

THE CREATURES

By WALTER DE LA MARE

IT was the ebbing light of evening that recalled me out of my story to a consciousness of my whereabouts. I dropped my little red book to my knee and glanced out of the narrow and begrimed oblong window. We were skirting the eastern coast of cliffs, to the very edge of which a ploughman, stumbling along behind his two great horses, was driving the last of his dark furrows. In a cleft far down between the rocks a cold and idle sea was soundlessly laying its frigid garlands of foam. I stared over the flat stretch of waters, then turned my head, and looked with a kind of suddenness into the face of my one fellow-traveller.

He had entered the carriage, all but unheeded, yet not altogether unresented, at the last country station. His features were a little obscure in the fading daylight that hung between our four narrow walls, but apparently his eyes had been fixed on my face for some little time.

He narrowed his lids at this unexpected confrontation, jerked back his head, and cast a glance out of his mirky glass at the bit of greenish-bright moon that was struggling into its full brilliance above the dun, swelling uplands.

"It's a queer experience, railway-travelling," he began abruptly, in a low, almost deprecating voice, drawing his hand across his eyes. "One is cast into a passing privacy with a fellow-stranger and then is gone." It was as if he had been patiently awaiting the attention of a chosen listener.

I nodded, looking at him. "*That* privacy, too," he ejaculated, "all that!" My eyes turned towards the window again: bare, thorned, black January hedge, inhospitable salt coast, flat waste of northern water. Our engine-driver promptly shut off his steam, and we slid almost noiselessly out of sight of sky and sea into a cutting.

"It's a desolate country," I ventured to remark.

"Oh, yes, 'desolate'!" he echoed a little wearily. "But what always frets me is the way we have of arrogating to ourselves the offices of judge, jury, and counsel all in one. For my part, I never forget it—the futility, the presumption. It *leads* nowhere. We drive in—into all this silence, this—this 'forsakenness,' this dream of a world between her lights of day and night time. Consciousness! . . . What itching monkeys men are!" He recovered himself, swallowed his indignation with an obvious gulp. "As if," he continued in more chastened tones—"as if that other gate were not for ever ajar, into God knows what of peace and mystery." He stooped forward, lean, darkened, objurgatory. "Don't we *make* our world? Isn't *that* our blessed, our betrayed responsibility?"

I nodded, and ensconced myself, like a dog in straw, in that basest of all responses to a rare, even if eccentric, candour—caution.

“ Well,” he continued, a little weariedly, “ that’s the indictment. Small wonder if it will need a trumpet to blare us into that last ‘ Family Prayers.’ Then perhaps a few solitaries—just a few—will creep out of their holes and fastnesses, and draw mercy from the merciful on the cities of the plain. The buried talent will shine none the worse for the long, long looming of its napery spun from dream and desire.

“ Years ago—ten, fifteen, perhaps—I chanced on the queerest specimen of this order of the ‘ talented.’ Much the same country, too. This ”—he swept his glance out over a now invisible sea—“ this is a kind of dwarf replica of it. More naked, smoother, more sudden and precipitous, more ‘ forsaken,’ moody. Alone ! The trees are shorn there, as if with monstrous shears, by the winter gales. The air’s salt. It is a country of stones and emerald meadows, of green, meandering, aimless lanes, of farms set in their clifts and valleys like rough time-bedimmed jewels, as if by some angel of humanity, wandering between dark and daybreak.

“ I was younger then—in body : the youth of the mind is for men of an age—yours, maybe, and mine. Even then, even at that, I was sickened of crowds, of that unimaginable London—swarming wilderness of mankind in which a poor lost thirsty dog from Otherwhere tastes first the full meaning of that idle word ‘ forsaken.’ ‘ Forsaken by whom ? ’ is the question I ask myself now. Visitors to my particular paradise were few then—as if, my dear sir, we were not all of us visitors, visitants, revenants, on earth, panting for time in which to tell and share our secrets, roving in search of the marks that shall prove our quest not vain, not unprecedented, not a treachery. But let that be.

“ I would start off morning after morning, bread and cheese in pocket, from the bare old house I lodged in, bound for that unforeseen nowhere for which the heart, the fantasy aches. Lingered hot noondays would find me stretched in a state half-comatose, yet vigilant, on the close-flowered turf of the fields or cliffs, on the sun-baked sands and rocks, soaking in the scene and life around me like some pilgrim chameleon. It was in hope to lose my way that I would set out. How shall a man find his way unless he lose it ? Now and then I succeeded. That country is large, and its land and sea marks easily cheat the stranger. I was still of an age, you see, when my ‘ small door ’ was ajar, and I planted a solid foot to keep it from shutting. But how could I know what I was after ? One just shakes the tree of life, and the rare fruits come tumbling down, to rot for the most part in the lush grasses.

“ What was most haunting and provocative in that far-away country was its fleeting resemblance to the country of dream. You stand, you sit, or lie prone on its bud-starred heights, and look down ; the green, dispersed, treeless landscape spreads beneath you, with its hollows and mounded slopes, clustering farmstead, and scatter of village, all motionless under

the vast wash of sun and blue, like the drop-scene of some enchanted play-house centuries old. So, too, the visionary bird-haunted headlands, veiled faintly in a mist of unreality above their broken stones and the enormous saucer of the sea.

“ You cannot guess there what you may not chance upon, or whom. Bells clash, boom, and quarrel hollowly on the edge of darkness in those breakers. Voices waver across the fainter winds. The birds cry in a tongue unknown yet not unfamiliar. The sky is the hawks’ and the stars’. *There* one is on the edge of life, of the unforeseen, whereas our cities—are not our desiccated jaded minds ever continually pressing and edging further and further away from freedom, the vast unknown, the infinite presence, picking a fool’s journey from sensual fact to fact at the tail of that he-ass called Reason? I suggest that in that solitude the spirit within us realises that it treads the outskirts of a region long since called the Imagination. I assert we have strayed, and in our blindness abandoned——”

My stranger paused in his frenzy, glanced out at me from his obscure corner as if he had intended to stun, astonish me with some violent heresy. We puffed out slowly, laboriously, from a “ Halt ” at which in the gathering dark and moonshine we had for some while been at a standstill. Never was wedding-guest more desperately at the mercy of ancient mariner.

“ Well, one day,” he went on, lifting his voice a little to master the resounding heart-beats of our steam-engine—“ one late afternoon, in my goal-less wanderings, I had climbed to the summit of a steep grass-grown cart-track, winding up dustily between dense, untended hedges. Even then I might have missed the house to which it led, for, hair-pin fashion, the track here abruptly turned back on itself, and only a far fainter footpath led on over the hill-crest. I might, I say, have missed the house and—and its inmates, if I had not heard the musical sound of what seemed like the twangling of a harp. This thin-drawn, sweet, tuneless warbling welled over the close green grass of the height as if out of space. Truth cannot say whether it was of that air or of my own fantasy. Nor did I ever discover what instrument, whether of man or Ariel, had released a strain so pure and yet so bodiless.

“ I pushed on and found myself in command of a gorse-strewn height, a stretch of country that lay a few hundred paces across the steep and sudden valley in between. In a V-shaped entry to the left, and sunwards, lay an azure and lazy tongue of the sea. And as my eye slid softly thence and upwards and along the sharp, green horizon line against the glass-clear turquoise of space, it caught the flinty glitter of a square chimney. I pushed on, and presently found myself at the gate of a farmyard.

“ There was but one straw-mow upon its staddles. A few fowls were sunning themselves in their dust-baths. White and pied doves preened and cooed on the roof of an outbuilding as golden with its lichens as if the western sun had scattered its dust for centuries upon the large slate slabs. Just that life and the whispering of the wind, nothing more. Yet even at

one swift glimpse I seemed to have trespassed upon a peace that had endured for ages ; to have crossed the viewless border that divides time from eternity. I leaned, resting, over the gate, and could have remained there for hours, lapsing ever more profoundly into the blessed quietude that had stolen over my thoughts.

“ A bent-up woman appeared at the dark entry of a stone shed opposite to me, and, shading her eyes, paused in prolonged scrutiny of the stranger. At that I entered the gate and, explaining that I had lost my way and was tired and thirsty, asked for some milk. She made no reply, but after peering up at me, with something between suspicion and apprehension on her weather-beaten old face, led me towards the house which lay to the left on the slope of the valley, hidden from me till then by plummy bushes of tamarisk.

“ It was a low grave house, grey-chimneyed, its stone walls traversed by a deep shadow cast by the declining sun, its dark windows rounded and uncurtained, its door wide open to the porch. She entered the house, and I paused upon the threshold. A deep unmoving quiet lay within, like that of water in a cave renewed by the tide. Above a table hung a wreath of wild flowers. To the right was a heavy oak settle upon the flags. A beam of sunlight pierced the air of the staircase from an upper window.

“ Presently a dark long-faced gaunt man appeared from within, contemplating me, as he advanced, out of eyes that seemed not so much to fix the intruder as to encircle his image, as the sea contains the distant speck of a ship on its wide blue bosom of water. They might have been the eyes of the blind ; the windows of a house in dream to which the inmate must make something of a pilgrimage to look out upon actuality. Then he smiled, and the long, dark features, melancholy yet serene, took light upon them, as might a bluff of rock beneath a thin passing wash of sunshine. With a gesture he welcomed me into the large, dark-flagged kitchen, cool as a cellar, airy as a belfry, its sweet air traversed by a long oblong of light out of the west.

“ The wide shelves of the painted dresser were laden with crockery. A wreath of freshly-gathered flowers hung over the chimney-piece. As we entered, a twittering cloud of small birds, robins, hedge-sparrows, chaffinches fluttered up a few inches from floor and sill and window-seat, and once more, with tiny starry-dark eyes observing me, soundlessly alighted.

“ I could hear the infinitesimal *tic-tac* of their tiny claws upon the slate. My gaze drifted out of the window into the garden beyond, a cavern of clearer crystal and colour than that which astounded the eyes of young Aladdin. Apart from the twisted garland of wild flowers, the shining metal of range and copper candlestick, and the bright-scoured crockery, there was no adornment in the room except a rough frame, hanging from a nail in the wall, and enclosing what appeared to be a faint patterned fragment of blue silk or fine linen. The chairs and table were old and heavy. A low light warbling, an occasional *skirr* of wing, a haze-like drone of bee and fly—

these were the only sounds that edged a quiet intensified in its profundity by the remote stirrings of the sea.

“The house was stilled as by a charm, yet thought within me asked no questions; speculation was asleep in its kennel. I sat down to the milk and bread, the honey and fruit which the old woman laid out upon the table, and her master seated himself opposite to me, now in a low sibilant whisper—a tongue which they seemed to understand—addressing himself to the birds, and now, as if with an effort, raising those strange grey-green eyes of his to bestow a quiet remark upon me. He asked, rather in courtesy than with any active interest, a few questions, referring to the world, its business and transports—*our* beautiful world—as an astronomer in the small hours might murmur a few words to the chance-sent guest of his solitude concerning the secrets of Uranus or Saturn. There is another, an inexorable side to the moon. Yet he said enough for me to gather that he, too, was of that small tribe of the aloof and wild to which our cracked old word ‘forsaken’ might be applied, hermits, clay-matted fakirs, and such-like, the snowy birds that play and cry amid mid-oceanic surges, the living of an oasis of the wilderness, which share a reality only distantly dreamed of by the time-driven, thought-corroded congregations of man.

“Yet so narrow and hazardous I somehow realised was the brink of fellow-being (shall I call it?) which we shared, he and I, that again and again fantasy within me seemed to hover over that precipice Night knows as fear. It was he, it seemed, with that still embracive contemplation of his, with that far-away yet reassuring smile, that kept my poise, my balance. ‘No,’ some voice within him seemed to utter, ‘you are safe; the bounds are fixed; though hallucination chaunt its decoy, you shall not irretrievably pass over. Eat and drink, and presently return to “life.”’ And I listened, and, like that of a drowsy child in its cradle, my consciousness sank deeper and deeper, stilled, pacified, into the dream amid which, as it seemed, this soundless house of stone now reared its walls.

“I had all but finished my meal when I heard footsteps approaching on the flags without. The murmur of other voices, distinguishably shrill yet guttural, even at a distance, and in spite of the dense stones and beams of the house which had blunted their timbre, had already reached me. Now the feet halted. I turned my head—cautiously, even perhaps apprehensively—and confronted two figures in the doorway.

“I cannot now guess the age of my entertainer. These children—for children they were in face and gesture and effect, though as to form and stature apparently in their last teens—these children were far more problematical. I say ‘form and stature,’ yet obviously they were dwarfish. Their heads were sunken between their shoulders, their hair thick, their eyes disconcertingly deep-set. They were ungainly, their features peculiarly irregular, as if two races from the ends of the earth had in them intermingled their blood and strangeness, as if rather animal and angel had connived in their creation.

“ But if some inward light lay on the still eyes, on the gaunt, sorrowful, quixotic countenance that now was fully and intensely bent on mine, emphatically that light was theirs also. He spoke to them, they answered—in English, my own language, without a doubt : but an English slurred, broken, and unintelligible, to me, yet clear as bell, haunting, penetrating, pining as voice of nix or siren. My ears drank in the sound as an Arab parched with desert sand falls on his dried belly and gulps in mouthfuls of crystal water. The birds hopped nearer, as if beneath the rod of an enchanter. A sweet continuous clamour arose from their small throats. The exquisite colours of plume and bosom burned, greened, melted in the level sun-ray, in the darker air beyond.

“ A kind of mournful gaiety, a lamentable felicity, such as rings in the cadences of an old folk-song, welled into my heart. I was come back to the borders of Eden, bowed and outwearied, gazing out of dream into dream, homesick, ‘ forsaken.’

“ Well, years have gone by,” muttered my fellow-traveller deprecatingly, “ but I have not forgotten that Eden’s primeval trees and shade.

“ They led me out, these bizarre companions, a he and a she, if I may put it as crudely as my apprehension of them put it to me then. Through a broad door they conducted me—if one who leads may be said to be conducted—into their garden. Garden ! A full mile long, between undiscovered walls, it sloped and narrowed towards a sea at whose dark unfoamed blue, even at this distance, my eyes dazzled. Yet how can one call that a garden which reveals no ghost of a sign of human arrangement, of human slavery, of spade or hoe ?

“ Great boulders shouldered up, tessellated, embossed, powdered with a thousand various mosses and lichens, between a flowering greenery of weeds. Wind-stunted, clear-emerald, lichen-tufted trees smoothed and crisped the inflowing airs of the ocean with their leaves and spines, sibilating a thin scarce-audible music. Scanty, rank, and uncultivated fruits hung close their vivid-coloured cheeks to the gnarled branches. It was the harbourage of birds, the small embowering parlour of their house of life, under an evening sky, pure and lustrous as a water-drop. It cried ‘ Hospital ’ to the wanderers of the universe.

“ As I look back in ever-thinning, nebulous remembrance, on my two companions, hear their voices gutturally sweet and shrill, catch again their being, so to speak, I realise that there was a kind of Orientalism in their effect. Their instant courtesy was not Western, the smiles that greeted me, whenever I turned my head to look back at them, were infinitely friendly, yet infinitely remote. So ungainly, so far from our notions of beauty and symmetry were their bodies and faces, those heads thrust heavily between their shoulders, their disproportioned yet graceful arms and hands, that the children in some of our English villages might be moved to stone them, while their elders looked on and laughed.

“ Dusk was drawing near ; soon night would come. The colours of the

sunset, sucking its extremest dye from every leaf and blade and petal, touched my consciousness even then with a vague fleeting alarm.

“ I remember I asked these strange and happy beings, repeating my question twice or thrice, as we neared the surfy entry of the valley upon whose sands a tiny stream emptied its fresh waters—I asked them if it was they who had planted this multitude of flowers, many of a kind utterly unknown to me and alien to a country inexhaustibly rich. ‘ We wait; we wait ! ’ I think they cried. And it was as if their cry woke echo from the green-walled valleys of the mind into which I had strayed. Shall I confess that tears came into my eyes as I gazed hungrily around me on the harvest of their patience ?

“ Never was actuality so close to dream. It was not only an unknown country, slipped in between these placid hills, upon which I had chanced in my ramblings. I had entered for a few brief moments a strange region of consciousness. I was treading, thus accompanied, amid a world of welcoming and fearless life—oh, friendly to me !—the paths of man’s imagination, the kingdom from which thought and curiosity, vexed scrutiny and lust—a lust it may be for nothing more impious than the actual—had prehistorically proved the insensate means of his banishment. ‘ Reality,’ ‘ Consciousness ’: had he for ‘ the time being ’ unwittingly, unhappily missed his way ? Would he be led back at length to that garden wherein cockatrice and basilisk bask, harmlessly, at peace ?

“ I speculate now. In that queer, yes, and possibly sinister, company, sinister only because it was alien to me, I did not speculate. In their garden, the familiar was become the strange—‘ the strange ’ that lurks in the inmost heart, unburdens its riches in trance, flings its light and gilding upon love, gives heavenly savour to the intemperate bowl of passion, and is the secret of our incommunicable pity. What is yet queerer, these beings were evidently glad of my company. They stumped after me (as might yellow men after some Occidental quadruped never before seen) in merry collusion of nods and wreathed smiles at this perhaps unprecedented intrusion.

“ I stood for a moment looking out over the placid surface of the sea. A ship in sail hung phantom-like on the horizon. I pined to call my discovery to its seamen. The tide gushed, broke, spent itself on the bare boulders. I was suddenly cold and alone, and gladly turned back into the garden, my companions instinctively separating to let me pass between them. I breathed in the rare, almost exotic heat, the tenuous, honeyed, almond-laden air of its flowers and birds—gull, mandrake, plover, wagtail, finch, robin, which as I half-angrily, half-sadly realised fluttered up in momentary dismay only at *my* presence, the embodied spectre of their enemy, man. Man ? Then who were these ? . . .

“ I lost again a way lost early that morning, as I trudged inland at night. The dark came, warm and starry. I was tired, dejected, exhausted beyond words. That night I slept in a barn and was awakened soon after daybreak by the crowing of cocks. I went out, dazed and blinking into the sunlight,

bathed face and hands in a brook near by, and came to a village before a soul was stirring. So I sat under a thrift-cushioned, thorn-crowned wall in a meadow, and once more drowsed off and fell asleep. When again I awoke, it was ten o'clock. The church clock in its tower knelled out its strokes, and I went into an inn for food.

“ A corpulent, blonde woman, kindly and hospitable, with a face comfortably resembling her own sow's, that yuffed and nosed in at the open door as I sat on my stool, served me with what I called for. I described—not without some vanishing shame, as if it were a treachery—my farm, its whereabouts.

“ Her small blue eyes ‘ pigged ’ at me with a fleeting expression which I failed to translate. The name of the farm, it appeared, was Trevarras. ‘ And did you see any of the Creatures ? ’ she asked me in a voice not entirely her own. ‘ The Creatures ’ ! I sat back for an instant and stared at her ; then realised that Creature was the name of my host, and Maria and Christus (though here her dialect may have deceived me) the names of my two gardeners. She spun an absurd story, so far as I could tack it together and make it coherent. Superstitious stuff about this man who had wandered in upon the shocked and curious inhabitants of the district and made his home at Trevarras — a stranger and pilgrim, a ‘ foreigner,’ it seemed, of few words, dubious manners, and both uninformative.

“ Then there was something (she placed her two fat hands, one of them wedding-ringed, on the zinc of the bar-counter, and peered over at me, as if I were a delectable ‘ wash ’), then there was something about a woman ‘ from the sea.’ In a ‘ blue gown,’ and either dumb, inarticulate, or mistress of only a foreign tongue. She must have lived in sin, moreover, those pig's eyes seemed to yearn, since the children were ‘ simple,’ ‘ naturals ’—as God intends in such matters. It was useless. One's stomach may sometimes reject the cold sanative aerated water of ‘ the next morning,’ and my ridiculous intoxication had left me dry but not yet quite sober.

“ Anyhow, this she told me, that my blue woman, as fair as flax, had died and was buried in the neighbouring churchyard (the nearest to, though miles distant from, Trevarras). She repeatedly assured me, as if I might otherwise doubt so sophisticated a fact, that I should find her grave there, her ‘ stone.’

“ So indeed I did—far away from the elect, and in a shade-ridden north-west corner of the sleepy, cropless acre: a slab, scarcely rounded, of granite, with but a name bitten out of the dark rough surface, ‘ *Femina Creature.* ’ ”