee walk.

"How is the night?" she said, as if to change the whole feeling in the room. She pushed back the thick grey-silk curtains. "Why?" she exclaimed. "What is that light burning? A red light?"

"Oh, that's only the pit-bank on fire," said Robert, who had followed her.

"How strange!--Why is it burning now?"

"It always burns, unfortunately--it is most consistent at it. It is the refuse from the mines. It has been burning for years, in spite of all

efforts to the contrary."

"How very curious! May we look at it?" Josephine now turned the handle of the French windows, and stepped out.

"Beautiful!" they heard her voice exclaim from outside.

In the room, Julia laid her hand gently, protectively over the hand of Cyril Scott.

"Josephine and Robert are admiring the night together!" she said, smiling with subtle tenderness to him.

"Naturally! Young people always do these romantic things," replied Cyril Scott. He was twenty-two years old, so he could afford to be cynical.

"Do they?--Don't you think it's nice of them?" she said, gently removing her hand from his. His eyes were shining with pleasure.

"I do. I envy them enormously. One only needs to be sufficiently naive," he said.

"One does, doesn't one!" cooed Julia.

"I say, do you hear the bells?" said Robert, poking his head into the room.

"No, dear! Do you?" replied Julia.

"Bells! Hear the bells! Bells!" exclaimed the half-tipsy and self-conscious Jim. And he rolled in his chair in an explosion of sudden, silent laughter, showing his mouthful of pointed teeth, like a dog. Then he gradually gathered himself together, found his feet, smiling fixedly.

"Pretty cool night!" he said aloud, when he felt the air on his almost bald head. The darkness smelt of sulphur.

Josephine and Robert had moved out of sight. Julia was abstracted, following them with her eyes. With almost supernatural keenness she seemed to catch their voices from the distance.

"Yes, Josephine, WOULDN'T that be AWFULLY ROMANTIC!"--she suddenly called shrilly.

The pair in the distance started.

"What--!" they heard Josephine's sharp exclamation.

"What's that?--What would be romantic?" said Jim as he lurched up and caught hold of Cyril Scott's arm.

"Josephine wants to make a great illumination of the grounds of the estate," said Julia, magniloquent.

"No--no--I didn't say it," remonstrated Josephine.

"What Josephine said," explained Robert, "was simply that it would be pretty to put candles on one of the growing trees, instead of having a Christmas-tree indoors."

"Oh, Josephine, how sweet of you!" cried Julia.

Cyril Scott giggled.

"Good egg! Champion idea, Josey, my lass. Eh? What--!" cried Jim. "Why not carry it out--eh? Why not? Most attractive." He leaned forward over Josephine, and grinned.

"Oh, no!" expostulated Josephine. "It all sounds so silly now. No. Let us go indoors and go to bed."

"NO, Josephine dear--No! It's a LOVELY IDEA!" cried Julia. "Let's get candles and lanterns and things--"

"Let's!" grinned Jim. "Let's, everybody--let's."

"Shall we really?" asked Robert. "Shall we illuminate one of the

fir-trees by the lawn?"

"Yes! How lovely!" cried Julia. "I'll fetch the candles."

"The women must put on warm cloaks," said Robert.

They trooped indoors for coats and wraps and candles and lanterns. Then, lighted by a bicycle lamp, they trooped off to the shed to twist wire round the candles for holders. They clustered round the bench.

"I say," said Julia, "doesn't Cyril look like a pilot on a stormy night! Oh, I say--!" and she went into one of her hurried laughs.

They all looked at Cyril Scott, who was standing sheepishly in the background, in a very large overcoat, smoking a large pipe. The young man was uncomfortable, but assumed a stoic air of philosophic indifference.

Soon they were busy round a prickly fir-tree at the end of the lawn. Jim stood in the background vaguely staring. The bicycle lamp sent a beam of strong white light deep into the uncanny foliage, heads clustered and hands worked. The night above was silent, dim. There was no wind. In the near distance they could hear the panting of some engine at the colliery.

"Shall we light them as we fix them," asked Robert, "or save them for

one grand rocket at the end?"

"Oh, as we do them," said Cyril Scott, who had lacerated his fingers and wanted to see some reward.

A match spluttered. One naked little flame sprang alight among the dark foliage. The candle burned tremulously, naked. They all were silent.

"We ought to do a ritual dance! We ought to worship the tree," sang Julia, in her high voice.

"Hold on a minute. We'll have a little more illumination," said Robert.

"Why yes. We want more than one candle," said Josephine.

But Julia had dropped the cloak in which she was huddled, and with arms slung asunder was sliding, waving, crouching in a pas seul before the tree, looking like an animated bough herself.

Jim, who was hugging his pipe in the background, broke into a short, harsh, cackling laugh.

"Aren't we fools!" he cried. "What? Oh, God's love, aren't we fools!"

"No--why?" cried Josephine, amused but resentful.

But Jim vouchsafed nothing further, only stood like a Red Indian gripping his pipe.

The beam of the bicycle-lamp moved and fell upon the hands and faces of the young people, and penetrated the recesses of the secret trees. Several little tongues of flame clipped sensitive and ruddy on the naked air, sending a faint glow over the needle foliage. They gave a strange, perpendicular aspiration in the night. Julia waved slowly in her tree dance. Jim stood apart, with his legs straddled, a motionless figure.

The party round the tree became absorbed and excited as more ruddy tongues of flame pricked upward from the dark tree. Pale candles became evident, the air was luminous. The illumination was becoming complete, harmonious.

Josephine suddenly looked round.

"Why-y-y!" came her long note of alarm.

A man in a bowler hat and a black overcoat stood on the edge of the twilight.

"What is it?" cried Julia.

"Homo sapiens!" said Robert, the lieutenant. "Hand the light, Cyril."
He played the beam of light full on the intruder; a man in a bowler hat,

with a black overcoat buttoned to his throat, a pale, dazed, blinking face. The hat was tilted at a slightly jaunty angle over the left eye, the man was well-featured. He did not speak.

"Did you want anything?" asked Robert, from behind the light.

Aaron Sisson blinked, trying to see who addressed him. To him, they were all illusory. He did not answer.

"Anything you wanted?" repeated Robert, military, rather peremptory.

Jim suddenly doubled himself up and burst into a loud harsh cackle of laughter. Whoop! he went, and doubled himself up with laughter. Whoop! Whoop! he went, and fell on the ground and writhed with laughter. He was in that state of intoxication when he could find no release from maddening self-consciousness. He knew what he was doing, he did it deliberately. And yet he was also beside himself, in a sort of hysterics. He could not help himself in exasperated self-consciousness.

The others all began to laugh, unavoidably. It was a contagion. They laughed helplessly and foolishly. Only Robert was anxious.

"I'm afraid he'll wake the house," he said, looking at the doubled up figure of Jim writhing on the grass and whooping loudly.

"Or not enough," put in Cyril Scott. He twigged Jim's condition.

"No--no!" cried Josephine, weak with laughing in spite of herself. "No--it's too long--I'm like to die laughing--"

Jim embraced the earth in his convulsions. Even Robert shook quite weakly with laughter. His face was red, his eyes full of dancing water. Yet he managed to articulate.

"I say, you know, you'll bring the old man down." Then he went off again into spasms.

"Hu! Hu!" whooped Jim, subsiding. "Hu!"

He rolled over on to his back, and lay silent. The others also became weakly silent.

"What's amiss?" said Aaron Sisson, breaking this spell.

They all began to laugh again, except Jim, who lay on his back looking up at the strange sky.

"What're you laughing at?" repeated Aaron.

"We're laughing at the man on the ground," replied Josephine. "I think he's drunk a little too much."

"Ay," said Aaron, standing mute and obstinate.

"Did you want anything?" Robert enquired once more.

"Eh?" Aaron looked up. "Me? No, not me." A sort of inertia kept him rooted. The young people looked at one another and began to laugh, rather embarrassed.

"Another!" said Cyril Scott cynically.

They wished he would go away. There was a pause.

"What do you reckon stars are?" asked the sepulchral voice of Jim. He still lay flat on his back on the grass.

Josephine went to him and pulled at his coat.

"Get up," she said. "You'll take cold. Get up now, we're going indoors."

"What do you reckon stars are?" he persisted.

Aaron Sisson stood on the edge of the light, smilingly staring at the scene, like a boy out of his place, but stubbornly keeping his ground.

"Get up now," said Josephine. "We've had enough." But Jim would not move.

Robert went with the bicycle lamp and stood at Aaron's side.

"Shall I show you a light to the road--you're off your track," he said. "You're in the grounds of Shottle House."

"I can find my road," said Aaron. "Thank you."

Jim suddenly got up and went to peer at the stranger, poking his face close to Aaron's face.

"Right-o," he replied. "You're not half a bad sort of chap--Cheery-o! What's your drink?"

"Mine--whiskey," said Aaron.

"Come in and have one. We're the only sober couple in the bunch--what?" cried Jim.

Aaron stood unmoving, static in everything. Jim took him by the arm affectionately. The stranger looked at the flickering tree, with its tiers of lights.

"A Christmas tree," he said, jerking his head and smiling.

"That's right, old man," said Jim, seeming thoroughly sober now. "Come

indoors and have a drink."

Aaron Sisson negatively allowed himself to be led off. The others followed in silence, leaving the tree to flicker the night through. The stranger stumbled at the open window-door.

"Mind the step," said Jim affectionately.

They crowded to the fire, which was still hot. The newcomer looked round vaguely. Jim took his bowler hat and gave him a chair. He sat without looking round, a remote, abstract look on his face. He was very pale, and seemed-inwardly absorbed.

The party threw off their wraps and sat around. Josephine turned to Aaron Sisson, who sat with a glass of whiskey in his hand, rather slack in his chair, in his thickish overcoat. He did not want to drink. His hair was blond, quite tidy, his mouth and chin handsome but a little obstinate, his eyes inscrutable. His pallor was not natural to him. Though he kept the appearance of a smile, underneath he was hard and opposed. He did not wish to be with these people, and yet, mechanically, he stayed.

"Do you feel quite well?" Josephine asked him.

He looked at her quickly.

"Me?" he said. He smiled faintly. "Yes, I'm all right." Then he dropped his head again and seemed oblivious.

"Tell us your name," said Jim affectionately.

The stranger looked up.

"My name's Aaron Sisson, if it's anything to you," he said.

Jim began to grin.

"It's a name I don't know," he said. Then he named all the party present. But the stranger hardly heeded, though his eyes looked curiously from one to the other, slow, shrewd, clairvoyant.

"Were you on your way home?" asked Robert, huffy.

The stranger lifted his head and looked at him.

"Home!" he repeated. "No. The other road--" He indicated the direction with his head, and smiled faintly.

"Beldover?" inquired Robert.

"Yes."

He had dropped his head again, as if he did not want to look at them.

To Josephine, the pale, impassive, blank-seeming face, the blue eyes with the smile which wasn't a smile, and the continual dropping of the well-shaped head was curiously affecting. She wanted to cry.

"Are you a miner?" Robert asked, de haute en bas.

"No," cried Josephine. She had looked at his hands.

"Men's checkweighman," replied Aaron. He had emptied his glass. He put it on the table.

"Have another?" said Jim, who was attending fixedly, with curious absorption, to the stranger.

"No," cried Josephine, "no more."

Aaron looked at Jim, then at her, and smiled slowly, with remote bitterness. Then he lowered his head again. His hands were loosely clasped between his knees.

"What about the wife?" said Robert--the young lieutenant.

"What about the wife and kiddies? You're a married man, aren't you?"

The sardonic look of the stranger rested on the subaltern.

"Yes," he said.

"Won't they be expecting you?" said Robert, trying to keep his temper and his tone of authority.

"I expect they will--"

"Then you'd better be getting along, hadn't you?"

The eyes of the intruder rested all the time on the flushed subaltern. The look on Aaron's face became slowly satirical.

"Oh, dry up the army touch," said Jim contemptuously, to Robert. "We're all civvies here. We're all right, aren't we?" he said loudly, turning to the stranger with a grin that showed his pointed teeth.

Aaron gave a brief laugh of acknowledgement.

"How many children have you?" sang Julia from her distance.

"Three."

"Girls or boys?"

"Girls."

"All girls? Dear little things! How old?"

"Oldest eight--youngest nine months--"

"So small!" sang Julia, with real tenderness now--Aaron dropped his head. "But you're going home to them, aren't you?" said Josephine, in whose eyes the tears had already risen. He looked up at her, at her tears. His face had the same pale perverse smile.

"Not tonight," he said.

"But why? You're wrong!" cried Josephine.

He dropped his head and became oblivious.

"Well!" said Cyril Scott, rising at last with a bored exclamation. "I think I'll retire."

"Will you?" said Julia, also rising. "You'll find your candle outside."

She went out. Scott bade good night, and followed her. The four people remained in the room, quite silent. Then Robert rose and began to walk about, agitated.

"Don't you go back to 'em. Have a night out. You stop here tonight," Jim said suddenly, in a quiet intimate tone.

The stranger turned his head and looked at him, considering.

"Yes?" he said. He seemed to be smiling coldly.

"Oh, but!" cried Josephine. "Your wife and your children! Won't they be awfully bothered? Isn't it awfully unkind to them?"

She rose in her eagerness. He sat turning up his face to her. She could not understand his expression.

"Won't you go home to them?" she said, hysterical.

"Not tonight," he replied quietly, again smiling.

"You're wrong!" she cried. "You're wrong!" And so she hurried out of the room in tears.

"Er--what bed do you propose to put him in?" asked Robert rather officer-like.

"Don't propose at all, my lad," replied Jim, ironically--he did not like Robert. Then to the stranger he said:

"You'll be all right on the couch in my room?--it's a good couch, big enough, plenty of rugs--" His voice was easy and intimate.

Aaron looked at him, and nodded.

They had another drink each, and at last the two set off, rather stumbling, upstairs. Aaron carried his bowler hat with him.

Robert remained pacing in the drawing-room for some time. Then he went out, to return in a little while. He extinguished the lamps and saw that the fire was safe. Then he went to fasten the window-doors securely. Outside he saw the uncanny glimmer of candles across the lawn. He had half a mind to go out and extinguish them--but he did not. So he went upstairs and the house was quiet. Faint crumbs of snow were falling outside.

When Jim woke in the morning Aaron had gone. Only on the floor were two packets of Christmas-tree candles, fallen from the stranger's pockets.
He had gone through the drawing-room door, as he had come. The housemaid said that while she was cleaning the grate in the dining-room she heard someone go into the drawing-room: a parlour-maid had even seen someone come out of Jim's bedroom. But they had both thought it was Jim himself, for he was an unsettled house mate.

There was a thin film of snow, a lovely Christmas morning.