CHAPTER VIII. A PUNCH IN THE WIND

The Lillys had a labourer's cottage in Hampshire--pleasant enough. They were poor. Lilly was a little, dark, thin, quick fellow, his wife was strong and fair. They had known Robert and Julia for some years, but Josephine and Jim were new acquaintances,--fairly new.

One day in early spring Lilly had a telegram, "Coming to see you arrive 4:30--Bricknell." He was surprised, but he and his wife got the spare room ready. And at four o'clock Lilly went off to the station. He was a few minutes late, and saw Jim's tall, rather elegant figure stalking down the station path. Jim had been an officer in the regular army, and still spent hours with his tailor. But instead of being a soldier he was a sort of socialist, and a red-hot revolutionary of a very ineffectual sort.

"Good lad!" he exclaimed, as Lilly came up. "Thought you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all. Let me carry your bag." Jim had a bag and a knapsack.

"I had an inspiration this morning," said Jim. "I suddenly saw that if there was a man in England who could save me, it was you."

"Save you from what?" asked Lilly, rather abashed.

"Eh--?" and Jim stooped, grinning at the smaller man.

Lilly was somewhat puzzled, but he had a certain belief in himself as a saviour. The two men tramped rather incongruously through the lanes to the cottage.

Tanny was in the doorway as they came up the garden path.

"So nice to see you! Are you all right?" she said.

"A-one!" said Jim, grinning. "Nice of you to have me."

"Oh, we're awfully pleased."

Jim dropped his knapsack on the broad sofa.

"I've brought some food," he said.

"Have you! That's sensible of you. We can't get a great deal here, except just at week-ends," said Tanny.

Jim fished out a pound of sausages and a pot of fish paste.

"How lovely the sausages," said Tanny. "We'll have them for dinner tonight--and we'll have the other for tea now. You'd like a wash?"

But Jim had already opened his bag, taken off his coat, and put on an old one.

"Thanks," he said.

Lilly made the tea, and at length all sat down.

"Well how unexpected this is--and how nice," said Tanny.

"Jolly--eh?" said Jim.

He ate rapidly, stuffing his mouth too full.

"How is everybody?" asked Tanny.

"All right. Julia's gone with Cyril Scott. Can't stand that fellow, can you? What?"

"Yes, I think he's rather nice," said Tanny. "What will Robert do?"

"Have a shot at Josephine, apparently."

"Really? Is he in love with her? I thought so. And she likes him too, doesn't she?" said Tanny.

"Very likely," said Jim.

"I suppose you're jealous," laughed Tanny.

"Me!" Jim shook his head. "Not a bit. Like to see the ball kept rolling."

"What have you been doing lately?"

"Been staying a few days with my wife."

"No, really! I can't believe it."

Jim had a French wife, who had divorced him, and two children. Now he was paying visits to this wife again: purely friendly. Tanny did most of the talking. Jim excited her, with his way of looking in her face and grinning wolfishly, and at the same time asking to be saved.

After tea, he wanted to send telegrams, so Lilly took him round to the village post-office. Telegrams were a necessary part of his life. He had to be suddenly starting off to keep sudden appointments, or he felt he was a void in the atmosphere. He talked to Lilly about social reform, and so on. Jim's work in town was merely nominal. He spent his time wavering about and going to various meetings, philandering and weeping.

Lilly kept in the back of his mind the Saving which James had come to look for. He intended to do his best. After dinner the three sat cosily

round the kitchen fire.

"But what do you really think will happen to the world?" Lilly asked Jim, amid much talk.

"What? There's something big coming," said Jim.

"Where from?"

"Watch Ireland, and watch Japan--they're the two poles of the world," said Jim.

"I thought Russia and America," said Lilly.

"Eh? What? Russia and America! They'll depend on Ireland and Japan. I know it. I've had a vision of it. Ireland on this side and Japan on the other--they'll settle it."

"I don't see how," said Lilly.

"I don't see HOW--But I had a vision of it."

"What sort of vision?"

"Couldn't describe it."

"But you don't think much of the Japanese, do you?" asked Lilly.

"Don't I! Don't I!" said Jim. "What, don't you think they're wonderful?"

"No. I think they're rather unpleasant."

"I think the salvation of the world lies with them."

"Funny salvation," said Lilly. "I think they're anything but angels."

"Do you though? Now that's funny. Why?"

"Looking at them even. I knew a Russian doctor who'd been through the Russo-Japanese war, and who had gone a bit cracked. He said he saw the Japs rush a trench. They threw everything away and flung themselves through the Russian fire and simply dropped in masses. But those that reached the trenches jumped in with bare hands on the Russians and tore their faces apart and bit their throats out--fairly ripped the faces off the bone.--It had sent the doctor a bit cracked. He said the wounded were awful,--their faces torn off and their throats mangled--and dead Japs with flesh between the teeth--God knows if it's true. But that's the impression the Japanese had made on this man. It had affected his mind really."

Jim watched Lilly, and smiled as if he were pleased.

"No--really--!" he said.

"Anyhow they're more demon than angel, I believe," said Lilly.

"Oh, no, Rawdon, but you always exaggerate," said Tanny.

"Maybe," said Lilly.

"I think Japanese are fascinating--fascinating--so quick, and such FORCE in them--"

"Rather!--eh?" said Jim, looking with a quick smile at Tanny.

"I think a Japanese lover would be marvellous," she laughed riskily.

"I s'd think he would," said Jim, screwing up his eyes.

"Do you hate the normal British as much as I do?" she asked him.

"Hate them! Hate them!" he said, with an intimate grin.

"Their beastly virtue," said she. "And I believe there's nobody more vicious underneath."

"Nobody!" said Jim.

"But you're British yourself," said Lilly to Jim.

"No, I'm Irish. Family's Irish--my mother was a Fitz-patrick."

"Anyhow you live in England."

"Because they won't let me go to Ireland."

The talk drifted. Jim finished up all the beer, and they prepared to go to bed. Jim was a bit tipsy, grinning. He asked for bread and cheese to take upstairs.

"Will you have supper?" said Lilly. He was surprised, because Jim had eaten strangely much at dinner.

"No--where's the loaf?" And he cut himself about half of it. There was no cheese.

"Bread'll do," said Jim.

"Sit down and eat it. Have cocoa with it," said Tanny.

"No, I like to have it in my bedroom."

"You don't eat bread in the night?" said Lilly.

"I do."

"What a funny thing to do."

The cottage was in darkness. The Lillys slept soundly. Jim woke up and chewed bread and slept again. In the morning at dawn he rose and went downstairs. Lilly heard him roaming about--heard the woman come in to clean--heard them talking. So he got up to look after his visitor, though it was not seven o'clock, and the woman was busy.--But before he went down, he heard Jim come upstairs again.

Mrs. Short was busy in the kitchen when Lilly went down.

"The other gentleman have been down, Sir," said Mrs. Short. "He asked me where the bread and butter were, so I said should I cut him a piece. But he wouldn't let me do it. I gave him a knife and he took it for himself, in the pantry."

"I say, Bricknell," said Lilly at breakfast time, "why do you eat so much bread?"

"I've got to feed up. I've been starved during this damned war."

"But hunks of bread won't feed you up."

"Gives the stomach something to work at, and prevents it grinding on the

nerves," said Jim.

"But surely you don't want to keep your stomach always full and heavy."

"I do, my boy. I do. It needs keeping solid. I'm losing life, if I don't. I tell you I'm losing life. Let me put something inside me."

"I don't believe bread's any use."

During breakfast Jim talked about the future of the world.

"I reckon Christ's the finest thing time has ever produced," said he; "and will remain it."

"But you don't want crucifixions ad infinitum," said Lilly.

"What? Why not?"

"Once is enough--and have done."

"Don't you think love and sacrifice are the finest things in life?" said Jim, over his bacon.

"Depends WHAT love, and what sacrifice," said Lilly. "If I really believe in an Almighty God, I am willing to sacrifice for Him. That is, I'm willing to yield my own personal interest to the bigger creative

interest.--But it's obvious Almighty God isn't mere Love."

"I think it is. Love and only love," said Jim. "I think the greatest joy is sacrificing oneself to love."

"To SOMEONE you love, you mean," said Tanny.

"No I don't. I don't mean someone at all. I mean love--love--love. I sacrifice myself to love. I reckon that's the highest man is capable of."

"But you can't sacrifice yourself to an abstract principle," said Tanny.

"That's just what you can do. And that's the beauty of it. Who represents the principle doesn't matter. Christ is the principle of love," said Jim.

"But no!" said Tanny. "It MUST be more individual. It must be SOMEBODY you love, not abstract love in itself. How can you sacrifice yourself to an abstraction."

"Ha, I think Love and your Christ detestable," said Lilly--"a sheer ignominy."

"Finest thing the world has produced," said Jim.

"No. A thing which sets itself up to be betrayed! No, it's foul. Don't you see it's the Judas principle you really worship. Judas is the real hero. But for Judas the whole show would have been manque."

"Oh yes," said Jim. "Judas was inevitable. I'm not sure that Judas wasn't the greatest of the disciples--and Jesus knew it. I'm not sure Judas wasn't the disciple Jesus loved."

"Jesus certainly encouraged him in his Judas tricks," said Tanny.

Jim grinned knowingly at Lilly.

"Then it was a nasty combination. And anything which turns on a Judas climax is a dirty show, to my thinking. I think your Judas is a rotten, dirty worm, just a dirty little self-conscious sentimental twister. And out of all Christianity he is the hero today. When people say Christ they mean Judas. They find him luscious on the palate. And Jesus fostered him--" said Lilly.

"He's a profound figure, is Judas. It's taken two thousand years to begin to understand him," said Jim, pushing the bread and marmalade into his mouth.

"A traitor is a traitor--no need to understand any further. And a system which rests all its weight on a piece of treachery makes that treachery not only inevitable but sacred. That's why I'm sick of Christianity.--At

any rate this modern Christ-mongery."

"The finest thing the world has produced, or ever will produce--Christ and Judas--" said Jim.

"Not to me," said Lilly. "Foul combination."

It was a lovely morning in early March. Violets were out, and the first wild anemones. The sun was quite warm. The three were about to take out a picnic lunch. Lilly however was suffering from Jim's presence.

"Jolly nice here," said Jim. "Mind if I stay till Saturday?"

There was a pause. Lilly felt he was being bullied, almost obscenely bullied. Was he going to agree? Suddenly he looked up at Jim.

"I'd rather you went tomorrow," he said.

Tanny, who was sitting opposite Jim, dropped her head in confusion.

"What's tomorrow?" said Jim.

"Thursday," said Lilly.

"Thursday," repeated Jim. And he looked up and got Lilly's eye. He wanted to say "Friday then?"

"Yes, I'd rather you went Thursday," repeated Lilly.

"But Rawdon--!" broke in Tanny, who was suffering. She stopped, however.

"We can walk across country with you some way if you like," said Lilly to Jim. It was a sort of compromise.

"Fine!" said Jim. "We'll do that, then."

It was lovely sunshine, and they wandered through the woods. Between Jim and Tanny was a sort of growing rapprochement, which got on Lilly's nerves.

"What the hell do you take that beastly personal tone for?" cried Lilly at Tanny, as the three sat under a leafless great beech-tree.

"But I'm not personal at all, am I, Mr. Bricknell?" said Tanny.

Jim watched Lilly, and grinned pleasedly.

"Why shouldn't you be, anyhow?" he said.

"Yes!" she retorted. "Why not!"

"Not while I'm here. I loathe the slimy creepy personal

intimacy.--'Don't you think, Mr. Bricknell, that it's lovely to be able to talk quite simply to somebody? Oh, it's such a relief, after most people---'" Lilly mimicked his wife's last speech savagely.

"But I MEAN it," cried Tanny. "It is lovely."

"Dirty messing," said Lilly angrily.

Jim watched the dark, irascible little man with amusement. They rose, and went to look for an inn, and beer. Tanny still clung rather stickily to Jim's side.

But it was a lovely day, the first of all the days of spring, with crocuses and wall-flowers in the cottage gardens, and white cocks crowing in the quiet hamlet.

When they got back in the afternoon to the cottage, they found a telegram for Jim. He let the Lillys see it--"Meet you for a walk on your return journey Lois." At once Tanny wanted to know all about Lois. Lois was a nice girl, well-to-do middle-class, but also an actress, and she would do anything Jim wanted.

"I must get a wire to her to meet me tomorrow," he said. "Where shall I say?"

Lilly produced the map, and they decided on time and station at which

Lois coming out of London, should meet Jim. Then the happy pair could walk along the Thames valley, spending a night perhaps at Marlowe, or some such place.

Off went Jim and Lilly once more to the postoffice. They were quite good friends. Having so inhospitably fixed the hour of departure, Lilly wanted to be nice. Arrived at the postoffice, they found it shut: half-day closing for the little shop.

"Well," said Lilly. "We'll go to the station."

They proceeded to the station--found the station-master--were conducted down to the signal-box. Lilly naturally hung back from people, but Jim was hob-nob with the station-master and the signal man, quite officer-and-my-men kind of thing. Lilly sat out on the steps of the signal-box, rather ashamed, while the long telegram was shouted over the telephone to the junction town--first the young lady and her address, then the message "Meet me X. station 3:40 tomorrow walk back great pleasure Jim."

Anyhow that was done. They went home to tea. After tea, as the evening fell, Lilly suggested a little stroll in the woods, while Tanny prepared the dinner. Jim agreed, and they set out. The two men wandered through the trees in the dusk, till they came to a bank on the farther edge of the wood. There they sat down.

And there Lilly said what he had to say. "As a matter of fact," he said, "it's nothing but love and self-sacrifice which makes you feel yourself losing life."

"You're wrong. Only love brings it back--and wine. If I drink a bottle of Burgundy I feel myself restored at the middle--right here! I feel the energy back again. And if I can fall in love--But it's becoming so damned hard--"

"What, to fall in love?" asked Lilly.

"Yes."

"Then why not leave off trying! What do you want to poke yourself and prod yourself into love, for?"

"Because I'm DEAD without it. I'm dead. I'm dying."

"Only because you force yourself. If you drop working yourself up--"

"I shall die. I only live when I can fall in love. Otherwise I'm dying by inches. Why, man, you don't know what it was like. I used to get the most grand feelings--like a great rush of force, or light--a great rush--right here, as I've said, at the solar plexus. And it would come any time--anywhere--no matter where I was. And then I was all right.

"All right for what?--for making love?"

"Yes, man, I was."

"And now you aren't?--Oh, well, leave love alone, as any twopenny doctor would tell you."

"No, you're off it there. It's nothing technical. Technically I can make love as much as you like. It's nothing a doctor has any say in. It's what I feel inside me. I feel the life going. I know it's going. I never get those inrushes now, unless I drink a jolly lot, or if I possibly could fall in love. Technically, I'm potent all right--oh, yes!"

"You should leave yourself and your inrushes alone."

"But you can't. It's a sort of ache."

"Then you should stiffen your backbone. It's your backbone that matters. You shouldn't want to abandon yourself. You shouldn't want to fling yourself all loose into a woman's lap. You should stand by yourself and learn to be by yourself. Why don't you be more like the Japanese you talk about? Quiet, aloof little devils. They don't bother about being loved. They keep themselves taut in their own selves--there, at the bottom of the spine--the devil's own power they've got there."

Jim mused a bit.

"Think they have?" he laughed. It seemed comic to him.

"Sure! Look at them. Why can't you gather yourself there?"

"At the tail?"

"Yes. Hold yourself firm there."

Jim broke into a cackle of a laugh, and rose. The two went through the dark woods back to the cottage. Jim staggered and stumbled like a drunken man: or worse, like a man with locomotor ataxia: as if he had no power in his lower limbs.

"Walk there--!" said Lilly, finding him the smoothest bit of the dark path. But Jim stumbled and shambled, in a state of nauseous weak relaxation. However, they reached the cottage: and food and beer--and Tanny, piqued with curiosity to know what the men had been saying privately to each other.

After dinner they sat once more talking round the fire.

Lilly sat in a small chair facing the fire, the other two in the armchairs on either side the hearth.

"How nice it will be for you, walking with Lois towards London

tomorrow," gushed Tanny sentimentally.

"Good God!" said Lilly. "Why the dickens doesn't he walk by himself, without wanting a woman always there, to hold his hand."

"Don't be so spiteful," said Tanny. "YOU see that you have a woman always there, to hold YOUR hand."

"My hand doesn't need holding," snapped Lilly.

"Doesn't it! More than most men's! But you're so beastly ungrateful and mannish. Because I hold you safe enough all the time you like to pretend you're doing it all yourself."

"All right. Don't drag yourself in," said Lilly, detesting his wife at that moment. "Anyhow," and he turned to Jim, "it's time you'd done slobbering yourself over a lot of little women, one after the other."

"Why shouldn't I, if I like it?" said Jim.

"Yes, why not?" said Tanny.

"Because it makes a fool of you. Look at you, stumbling and staggering with no use in your legs. I'd be ashamed if I were you."

"Would you?" said Jim.

"I would. And it's nothing but your wanting to be loved which does it. A maudlin crying to be loved, which makes your knees all go rickety."

"Think that's it?" said Jim.

"What else is it. You haven't been here a day, but you must telegraph for some female to be ready to hold your hand the moment you go away. And before she lets go, you'll be wiring for another. YOU WANT TO BE LOVED, you want to be loved--a man of your years. It's disgusting--"

"I don't see it. I believe in love--" said Jim, watching and grinning oddly.

"Bah, love! Messing, that's what it is. It wouldn't matter if it did you no harm. But when you stagger and stumble down a road, out of sheer sloppy relaxation of your will---"

At this point Jim suddenly sprang from his chair at Lilly, and gave him two or three hard blows with his fists, upon the front of the body. Then he sat down in his own chair again, saying sheepishly:

"I knew I should have to do it, if he said any more."

Lilly sat motionless as a statue, his face like paper. One of the blows

had caught him rather low, so that he was almost winded and could not breathe. He sat rigid, paralysed as a winded man is. But he wouldn't let it be seen. With all his will he prevented himself from gasping. Only through his parted lips he drew tiny gasps, controlled, nothing revealed to the other two. He hated them both far too much.

For some minutes there was dead silence, whilst Lilly silently and viciously fought for his breath. Tanny opened her eyes wide in a sort of pleased bewilderment, and Jim turned his face aside, and hung his clasped hands between his knees.

"There's a great silence, suddenly!" said Tanny.

"What is there to say?" ejaculated Lilly rapidly, with a spoonful of breath which he managed to compress and control into speech. Then he sat motionless again, concerned with the business of getting back his wind, and not letting the other two see.

Jim jerked in his chair, and looked round.

"It isn't that I don't like the man," he said, in a rather small voice. "But I knew if he went on I should have to do it."

To Lilly, rigid and physically preoccupied, there sounded a sort of self-consciousness in Jim's voice, as if the whole thing had been semi-deliberate. He detected the sort of maudlin deliberateness which

goes with hysterics, and he was colder, more icy than ever.

Tanny looked at Lilly, puzzled, bewildered, but still rather pleased, as if she demanded an answer. None being forthcoming, she said:

"Of course, you mustn't expect to say all those things without rousing a man."

Still Lilly did not answer. Jim glanced at him, then looked at Tanny.

"It isn't that I don't like him," he said, slowly. "I like him better than any man I've ever known, I believe." He clasped his hands and turned aside his face.

"Judas!" flashed through Lilly's mind.

Again Tanny looked for her husband's answer.

"Yes, Rawdon," she said. "You can't say the things you do without their having an effect. You really ask for it, you know."

"It's no matter." Lilly squeezed the words out coldly. "He wanted to do it, and he did it."

A dead silence ensued now. Tanny looked from man to man.

"I could feel it coming on me," said Jim.

"Of course!" said Tanny. "Rawdon doesn't know the things he says." She was pleased that he had had to pay for them, for once.

It takes a man a long time to get his breath back, after a sharp blow in the wind. Lilly was managing by degrees. The others no doubt attributed his silence to deep or fierce thoughts. It was nothing of the kind, merely a cold struggle to get his wind back, without letting them know he was struggling: and a sheer, stock-stiff hatred of the pair of them.

"I like the man," said Jim. "Never liked a man more than I like him." He spoke as if with difficulty.

"The man" stuck safely in Lilly's ears.

"Oh, well," he managed to say. "It's nothing. I've done my talking and had an answer, for once."

"Yes, Rawdy, you've had an answer, for once. Usually you don't get an answer, you know--and that's why you go so far--in the things you say. Now you'll know how you make people feel."

"Quite!" said Lilly.

"I don't feel anything. I don't mind what he says," said Jim.

"Yes, but he ought to know the things he DOES say," said Tanny. "He goes on, without considering the person he's talking to. This time it's come back on him. He mustn't say such personal things, if he's not going to risk an answer."

"I don't mind what he says. I don't mind a bit," said Jim.

"Nor do I mind," said Lilly indifferently. "I say what I feel--You do as you feel--There's an end of it."

A sheepish sort of silence followed this speech. It was broken by a sudden laugh from Tanny.

"The things that happen to us!" she said, laughing rather shrilly. "Suddenly, like a thunderbolt, we're all struck into silence!"

"Rum game, eh!" said Jim, grinning.

"Isn't it funny! Isn't life too funny!" She looked again at her husband. "But, Rawdy, you must admit it was your own fault."

Lilly's stiff face did not change.

"Why FAULT!" he said, looking at her coldly. "What is there to talk about?"

"Usually there's so much," she said sarcastically.

A few phrases dribbled out of the silence. In vain Jim, tried to get Lilly to thaw, and in vain Tanny gave her digs at her husband. Lilly's stiff, inscrutable face did not change, he was polite and aloof. So they all went to bed.

In the morning, the walk was to take place, as arranged, Lilly and Tanny accompanying Jim to the third station across country. The morning was lovely, the country beautiful. Lilly liked the countryside and enjoyed the walk. But a hardness inside himself never relaxed. Jim talked a little again about the future of the world, and a higher state of Christlikeness in man. But Lilly only laughed. Then Tanny managed to get ahead with Jim, sticking to his side and talking sympathetic personalities. But Lilly, feeling it from afar, ran after them and caught them up. They were silent.

"What was the interesting topic?" he said cuttingly.

"Nothing at all!" said Tanny, nettled. "Why must you interfere?"

"Because I intend to," said Lilly.

And the two others fell apart, as if severed with a knife. Jim walked rather sheepishly, as if cut out.

So they came at last past the canals to the wayside station: and at last Jim's train came. They all said goodbye. Jim and Tanny were both waiting for Lilly to show some sign of real reconciliation. But none came. He was cheerful and aloof.

"Goodbye," he said to Jim. "Hope Lois will be there all right. Third station on. Goodbye! Goodbye!"

"You'll come to Rackham?" said Jim, leaning out of the train.

"We should love to," called Tanny, after the receding train.

"All right," said Lilly, non-committal.

But he and his wife never saw Jim again. Lilly never intended to see him: a devil sat in the little man's breast.

"You shouldn't play at little Jesus, coming so near to people, wanting to help them," was Tanny's last word.