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The Tree

By WALTER DE LA MARE, *Author of "MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET," etc.*

Drawings by DOROTHY P. LATHROP

INCREASED in his dingy and faded first-class railway-carriage, the prosperous fruit merchant sat alone. From the collar of his thick frieze great-coat stuck out a triangular nose. On each side of it a small bleak, black eye gazed absently at one of the buttons on the empty, blue-upholstered seat opposite him. His breath spread a fading vapor in the air. He sat bolt upright, congealed in body, heated in mind, his unseeing eye fixed on that cloth button, that stud. There was nothing else to look at, for the simple reason that his six narrow windows were whitely sheeted with hoar-frost. Only his thoughts were his company, while the coach, the superannuated coach, bumped dully on over the metals. And his thoughts were neither a satisfaction nor a pleasure. His square, hard head under his square, hard hat was nothing but a pot seething with vexation, scorn, and discontent.

What had invited him out so far, in weather so dismal, on a line so feebly patronized? Anger all but sparkled in his mind as he considered the intention of his journey, and what was likely to be the end of it. Twelve

solid, yet fleeting, years divided him from his last meeting with his half-brother, ship-load on ship-load of exotic oranges and lemons, pineapples, boxed figs, and blushing pomegranates. At this very moment three more or less seaworthy ocean tramps were steaming across the watery channels of the world laden with cargoes of which he was the principal consignee. He stretched out his legs, crossed his feet. He was a substantial man. There was nothing fantastic about *him*. To put on airs when you could n't afford them, to meet a friendly offer with rank ingratitude, to quarrel with the only relative on earth who had kept you out of the workhouse—he had sworn never to set foot in the place again. Yet here he was, and nothing but a fool for his pains. Having washed his hands of the whole silly business, he should have kept them washed. Instead of which he thrust them deeper into his capacious pockets and wondered to God when his journey was to come to an end.

No, it was with no charitable, no friendly, no sentimental motive that he was being glided joltingly on. A

half-brother, and particularly if he owes you a hundred pounds and more, need not be even fractionally a being one smiles to think of for the sake of auld lang syne. There was nothing in common between the two except a father, now twenty-five years in his grave, and a loan that would never be repaid. That was one galling feature of the situation. There was another. In plain print, in his own morning newspaper, the fruit merchant had chanced only a week or two ago on the preposterous fact that a mere woodcut of a mere "Bird and Flower," initialed P. P., had brought at Christie's ninety-seven guineas. Ninety-seven guineas—sixty-eight crates of excellent Denia oranges at thirty shillings a crate! What the devil! His small eyes seemed to congest, and yet at the same time to protrude from their sockets.

"P. P."—Perfect pest, paltry poser, plaguy parasite! And yet hardly a parasite. You could n't dish a half-brother who had n't sent you a single word of greeting for twelve solid, fleeting, prosperous years with a term like that. Even if he did owe you a hundred pounds. Even if he had n't the faintest wish to remind you of the fact. Not that the fruit merchant wanted his hundred pounds. He was not a debt-collector. It was the principle of the thing.

If half an hour's silly scratching over a little lump of wood could bring you ninety-seven guineas, about twenty-nine and a half minutes would bring in a round hundred. And there were more birds and more flowers in that infernal tree than Noah could have found room for in his ark. The tree! The very thought of it swept a pulsating cloud of rage over his eyes.

Cool, quiet insolence he could have forgiven and almost forgotten, but the merest reminder of that talk about the tree never failed to infuriate him. It infuriated him now almost beyond endurance simply because he knew, even if he would n't confess it openly to himself, that *this* was the decoy which was dragging him on these fifty-three interminable miles on a freezing, hideous country afternoon.

The tree! Never in all his life had he met with such an exhibition of sheer, stark midsummer madness. And yet, with every inch of his journey, the recollection grew on him. He could n't get it out of his head. Curiosity, resentment, vindictiveness, a cold, creeping cunning, a score of conflicting emotions, zigzagged to and fro in his mind; he glared through them at the walls of his cage. But worst outrage of all was the creeping realization—and his body stiffened at the thought—that he was even now, and perhaps even a little more than ever, afraid of the tree. When you finally deal with a relative who has been a pest to you all your life, the one thing you do not look for is an interference of that kind.

He could not deny it, the tree had impressed him. The moment he thought of his brother, of the country, even of his boyhood, there it was. It had impressed him so much that the upholstered button had now completely disappeared, and he seemed to be actually in the presence of the tree again. He saw it as vividly as if its image hung there before his very eyes in the slightly self-warmed air of his solitary compartment. The experience filled him with so sudden a flood of aversion and resentment that the voice of the guard chanting the name

of his destination reached him only just in time to set him frantically pulling down his frozen window and ejecting himself out of the train.

One hasty glance around him showed that he was the sole traveler to alight on the frosted timbers of the obscure little station. A faint rosi-ness in the west foretold the decline of the still wintry day. The firs that flanked the dreary passenger-shed of the platform stood burdened already with the blackness of coming night.

He was elderly, he was obese, his heart was none too sound, at least as compared with his head; yet if he intended to catch the last train home, he had scarcely two hours in which to reach his half-brother's wretched little house, to congratulate him on his guineas, to refuse to accept repayment of his loan, to sneer at his tree, and to return to the station.

A bark at a weedy young porter in mittens, with mouth ajar over his long teeth, sent him ambling off for a conveyance. The fruit merchant stood under the shed, in his frieze coat and square, hard hat, and watched the train glide out of the station. The screech of its engine, horning up into the windless air, had exactly expressed his own peculiar sentiments.

There was not a living being in sight whereon to breathe a curse. Only himself, a self he had been vaguely cursing throughout his tedious journey. The frozen landscape lay white in the dying day. The sun hung like the yolk of an egg above the still horizon. Some menace in the very look of this sullen object hinted that P. P. might long since have crossed the bourne from which no belated draft on any earthly bank had ever been known to come. The thought

diverted into more rugged channels the current of the talk which he had intended to engage in with his half-brother. In other words, he would give the silly fool a bit of his mind. The fact was, their last quarrel, if anything so one-sided could be called a quarrel, had tinctured the fruit merchant's outlook on the world a good deal more densely than he would until now have confessed.

No living creature, no sound, stirred the air. The fair country lay cold, as if in a swoon. Like a shallow inverted saucer a becalmed sky curved itself over the unbroken quiet of the fields. His broad cleft chin thrust into his muffler, his hands into his pockets, the stranger to these parts stood waiting; just stood there with his small black eyes staring desolately out of his clothes. Why, you might as well be marooned in a foreign land, or on a stage, sterile, cold, vacant, with not a single soul in the audience. At the sound of wheels and hoofs, he coughed as if in uncontrollable indignation, and turned smartly on his heel.

§ 2

With a gesture of disdain the fruit merchant sourly thrust a shilling into the weedy porter's immense-knuckled hand, and mounted into the ancient cab that had somehow been excavated from the country-side stagnating all about them. The man on the box was like some cautious and obscure little animal that had been dug up out of the earth. When given his direction, his face had fallen into an indescribable expression beneath its whiskers—an expression, it appeared, which was its nearest approach to a smile.

"And don't spare your horse," had barked his fare, slamming the rickety door behind him.

A railway-carriage, even of the most antique description, when its glass is opaque with rime, is a little less like a prison-cell than a four-wheeled cab. For which reason, perhaps, as the vehicle ground on beneath the misty, leafless elms, the frigid air was allowed to beat softly in from the open window upon its occupant's slightly impurpled face. And still, on and on, memory retrieved for him, now here, now there, every incident of his last experience on this selfsame road. It had been summer-time—June. He had been twelve years younger, a good gross of years less prosperous, and perhaps not quite so easily fanned into a peculiar helpless state of rage.

Indeed, his actual meeting with his half-brother at the little white garden-gate had been almost friendly. So friendly that it would hardly have been supposed they were in any way unpleasingly related to one another, or that the least responsibility of each to each could have caused any kind of festering recrimination. Not that P. P. was even then the kind of person one hastens to introduce to one's friends. You not only never knew how he would look or what he would say; you were n't even certain what he might do. A rolling stone that merely fails to gather moss is a harmless object in comparison with one that appears to gather momentum. And even the most trifling suggestion not so much of eccentricity as of an alien and crooked gleam in the eye is apt to make the most respectable company a little uneasy.

Not that the two half-brothers had ever discussed together their aims and

intentions and ideas about life, their desires or motives or hopes or aversions or apprehensions or prejudices. The fruit merchant had his fair share of most of these human incentives, but he also had principles, and one of them was to keep his mouth shut. They had met, had shaken hands, had exchanged remarks on the weather. Then P. P., in his frayed jacket and slippers, had aimlessly led him off with an expressionless face into the garden, had aimlessly dropped a few distant remarks about their common past, and then, surrounded as they were by the scenery, scents, and noises of summer, had pushed his knotted hands into his trousers' pockets and fallen silent, his gray, vacant eyes fixed on the tree.

Apart from a clump of elms in the distance, there was nothing in view even to challenge it for beauty, growth, and station. From its station all but at the foot of the broken-hedged, straggling garden, it rose to heaven, a prodigious, spreading, ascendant cone, with its long, dark, green, pointed leaves. It stood, from first springing branch to apex, a motionless, somnolent fountain of flowers.

If his half-brother had taken the fruit merchant into a dingy little greenhouse and had shown him an ailing plant that with care, water, and guano had been raised from some far-fetched seed—well, that might have been something to boast about. He himself was in the trade. He knew a Jaffa orange from a mandarin. The stuff had to *grow*, of course, and he was broad-minded enough to approve of rural enterprise. Giant mangolds and prize pumpkins did no harm.

He had stared broodingly about him. The garden was a waste, the

hedges untrimmed, a rank, lusty growth of weeds flaunted their flowers at the sun. And this tree—it must have been flourishing here for centuries past, a positive eyesore to any practical gardener. P. P. could n't even put a name to it, yet by the fixed, idiotic, dreamy look on his face you might have supposed it was a gift from heaven; that, having waved his hands about like those colored hum-bugs with the mango, the thing had sprung up out of the ground by sheer magic.

Nor that the fruit merchant had denied that it was unique. He had never seen, nor would he ever want to see, its double. The sun had beaten down upon his head; a low, enormous drone filled the air; the reflected light dazed his eyes. A momentary faintness had stolen over him as he had turned once more and glanced again into his half-brother's long, bony face—the absent eyes, the prominent cheek, the graying hair dappled with sunlight.

"How do you *know* it 's unique?" he had asked. "It may be as common as blackberries in other parts of the country—or abroad. One of the officers on the *Catamaran* was telling me—"

"I don't know," his half-brother had interrupted him. "But I have been looking at trees all my life. This resembles all, reminds me of none. Besides, I'm not going abroad, at least for the present."

What had he meant by that? The fruit merchant had n't inquired; had merely stood there in the flowers and grasses, staring up into the spreading branches, almost involuntarily shaking his head at the pungent sweetness that hung dense and sickly in the air. And the old familiar symptoms began

to stir in him, symptoms which his intimates could have described in one word—fuming. He was not denying it, not he: the tree was remarkable as trees go. For one thing, it bore two distinct kinds and shapes of blossom. The one circular and full and milky in a dark cup-like calyx, with clusters of scarlet-tipped pistils; the other a pale-yellow oval, three-petaled, with a central splash of orange. He had surreptitiously squeezed a couple of the fallen flowers into his pocket-book, had taken them out at his office the next morning to show them to the partner he had afterward bought out of the business, only to find them black, slimy, and unrecognizable, and to be laughed at for his pains.

"What 's the use of the thing?" he had next inquired of his half-brother. "Is it edible?"

At which, with the faint smile on his face that had infuriated the fruit merchant even as a boy, the other had merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not try it on the pigs?"

"I don't keep pigs."

Keep pigs, indeed! There was n't the faintest symptom that he would ever be able to keep himself.

"Well, are n't there any birds in these parts?" It had been a singularly false move.

"It has brought its own," had been his half-brother's muttered retort.

There was no denying it, at least so far as the fruit merchant's small ornithological knowledge went. At that very moment birds of a peculiarly vivid-green sheeniness were hovering and dipping between the deep blue of the sky and the mountainous blossoming. Little birds, with unusually long and attenuated bills, playing, fluttering, lispings, courting, and ap-

parently sucking the heady nectar from the snowy and ivory cups, while poised like animate gems on the wing. He had again opened his mouth, but his half-brother had laid a lean, tingling hand on his sleeve.

"Listen!" he said

Half-stifled, jetting, delirious bursts of song twinkled, belled, rose, died, overflowed from the tented depths of the tree, like the yells and laughter of a playground of children suddenly released for an unexpected half-holiday. Listen, indeed! The noise of the creatures was still echoing in his ears as he sat there, bulkily swaying, his eyes fixed on the pallid, gliding hedge-row from his fusty cab.

P. P. had not positively claimed that every single chorister in the chorus was an exogenous visitant. He had gone further. He had gently bent down a low-lying fan of leaves and bloom, and not content with exhibiting one by one living specimens of a spotted-blue, iridescent little beetle, a horned kind of cockchafer, and a dappled black-and-yellow-mottled ladybird, all of them following their lives in these surroundings; he had also chased, in vain, a couple of exotic butterflies down the slope of the garden, and had pointed out little clumps of saffron and sky-blue flowers, and a rank, ungainly weed with a cluster of black helmet-shaped florets at its tips, asserting that they were as rare, as unprecedented, in those parts as the tree itself.

"You don't mean to say, because the thing 's brought its own vermin, that it 's any the better for that? We can do that in the fruit trade."

"It 's brought me," said the other, mooning meanwhile in the opposite direction.

"And where do you raise your per-tatoes and artichokes and scarlet runners? It looks to me like a damn' waste of soil."

The wandering greenish-gray eyes had rested for a moment on the puffy, contemptuous face a few inches beneath them without the faintest symptom of intelligence. Empty eyes, yet with a hint of danger in them, like a bright-green pool of water in an old quarry.

"You shall have a basket of the fruit, if you 'll risk it. It never really ripens; queer-looking seeds."

"You eat it yourself, then?"

The eyes slid away, the narrow shoulders lifted a little.

"I take things as they come." It was precisely how he had afterward taken the check.

Seated there, on each side of the deal table, in the bare, uncarpeted, uncurtained living-room of the cottage, over a luncheon of bread and dry cheese and onions, with the reflected light of the tree on his half-brother's face, the talk between the two of them had gradually degenerated into an altercation.

At length the fruit merchant, with some little relief, had completely lost his temper. A half-empty jam-pot buzzing with bees was no more appetizing an object because the insects were not of the usual variety. He had literally been stung into repeating a few semi-fraternal truths.

To submit to being half-starved simply because nobody with money to waste would so much as look at your bits of drawings; to sit there dreamily grinning at a tree in your back garden twenty times more useless because there was n't its like for miles around, even *if* there was n't; to be content to hang like a bloodsucker on the gen-

erosity of a relative half blood and half water—well, he had given P. P. a bit of his mind.

The fruit merchant instinctively drew a cold, fat hand down his face as a more and more precise recollection of the subsequent scene recurred to him. Mere silence can be insulting, and there was one thing about his half-brother, worse than all the rest of his peculiarities put together, that had never failed to reduce him to a helpless indignation—his eyes. They did n't see you even when they were fixed on you across two feet of deal board. They saw something else, and with no vestige of common courtesy.

And those hands! You could swear at a glance that they had never done a single honest day's work in their owner's life. Every sight of them had made it easier for the fruit merchant to work himself up into a blind refreshing rage. The cottage had fairly shaken to his abuse; the raw onions had danced under his fist on the table. And twining in and out between his roarings and shoutings had meandered on that other low, groping, dispassionate voice—his brother's.

He had found his own place, and there he intended to remain. Rather than sit on a stool in a counting-house writing invoices for crates of oranges and pineapples, he would hang himself from the topmost branches of the tree. You had your own life to lead, and it did n't matter if you died of it. He was not making any claims. There was nothing the same in this world for any two persons. And the more different everything was, the more closely you should cling to the difference.

Oh, yes, it was mere chance, or whatever you liked to call it, that had

brought him here, mere chance that the tree had not even been charged for in the rent. There it was, and it would last him his lifetime; and, when that was over, he would n't complain. He had wagged his skimpy beard, a pencil between his fingers. No, he would n't complain if they just dug a hole in the garden and shoveled his body in under the grass within reach of the rootlets. What 's your body?

"They 'll bury me all right when I 'm safely dead. Try it; it 's a fair speculation."

"Try what?" The fruit merchant's countenance had suddenly set like a gargoyle in cast-iron.

His half-brother had nodded toward a dingy portfolio that stood leaning against a half-empty book-case. And at that his guest had laid about him with a will.

"So that 's the kind of profit you are hoping to make out of your old bee-bush! That 's your profit? That 's your fine airs—your miserable scribblings and scragglings?"

He had once more slammed down his huge fist on the table and delivered his ultimatum.

"See here, I give you a hundred pounds here and now. There 's no claim on me, not a shred. We don't even share the same mother, even if we share the same dad. You talk this abject rubbish to me. You have never earned a decent penny in your life. You never will. You are a fool and a loafer. Go to the parish and go for good. I 'm sick of it, d' ye hear? Sick of it. You sit there whiffing that I have n't eyes in my head, that I don't know black from white, that you 'd rather hang your miserable carcass in your wretched old tree than take a respectable job.

Well, hang it there. It won't break the branches if this is the only kind of meal you can give a visitor! I'm done with you. I wash my hands of you."

He had, inaccurately, pantomimed the operation, sweeping over the jam-pot as he did so; and now drew in his breath—a cold breath, too, as, with eyes fixed on the ever-lightening hedgerows beyond his oblong window, he remembered the renewed red-hot stab of pain that had transfixed the ball of his thumb.

§ 3

It recalled him instantaneously to his surroundings. Scrambling up from his seat, he ejected his head out of the cab into the open.

"Whoa, there, d' ye hear? I'm getting out."

The horse was dragged up on its haunches, the cab came to a standstill, and to the roaring suspirations of the animal the fruit merchant alighted on the tinkling ice of a frozen wayside puddle of water. He turned himself about. Time and the night had not tarried during his journey. The east was a blaze of moonlight. The moon glared in the gray heavens like a circular, flat little window of glass.

"Wait here," the fruit merchant bade his cabman in the desolation. "You've pretty near shaken the head off my body."

The cabman ducked his own small head in reply, and saluted his fare with a jerk of his whip.

"You won't be long," he sang out between his whiskers.

What did he mean by that? was the fruit merchant's querulous question to himself as he mounted the few

remaining yards of by-lane toward the crest of the slope. He was tired and elderly and cold. A pathetic look, one almost of sadness, came into his face. He pushed up his muffler and coughed. There replied the faintest echo from the low copse that bordered the lane. Grass, crystallized with hoarfrost, muffled his footsteps. What had he meant by that? repeated self to self, but not as if expectant of an answer.

When well out of sight of the cabman and his vehicle beneath the slope of the hill, the fruit merchant paused, lifting his eyes. League beyond league beneath him, as if to the confines of the world, the country-side spread on, frost-beclad meadow, wood, and winding lane. And one sole house in sight—a small, tumbledown, lightless, huddling cottage, its ragged thatch and walls checkered black with shadow and dazzling white with wash of moonshine. And there, lifting itself into the empty skies, its twigs and branches sweeping the stars, stood the single naked, gigantic tree.

The fruit merchant gazed across at it, like an obese, minute Belial on the ramparts of Eden. He had been fooled, then, tricked. He might have guessed the fatuity of his enterprise. He had guessed it. The house was empty; the bird had flown. Why for a single instant had he dreamed otherwise? Simply because all these years he had been deceived into believing there was a kind of honesty in the fellow. Just that something quixotic, stupid, stubborn, dense, dull, demented which—nothing but lies, then.

That bee in his bonnet, that snake in his grass; nothing but lies. There was no principle by which you could

judge a man like that; and yet—well, after all, he was like anybody else. Give him a taste of the sweets of success, and his boasted solitude, his contempt for the mere decencies of life, his pretended disgust at men more capable and square-headed than himself, had vanished into thin air. There were fools in the world, he had discovered, who would pay ninety-seven guineas for a second- or third-hand scrabble of a drawing. "Right you are; hand over the dibs, and I am off!"

A scornful, yet lugubrious, smile stole over the fruit merchant's purplish features. He would be honest about it. He positively enjoyed acknowledging when a rival had bested him over a bargain. He would even agree that he had always nursed his own little superstitions. And now all that fine, silly talk—sheer fudge. He had been himself childish fool enough to be impressed by it; yes, and to have been even a little frightened by—a tree!

He eyed it there, that gaunt, prodigious weed; and then, with one furtive glance over his round shoulder toward the crest of the slope behind which lay his way of escape from this wintry landscape and from every memory of the buffoon who had cheated him, he slowly descended the hill, pushed open the broken gate, and entered the icy, untended garden.

Once more he came to a standstill in his frieze coat, and from under the brim of his hard hat stared up into the huge frigid branches. There are a supple lift and ease in the twigs of a tree asleep in winter. Green, living buds are everywhere huddling close in their drowsy defenses. Even the fruit merchant could distinguish be-

tween the dreaming and the dead, or at any rate between the unripe and the rotten. And as he looked, two thoughts scurried like rats out of the wainscot of his mind. Those lean, shrunken twigs, those massive vegetable bones—the tree was dead! And up there— He shifted rapidly to and fro in order to secure an uninterrupted view of a kind of huddling shape up aloft there, an object that appeared to be stooping crazily forward, as if on a similar quest in respect to himself.

But, no; he took a deep breath. The sudden knocking against the wall of his head ceased. He need not have alarmed himself: an optical illusion; nothing.

The tree *was* dead. That was clear—a gaunt, black, sapless nightmare. But the ungainly clump and shape, hoisted midway among its boughs, was not a huddling human body. It was only another kind of derelict parasite—withered mistletoe. And that gentle skeleton-like rattling high overhead was only the fingering of a faint breeze in the moonlight, clacking twig against twig.

Maybe it would have simplified matters if— But no need to dwell on that. One corpse at a time was enough for any man on a night like this and in a country as cheerless as the plains of Gomorrah. A phrase or two out of his familiar bills of lading recurred to the fruit merchant's mind—"the act of God." There was something so horrific in the contorted set of the branches outthrust in ungainly menace above his head that he was reminded of no less a depravity than the devil himself. Thank the Lord! his half-brother had not remembered to send him a parcel of the fruit.

If ever poison showed in a plant, it

haunted every knot and knuckle of this derelict. Judgment had overtaken it—the act of God. That 's what came of boasting. That 's what came of idling a useless life away in a day-dream at other people's expense. And now the cunning bird was flown. The insult of his half-brother's triumph stabbed the fruit merchant like a sword.

A sudden giddiness, the roar as of water, caused in part, no doubt, by the posture of his head, swept over him, reverberated in his ears. He thrust a cautious hand into the breast of his coat and lowered his eyes. They came to a stay on the rugged, moonlit bole. And there, with hardly less intensity of gaze, they once more fixed themselves.

The natural living bark of the tree had been of a russet gray, resembling that of the beech. Apart from a peculiar shimmeringness due to the frost that crystallized it over, and as the skin of a dead thing, that bark now suggested the silveriness of leprosy. So far, so good. But midway up the unbranched bole, at the height of from five to six feet from the ground, appeared a wide, peculiar cicatrice. The iridescent grayness here abruptly ended. Above it stretched a clear blank ring of darker color, knobbed over, in and out, with tiny gaudy clusters of fungi.

The fruit merchant stole in a pace or two. No feat of the inhuman this. Cleanly and precisely, the thick rind of the tree must sometime since have been cut and pared away in a wide, equal ring, a ring too far from the ground to have been the work of pigs or goats, too smooth and sharp-edged to have been caused by the gnawings of cattle. It was perfectly plain: the

sap-protecting skin of the thing had been deliberately cut and hacked away. The tree had been murdered. High in the moonlit heavens it gloated there, a victim.

Not until then did the fruit merchant stealthily turn and once more survey his half-brother's house. The slow and almost furtive movement of his head and shoulders suggested that the action was involuntary. From this garden side the aspect of the hovel was even more abject and disconsolate. Its one ivy-clustered chimney-stack was smokeless. The moonbeams rained softly and mercilessly on the flint walls, the boarded windows, the rat-and-bird-ravaged thatch.

Only a specter could be content with such a dwelling, and a guilt-stricken wretch at that. Yet without any doubt in the world the house was still inhabited, for a slender amber beam of light leaned out at an obtuse angle from some crevice in the shuttering wood into the vast bath of moonshine.

For a moment the fruit merchant hesitated. He could leave the garden and regain his cab without nearing the house; he could yet once more "wash his hands." Certainly, after sight of the maniac's treacherous work on his unique God-given tree he had not the faintest vestige of a desire to confront his half-brother. Quite the reverse. He would far rather fling a second hundred pounds after the first than be once more contaminated by the creature. There was something vile in his surroundings. In shadows as black as pitch, like these, any inconceivable evil creature might lie in covert. If the tree alive could decoy an alien fauna to its succulent nectar, the tree dead might well invite even



less pleasing ministrations. Come what would, he was prepared. It might startle him, but he was dead-cold already; and when your whole mind is filled with disgust and disquiet, there is no room for physical fear. You merely want to shake yourself free, edge out, and be off.

Nevertheless, the human intruder in this inhuman wilderness was already, and with great caution, making his way toward the house. On a pitch-black night he might have hesitated. Had n't venomous serpents the habit of stealing for their winter slumber into the crannies and hollows of fallen wood? Might not even the lightest northern zephyr bring down upon his head another vast bulk of timber from the withered labyrinth above? But so bright was the earth's lantern, so still the starry sky, that he could hear and even see the seeds from the humbler winter weeds scattering out from their yawning pods, as with exquisite care he brushed on through the tangling growths around him.

And having at length closely approached the walls, standing actually within a jutting shadow, he paused yet again and took a deep breath into his body before, gently lifting himself, he set his eye to the crevice from which poured out that slender shaft of light.

So artificially brilliant was the room within by comparison with the full moonlight of the fruit merchant's natural world without that for an instant or two he saw nothing. But he persevered, and after a while his round, protruding eye found itself master of at least half the space on the other side of the shutters. Stilled through and through, his fingers

clutching the frosted sill, he stood there half suspended on his toes and as if hypnotized.

For scarcely more than a yard distant from his own there stooped a face—his half-brother's, a face to haunt you to your dying day. It was surmounted by a kind of nightcap, and was almost unrecognizable. The unfolding of the hours of twelve solitary years had played havoc with the once familiar features. The projecting brows above the angular cheekbones resembled polished stone. The ears stood out like the vans of a bat on each side above the corded neck. The thin, unkempt beard on the narrow jaw brushed the long, gnarled hand that was moving with a great and tedious care on the bare table beneath it.

Motionlessly, the hanging paraffin-lamp poured its radiance upon this engrossed, cadaverous visage, revealing every line and bone, hollow and wrinkle.

Nevertheless, its possessor, this old man, shrunken and hideous in his frame of abject poverty, his arms drawn close up to his fallen body, worked sedulously on and on. And behind and around him showed the fruit of his labors. Pinned to the scaling walls, propped on the ramshackle shelf above his fireless hearthstone, and even against the stale remnant of a loaf of bread on the cracked blue dish beside him, was a litter of pictures. And everywhere, lovely and marvelous in all its guises, the tree—the tree in spring's delight, in summer's quiet wonder, in autumn's garish decline, in naked, slumbering wintry grace. The colors glowed from the old fine, rough paper like lamps and gems.

There were drawings of birds, too—birds of dazzling plumage, of flowers and butterflies, their crimson and emerald, rose and saffron, seemingly shimmering and astir; their every mealy and feathery and polloned boss and petal and plume on fire with hoarded life and beauty. And there a viper with its sinuous, molten scales; and there a face and shape looking out of its nothingness such as would awaken even a dreamer in a dream.

Only three sounds in that night quiet, and these scarcely discernible, stirred in the watcher's ear: the faint, shrill singsong of the flame in the lamp, the harsh, wheezing breath of the artist, and the noise of rats or mice. This austere and dying creature must have come in at last from the world of nature and mankind a long time ago. The arm that had given the tree its quietus had now not the strength to lift an ax. Yet the ungainly fingers toiled assiduously on.

The fruit merchant, spying in on the old half-starved creature that sat there burning swiftly away among his insane gewgaws, as nearly broke out crying as laughing. He was frightened and elated, mute and bursting with words. The act of God! Rather than even remotely resemble that old scarecrow in his second childhood pushing that tiny-bladed knife across the surface of a flat of wood, he would—an empty and resolute look stole into the gazing eye.

Not that he professed to understand. He knew nothing. His head was completely empty. The last shred of rage and vindictiveness had vanished away. He was glad he had come, for now he was going back. What little of the present and future remained would soon be the past.

He, too, was aging. *His* life also was coming to an end. He stared on, oh, yes. And not even a nephew to inherit his snug little fortune. Worldly goods, ship-load on ship-load, well. Since he could not take it away with him, he would leave it behind. He would bequeath it to charity, to the W. F. M. C. A., perhaps; and he would make a note of the hundred pounds.

Not in malice; only to leave things businesslike and in order; to do your duty by a greedy and ungrateful world even though you were soon to be washing your hands of that, too. All waste, nothing but waste! But he thanked the Lord he had kept his sanity, that he was respected; that he was n't in the artificial fruit trade, the stuff your grandmother belled under glass. He thanked the Lord he was not foul to look at; foul, probably, to smell; and a poison even to think about.

Yet still he peeped on, this old Tom, though at no *Lady Godiva*. They would buy right enough; there was no doubt of that. Christie's would some day be humming with the things. He did n't deny the old lunatic that. He knew a bird when he saw it, even on paper. Ninety-seven guineas! At that rate there was more money swimming about in this pestilent hovel than ever he himself could lay his practised hands on.

And there were fools in plenty, rich, dabbling, affected, silly fools—dilettantes, you called 'em—who would never know that their lying, preposterous P. P. had destroyed the very life of the tree that had given its all for him. And why? And why? The fruit merchant was almost tempted to burn down the miserable cabin over his half-brother's head.

Who could tell? A gust of wind stirred in the bedraggled thatch, feebly whined in the keyhole.

And at that moment, as if an angry and helpless thought could make itself audible even above the hungry racketing of mice and the melancholic whistling of a paraffin-lamp—at that moment the corpse-like countenance, almost within finger-touch on the other side of the table, slowly raised itself from the labor of its regard, and appeared to be searching through the shutter's cranny as if into the fruit merchant's brain. The glance swept through him like an avalanche. No, no. But one instantaneous confrontation, and he had pushed himself back from the impious walls as softly as an immense sack of hay.

These were not eyes in that abominable countenance. Speck-pupiled, greenish-gray, unfocused under the protuberant mat of eyebrow, they remained as still as a salt and stagnant sea. And in their uplifted depths, stretching out into endless distances, the fruit merchant had seen regions of a country whence for neither love nor money he could ever harvest one fruit, one pip, one cankered bud. And blossoming there beside a glassy stream in the mid-distance of far-mountained sward—a tree.

§ 4

In after years an old, fat, vulgar, and bronchitic figure, muffled up in a pathetic shawl, would sometimes be seen seated in a place of honor, its hard, square hat upon its thick, bald skull, within positive reach of the jovial

auctioneer's ivory hammer. To purchase every P. P. that came into the market was a dream beyond even a multimillionaire's avarice. But small beetles or grubs or single feathers drawn "from the life" were within scope of the fruit merchant's purse. The eye that showed not the faintest vestige of reflected glory from the orange of the orange, the gamboge of the lemon, or the russet bronze of the pomegranate in their crated myriads would fitfully light up awhile as, one by one, and with reiterated grunts of satisfaction, he afterward, in the secrecy of his home, consigned these indifferent and "early" works of art to the flames.

But since his medical man had warned him that any manifestation of passion would almost unquestionably prove his ultimate manifestation of anything, he steadily avoided thinking of the tree. Yet there it remained, unexorcisable, ineradicable in his fading imagination.

Indeed, he finally expired in the small hours one black winter's morning, and as peacefully as a child, having dreamed that he was looking through a crevice into what could not be hell, but might be limbo or purgatory, the place of departed spirits. For there sat his half-brother, quite, quite still, and all about him, to be seen, gay and painted birds and crystal flowers and damasked butterflies; and, as it were, sylphs and salamanders, shapes of an unearthly beauty. But all of them strangely, preternaturally still, as if in a peep-show, as if stuffed.

