
When the Green Woods Laugh

H. E. Bates was born in 1905 at Rushden in Northamptonshire and was educated at Kettering Grammar School. He worked as a journalist and clerk on a local newspaper before publishing his first book, *The Two Sisters*, when he was twenty. In the next fifteen years he acquired a distinguished reputation for his stories about English country life. During the Second World War he was a Squadron Leader in the R.A.F. and some of his stories of service life, *The Greatest People in the World* (1942), *How Sleep the Brave* (1943) and *The Face of England* (1953), were written under the pseudonym of 'Frying Officer X'. His subsequent novels of Burma, *The Purple Plain* and *The jacaranda Tree*, and of India, *The Scarlet Sword*, stemmed directly or indirectly from his experience in the Eastern theatre of war. Perhaps one of his most famous works of fiction is the best-selling novel *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944).

In 1958 his writing took a new direction with the appearance of *The Darting Buds of May*, the first of the popular Larkin family novels, which was followed by *A Breath of French Air* (1959), *When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960), *Oh! To Be in England* (1963) and *A Little of What You Fancy* (1970). His autobiography appeared in three volumes, *The Vanished World* (1969), *The Blossoming World* (1971) and *The World in Ripeness* (1972). His last works included the novel *The Triple Echo* (1971), and a collection of short stories, *The Song of the Wren* (1972). H. E. Bates also wrote miscellaneous works on gardening, essays on country life, several plays including *The Day of Glory* (1945), *The Modern Short Story* (1941) and a story for children, *The White Admiral* (1968). His works have been translated into sixteen languages. A posthumous collection of his stories, *The Yellow Meads of Asphodel*, appeared in 1976.

H. E. Bates was awarded the C.B.E. in 1973 and died in January 1974. He was married in 1931 and had four children.

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When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy,
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by;
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it:

BLAKE: *Songs of Innocence*

After parking the Rolls Royce between the pigsties and the muck heap where twenty young turkeys were lazily scratching in the hot mid-morning air Pop Larkin, looking spruce and perky in a biscuit-coloured summer suit, paused to look back across his beloved little valley.

The landscape, though so familiar to him, presented a strange sight. Half-way up the far slope, in fiercely brilliant sunlight, two strawberry fields were on fire. Little cockscombs of orange flame were running before a light breeze, consuming yellow alleys of straw. Behind them the fields spread black, smoking slowly with low blue clouds that drifted away to spread across parched meadows all as yellow as the straw itself after months without rain.

‘Burning the strawberry fields off,’ Pop told Ma as he went into the kitchen. ‘That’s a new one all right. Never seen that before. Wonder what the idea of that is?’

‘Everything’ll burn off soon if we don’t get rain,’ Ma said. ‘Me included. As I said to the gentleman who was here this morning.’

Ma was wearing the lightest of sleeveless dresses, sky-blue with a low loose neckline. Her pinafore, tied at the waist, was bright yellow. The dress was almost transparent too, so that Pop could see her pink shoulder-straps showing through, a fact that excited him so much that he gave one of her bare olive-skinned arms a long smooth caress, quite forgetting at the same time to ask what gentleman she was referring to.

‘Why I’m cooking on a morning like this I can’t think,’ Ma said. Her hands were white with flour. Trays of apricot flans, raspberry tarts, and maids-of-honour covered the kitchen table. A smell of roasting lamb rose from the stove. ‘I’d be watering my zinnias if I had any sense. Or sitting under a tree somewhere.’

Pop picked up a still warm maid-of-honour and was about to slip it into his mouth when he changed his mind and decided to kiss Ma instead. Ma returned the kiss with instant generosity, her hands touching his face and her mouth partly open and soft, making Pop think hopefully that she might be in one of her primrose-and-bluebell moods. This made him begin to caress the nape of her neck, one of the places where she was most sensitive, but she stopped him by saying:

‘You’d better not get yourself worked up. That gentleman’ll be back here any minute now. Said he’d be back by half-past eleven.’

‘What gentleman?’

‘This gentleman I told you about. He was here just after ten. Said he wanted to see you urgently.’

Insurance feller, Pop thought. Or fire extinguishers. Something of that breed.

‘What’d he look like?’

‘Dark suit and a bowler hat and a gold watch-chain,’ Ma said. ‘And in a big black Rolls. With a chauffeur.’

‘Sounds like a brewer,’ Pop said, laughing, and started to take off his biscuit-coloured

summer jacket. Thinking at the same time that a glass of beer would be a nice idea, he paused to ask Ma if she would like one too.

‘Had two already this morning,’ Ma said. ‘Could face another one though.’

Pop put the maid-of-honour in his mouth and started to move towards the fridge. Ma, who was rolling out broad fresh flannels of dough, looked up suddenly from the pastry board as he came back with two iced bottles of Dragon’s Blood and laughed loudly, her enormous bust bouncing.

‘You look a fine sketch,’ she said. ‘Better go and look at yourself in the glass before your visitor arrives.’

Pop, looking into the kitchen mirror, laughed too, seeing his face covered with flour dust where Ma had kissed him.

‘Good mind to keep it on,’ he said. ‘Might frighten this feller away.’

He was, he thought, in no state for visitors; it was far too hot. He also had it in mind to ask Ma if she was in the mood to lie down for a bit after lunch. Mariette and Charley were at market; the rest of the children wouldn’t be home till four. There wouldn’t be a soul to disturb the peace of the afternoon except little Oscar.

‘Well, you’d better make up your mind one way or the other quick,’ Ma said, ‘because here comes the Rolls now.’

Pop sank his Dragon’s Blood quickly and Ma said: ‘Better let me get it off,’ and lifted the edge of her pinafore to his face, wiping flour dust away. This brought her body near to him again and he seized the chance to whisper warmly:

‘Ma, what about a bit of a lie-down after lunch?’ He playfully nipped the soft flesh of her thigh. ‘Feel like it? Perfick opportunity.’

‘Don’t get me all excited,’ Ma said. ‘I won’t know where to stop.’

In a mood of turmoil, thinking of nothing but how pleasant it was on hot summer afternoons to lie on the bed with Ma, Pop reluctantly walked into the yard. It was so hot that even the turkeys had given up scratching and were now gathered into a panting brood under an elderberry tree from which black limp inside-out umbrellas of berries were hanging lifelessly. Over in the strawberry fields lines of flame were still darting and running about the smoking straw and from the road the sound of the Rolls Royce door snapping shut was as sharp as a revolver shot in the sun-charged air.

It was in Pop’s mind to dismiss whoever was coming with a light-hearted quip such as ‘No today thank you. Shut the gate,’ when he stopped in abrupt surprise.

Ma’s visiting gentleman in the dark suit, bowler hat, and gold watch-chain had suddenly turned out to be a woman in a white silk suit covered with the thinnest of perpendicular black pencil-lines and with a small black-and-white hat to match.

She came across the yard, plumpish, blonde, chalky pink about the face and pretty in a half-simpering rosebud sort of way, with outstretched hands.

‘Mrs Jerebohm,’ she said. ‘How do you do?’ She spoke with the slightest of lisps, half laughing. ‘You must be Larkin?’

Pop, resenting the absence of what he called a handle to his name no less than the intrusion on his plan for a little privacy with Ma, murmured something about *that* was what he always

had been and what could he do for her?

Lisping again, Mrs Jerebohm said, with a hint of rapture:

‘Mr Jerebohm simply couldn’t wait to see the house for himself. So that’s where he’s gone and he wants us to meet him there. I hope that dove-tails all right? You know, fits in?’ It was not long before Pop was to discover that dovetailing was one of Mrs Jerebohm’s favourite and most repeated expressions. She simply adored things to dove-tail. She simply loved to have things zip-up, buttonhole, click, and otherwise be clipped into neat and unimpeachable order.

‘If we like it I hope we’ll have it all zipped-up this afternoon,’ she said. ‘That’s the way Mr Jerebohm likes to do business.’

Silent, Pop feigned a sort of ample innocence. What the ruddy hell, he asked himself, was the woman talking about?

‘They told us at the inn you wanted to sell and the minute we heard we had a sort of thing about it.’

Inn? Pop could only presume she meant The Hare and Hounds and at the same time couldn’t think what that simple pub had to do with her constant lisping raptures. She fixed him now with eyes as blue as forget-me-nots and a quick open smile that showed that two of her front teeth were crossed. That explained the lisping.

‘Could we go right away? I mean does that dove-tail and all that? We could go in the Rolls.’

Pop, bemusedly thinking of roast lamb and mint sauce, cold beer, fresh apricot flan, and Ma lying on the bed in nothing but her slip or even less, suddenly felt a spasm of impatience and used the very same expression he had once used to Mr Charlton, in the days when he had been as eager as a hunter to collect taxes.

‘You must have come to the wrong house, Madam,’ he said. ‘Or else I’m off my rocker.’

‘Oh! no.’ When Mrs Jerebohm flung up her hands with a rapturous lilt, which she did quite often, it had the effect of stretching the white suit across her bust, so that it momentarily seemed to puff up, tightly. It made her, Pop thought, with her smallish blue eyes and crossed teeth, not at all unlike a white eager budgerigar.

‘Oh! no,’ she said again. ‘That doesn’t fit. There can’t be two people who own Gore Court, can there?’

It had hardly occurred to Pop, quick as ever in reaction, what she was talking about before she fluttered lispingly on:

‘You can show us over, can’t you? You do want to sell, don’t you?’

‘Going to pull the whole shoot down one of these days,’ Pop said, ‘when I get the time.’

Mrs Jerebohm expressed sudden shock with prayerful lifts of her hands, bringing them together just under her chin.

‘Oh! but that’s awful sacrilege, isn’t it? Isn’t that awful sacrilege?’

Pop started to say that he didn’t know about that but the first words were hardly framed before she went lisping on:

‘But we could just see it, perhaps, couldn’t we? At the inn they assured us you were keen to sell. You see we’re mad to have a place in the country. Absolutely mad. So when we heard –

'Big place,' Pop said. 'Fifteen bedrooms.'

'That would suit us. That would fit all right. We'd want to have people down. My husband wants shooting parties and all that sort of thing.'

'Ah! he shoots does he?'

'Not yet,' she said, 'but he's going to learn.'

A sharp, searching fragrance of roast lamb drifted across the yard, causing Pop to sniff with uplifted nostrils. Ma, he thought, must be opening the oven door, and with relish he also remembered maids-of-honour, raspberry tarts, and apricot flans. He wondered too how many vegetables Ma was cooking and said:

'Couldn't manage nothing just now, I'm afraid. My dinner's on the table.'

'Oh? Not really?'

'Ma'll be dishing up in ten minutes and she won't have it spoiled.'

'Oh! be an angel.'

The appeal of the small forget-me-not eyes was too direct to resist and Pop answered it with a liquid look of his own, gazing at Mrs Jerebohm with a smoothness that most women would have found irresistibly disturbing. It was like a slow indirect caress.

On Mrs Jerebohm it had the effect of making her retreat a little. She seemed to become momentarily cool. She showed her crossed teeth in an unsmiling gap, much as if she had realized that her fluttering 'Oh! be an angel' had gone too far into realms of familiarity.

'I can wait for you to finish your lunch,' she said. 'I'm perfectly content to wait.'

'Oh! come in and have a bite,' Pop said. 'Ma'll be pleased to death.'

Mrs Jerebohm gave an answer of such incredible frigidity that Pop almost felt himself frozen in the hot July sunshine.

'No thank you. We never eat at midday.'

Pop could find no possible answer to this astounding, unreal statement; it struck him as being nothing but a fabulous lunacy. It couldn't possibly be that there were people who didn't eat at midday. It couldn't possibly be.

'I will wait in the car.'

'Have a wet then. Have a glass o' beer,' Pop said, his voice almost desperate. He was feeling an urgent need for a glass, perhaps two, himself. 'Come and sit down in the cool.'

Mrs Jerebohm, already cool enough as she surveyed the piles of junk lying everywhere across the sun-blistered yard, the now prostrate brood of turkeys and the Rolls Royce incongruously parked by the muck-heap, merely showed her small crossed teeth again and said:

'Have your dinner, Larkin. I'll be waiting for you.'

Turning abruptly, she went away on short almost prancing steps towards the road. Instinctively Pop gazed for a moment at the retreating figure in its pencilled white skirt. The hips, he thought, were over-large for the rest of the body. As they swung fleshily from side to side they looked in some way haughty and seemed frigidly to admonish him.

Going back into the house he felt something more than thirst to be the strongest of his reactions. The morning had suddenly become unreal. In a half-dream he poured himself a

glass of beer, drank part of it and then decided he needed a real blinder of a pick-me-up to restore his sanity.

Ma was busy laying the lunch table as he concocted a powerful mixture of gin, whisky, and French vermouth, a liberal dash of bitters and plenty of ice.

‘Been gone a long time,’ Ma said. ‘What did he want after all?’

In a low ruminative voice Pop explained to Ma that his visitor was, after all, a she.

‘Wants to buy Gore Court. Wants me to show her and her husband over after dinner.’

‘What’s she like? No wonder you been gone a long time.’

Pop swirled ice round and round in his glass, moodily gazing at it. He drank deeply of gin, whisky, and vermouth, waited for it to reach his empty stomach and then in tones of complete unreality revealed to Ma the shocking news that he had just met someone who, believe it or not, never ate at midday.

‘Can’t be right in her mind,’ Ma said.

‘Fact,’ Pop said. ‘Invited her in to lunch but that’s what she said. Never eats at midday.’

‘Why? Does she think it common or something?’

Pop said that could be it and drank solidly again. A moment later Ma opened the oven door and took out a sizzling brown leg of lamb surrounded by golden braised potatoes, so that the morning at once woke into new excruciating life, with pangs of hunger leaping through Pop like a pain.

‘You hear something new every day’ he said, ‘don’t you, Ma? Something as shakes you.’

Ma said you certainly did and then suddenly, with no warning at all, popped the leg of lamb back into the oven again.

‘You mean she’s still waiting out there? She’ll faint off or something.’

More than likely, Pop thought. Yes, she was waiting. Depressedly he poured another couple of inches of gin into his glass, hardly hearing Ma say:

‘I’d better take her a bite of something out. Glass of milk and a slice of flan or something. She can’t sit out there on an empty stomach. She’ll go over.’

Less than a minute later Ma was away across the yard on an errand that was less of mercy than one of sheer correction. It simply wasn’t right for people to do these things. It was as plain as the moon: if you didn’t eat you didn’t live. It was criminal. You faded away.

Pop had hardly mixed himself a third pick-me-up before Ma was back again, bearing the offering of apricot flan and milk, now rejected.

‘On a very strict diet,’ Ma said. ‘Trying to get her weight down. Got a proper chart and pills and units and points and all that sort of thing.’

Pop, remembering Mrs Jerebohm’s over-rounded thighs, tight in the thin white suit, was suddenly jolted by piercing shrieks from Ma. Her great sixteen-stone body seemed to be laughing from every pore.

‘I told her to look at me,’ Ma said. ‘I think it cheered her up a bit. She was no more than a sylph, I said.’

Pop put the word away in his mind for further reference. Ma took the sizzling leg of lamb

from the oven again and a few moments later Pop was deftly carving it into generous pink-brown slices, to which Ma added steaming hillocks of fresh-buttered French beans, two sorts of potatoes, new and braised, mint sauce, and vegetable marrow baked with cheese.

Bent over this feast in attentive reverence, Pop at last paused to drain a glass of beer and look up at Ma and say:

‘Ma, what did I pay for Gore Court in the end? I forget now.’

‘First it was going to be nine thousand. Then it was seven.’

Pop helped himself to five or six more new potatoes, remarking at the same time how good they were in the long hot summer, and then sat in thought for a moment or so.

‘What shall I ask? Ten?’

‘Show a nice profit. Might be able to have that swimming pool Mariette keeps talking about if you brought the deal off.’

There was a lot of land there, Pop reminded her. And all those greenhouses and stables and asparagus beds. To say nothing of the lake and the cherry orchard. He thought he’d ask twelve.

‘Why not fourteen?’ Ma said serenely. ‘You can always come down.’

Pop said that was true, but was Ma quite sure it wasn’t too much?

‘Not on your nelly. Look at the paltry bits of land they ask five hundred for nowadays. Don’t give it away.’

No chance of that, Pop said. Not if he knew it. No fear.

‘Go up a bit if anything,’ Ma said. ‘No harm in trying. Ask fifteen.’

Pop, ruminating briefly, thought he detected sense in this and finally, with an airy flourish of a hand, said he thought it wouldn’t choke him if he asked seventeen.

‘Now you’re talking,’ Ma said. ‘Now you’re using your loaf.’ She laughed suddenly, in her rich, quivering fashion. ‘Might be able to have the swimming pool heated now. You know how I hate cold water.’

Less than half an hour later, after eating three slices of flan, half a dozen maids-of-honour, and a raspberry tart or two, at the same time abandoning with reluctance the idea of a nice lie-down with Ma, Pop put on his light summer jacket again and went out to Mrs Jerebohm, leaving Ma at the task of feeding little Oscar, now eighteen months old, with much the same lunch he and Ma had had themselves, except that it was all mashed up and in smaller proportion. Oscar, he proudly noted, was getting as fat as a butter ball.

Out in the road a chauffeur in bottle green cap and uniform held open the door of Mrs Jerebohm’s Rolls and Pop stepped into an interior of beige-gold, the upholstery softer than velvet.

‘Well, here we are,’ Pop said. ‘Perfick afternoon.’

‘I see you too have a Rolls,’ Mrs Jerebohm said.

‘Oh! that old crate. That’s a laugh.’

Pop, who in reality adored and revered the Rolls with pride and tenderness as if it had been the eighth of his offspring, cheerfully proceeded to tear the car’s paltry reputation to pieces.

‘Took it for a small debt,’ he explained. ‘Wouldn’t pull pussy. Knocks like a cracked teapot. You’d get more out of a mule and a milk float. Still, the best I can afford. Struggle to make ends meet as it is.’

As the Rolls turned the last bend before the house faded from sight he invited Mrs Jerebohm to look back on his pitiful junkyard, the paradise from which he scratched the barest of livings-if he had good luck.

‘Like my poor old place,’ he said. ‘Just about had it. Falling apart and I’ll never get the time to put it together again.’

‘Charming countryside, though,’ Mrs Jerebohm said. ‘I adore the countryside.’

Pop resisted a powerful impulse to praise the countryside. Nothing in his life, except Ma, brought him nearer to celestial ecstasies than the countryside. Instead he now started to concentrate, with a new warm glow, on fresh enthusiasms.

‘Ah! but wait till you see Gore Court. Wait till you see that.’

‘I’m absolutely dying to. Absolutely dying. We’ve seen so many that haven’t-you know-some of dove-tailed, but this one gives me a kind of thing –’.

A moment later Mrs Jerebohm took a handkerchief from her white suede handbag, releasing an unrecognizable breath of perfume on which Pop’s hypersensitive nostrils at once seized with eager delight.

It was a wonderful perfume she was wearing, he said. Could she tell him what it was?

‘Verbena. French. You like it?’

It was perfick, Pop said. It suited her perfickly. It was just her style.

‘Thank you.’

She smiled as she spoke, this time with her lips parted a little more, so that the edges of her mouth were crinkled. The effect of this was so surprisingly pleasant after the frigidities in the yard that Pop wondered for a moment whether or not to hold her hand and then decided against it. Even so, he thought, it might not be all that much of a hardship to dove-tail with Mrs Jerebohm one fine day.

He was still pondering on the pleasant implications contained in the word dove-tail when the Rolls rounded a bend by a copse of sweet-chestnut, beyond which were suddenly revealed a mass of baronial turrets taller than the dark torches of surrounding pines.

‘There!’ Pop said. He spoke with a studied air of triumph, waving a hand. ‘There’s the house. There’s Gore Court for you. What about that, eh? How’s that strike you? Better than St Paul’s, ain’t it, better than St Paul’s?’

Mr Jerebohm, who had stayed the night with Mrs Jerebohm at The Hare and Hounds, had been up that morning with the lark. He was not at all sure what sort of bird a lark was or what it looked like, but he knew very well it was the bird you had to be up with.

Numbers of small brown birds in the many thick trees surrounding the pub, which both he and Mrs Jerebohm called the inn, had chirped him awake as early as half-past four. He supposed these might have been larks. On the other hand they might well have been robins. He was a stranger in the country; it was a foreign land to him, distant as Bolivia, unfamiliar as Siam. He simply didn't know nor did he know anything distinctive about the trees which stood about the pub with tall lushness, almost black in high summer leaf. A tree was a shape. It had branches, a trunk, and leaves. In spring the leaves appeared; they were green; and in autumn they fell off again.

Grass was to be recognized because it too was green, or generally so. It grew on the floor, most conveniently, and cows grazed at it. Mr Jerebohm recognized a cow. It had horns, teats and gave milk. If it didn't it was a bull. He also recognized a horse because even in London, where stockbroking absorbed him day and night, you sometimes still saw one drawing a cart. You also saw them on films and television, running races. You also hunted foxes with them, which was what Mr Jerebohm hoped to do as soon as he and Mrs Jerebohm had finally settled on a suitable place in the country.

Finding a suitable place in the country had turned out to be an unexpectedly difficult and tedious business. The notion that you rang up or called on a house-agent, described the kind of residence you wanted-Mr Jerebohm invariably referred to houses as residences and their surroundings as domains- and bought it immediately was nothing but a myth. This was not in the least surprising since myths were exactly what house-agents dealt in. They were crooks and liars. Their sole idea was to sell you pups.

Mr Jerebohm was determined not to be sold any pups. Nobody sold him any pups in the world of stockbroking and nobody was going to sell him any in the world of larks and cows. He was, since he was a Londoner, clever enough not to be caught by that sort of thing. People in London were naturally clever. They had to be; it was due to the competition.

On the other hand, everybody knew that people in the country were not clever, simply because there was no need to be. There were enough fields, trees, cows, horses and all the rest of it to go round. You had ample milk fresh from the cow. You kept hens and they laid multitudes of eggs. Farmers made butter. As to the people, you smelled innocence in the air. They were naturally simple. The sky, even when rainy, was full of purity. The fields had a sort of ample pastoral virginity about them, unbesmirched by anything, and even the manure heaps had a clean, simple tang that was good to breathe.

The exceptions to all this were house-agents. Two weeks of trailing with Mrs Jerebohm from one to another had made Mr Jerebohm tired and angry. He was now constantly taking pills and powders for the suppression of bouts of dyspepsia brought on by viewing manor

houses which turned out to be matchboxes, farms which were nothing but hen-coops and country residences of character which looked like disused workhouses or mental homes.

He wanted no more of house-agents at any price and for this reason had been more than glad when the barman at The Hare and Hounds had told him that a fellow named Larkin had a very nice house that he was planning to pull down. It was a pity and a shame, the barman said, but there it was. Nobody seemed to want it.

‘You’re sure it’s nice?’ Mr Jerebohm said. He had heard that word about houses before; it was the most misused, the most callous, in the language. ‘Has it class is what I mean?’

Class was what Mr Jerebohm was looking for and class was precisely what couldn’t be found.

‘I ought to know,’ the barman said. ‘My missus goes in to air it twice a week and cleans and dusts it once a fortnight. You could walk in tomorrow. Class?-it’s a treat. All in apple-pie order.’

Mr Jerebohm thanked the barman and gave him a shilling. It paid to be generous to the yokels.

‘Pinkie,’ he said that night as he folded his charcoal city trousers and hung them on the bedroom towel rail, ‘Pinkie, I’ve got a sort of hunch about this house. A funny kind of premonition. Have you?’

Pinkie was his pet name for Mrs Jerebohm; it suited her much better than Phyllis.

Pinkie, who in nothing but panties and brassière was squatting on her haunches in the middle of the bedroom floor, hands on hips, balancing a Bible and a thick telephone directory on her head, going through her slimming exercises, said she thought so too, adding:

‘I think I’ve lost another ounce. I weighed myself today in the ladies’ at that hotel where we had lunch. But can’t really tell until we get home and I can take everything off and get on the proper scales.’

Mr Jerebohm, saying good for her, got into bed, propped himself up on the pillows and started to read the *Financial Times*. The night was exceptionally hot and stuffy and in any case he knew from long experience that there was no need yet awhile to think of shutting his eyes. It would take Pinkie the best part of another hour to do her balancing acts with books, stretch her legs, touch her toes, do press-ups, take off her make-up and swallow her pills.

‘Good night, Sunbeam,’ she said when she got into bed at last. She liked to call him Sunbeam last thing at night, it left a blessed sort of glow in the air. ‘Sleep well.’ She kissed him lightly on the forehead, barely brushing his skin, anxious about her facial cream. ‘I’m mad to see the house. It’s so beautiful here. Don’t you think it’s beautiful?’

Mr Jerebohm wasn’t sure whether it was beautiful or not. Hot and restless, he found he couldn’t sleep well. It was terribly noisy everywhere. The countryside not only seemed to be full of barking dogs. From the fields came the constant moaning of cattle and, whenever he was on the verge of dropping off he was assailed from all sides by long asthmatic bleatings.

Later in the night he had a rough bad dream in which Pinkie lost so much weight that she became a skeleton and he woke in an unpleasant sweat to hear a whole eerie chain of birds hooting at each other from tree to tree. These, he supposed, might well have been owls, though he wouldn’t have been at all surprised to hear that they were nightingales.

Whatever they were they kept him awake until dawn, when once again the larks started their maddening chorus in the ivy.

When Pop Larkin first saw Mr Jerebohm, hatless and coatless in the heat, waiting outside the tall wrought-iron gate by Gore Court, it struck him immediately that his face seemed in some way curiously out of proportion with the rest of his body.

Mr Jerebohm was shortish, squat, and slightly paunchy beneath watch-chain and waistcoat. By contrast his face was rather long. It was greyish in an unhealthy sort of way, with thick loose lips and eyebrows that had in them bright sparks of ginger. He looked, Pop told himself, rather like a bloater on the stale side.

‘Afternoon, afternoon,’ Pop said. ‘Perfick wevver. Hope I haven’t kept you waiting? Hope you don’t find it too hot?’

Mr Jerebohm, who in sizzling heat had tramped about the domain of Gore Court for the better part of an hour so that his dark city trousers were now dustily snowy with white darts of seed from thistle and willow-herb, confessed to a slight feeling of weariness. But Pop was cheery:

‘Cooler inside the house. Wonderfully cool house, this. Thick walls. I daresay,’ he said, ‘it’s above twenty degrees cooler inside. Had a good wander round?’

Mr Jerebohm confessed that he had wandered but was not sure how good it was. He had learned to be craftily cautious about houses. He was going to be very wary. He wasn’t going to be sucked in.

‘Had to fight my way through a damn forest of weeds,’ he said. ‘Look at me. How long has the place been in this state of disrepair?’

Pop laughed resoundingly.

‘That seed?’ he said. ‘Blow away in a night. One good west wind and a drop o’ rain and it’ll melt away. Put up any pheasants?’

When Mr Jerebohm rather depressingly confessed that he hadn’t put up a bird of any kind Pop laughed and said:

‘Hiding up in the hot wevver. Place’s crawling wiv ’em. Partridges too. And snipe. And woodcock, down by the river. Didn’t see the river? I’ll take you down there when you had a deck at the house. And the lake? Beautiful trout in the lake. Nice perch too. Didn’t see the lake? Didn’t get that far? I’ll take you down.’

Mrs Jerebohm, following Pop and Mr Jerebohm up the circular stone steps leading to the front of the house from a short avenue of box trees, found herself borne along on a mystical flow of lilting information that might have come from a canary. It was so bright and bewildering that she was inside the house before she knew it, standing at the foot of a great baronial sweep of oaken stairs.

‘There’s a flight of stairs for you,’ Pop said. He waved a demonstratively careless hand. ‘Handsome, eh? Like it?’

Mrs Jerebohm, almost in a whisper, went so far as to say that she adored it. If anything

clicked, that staircase did.

Cautious as ever by contrast, Mr Jerebohm struck the banisters of the stairs a severe blow with the flat of his hand, as if hoping they would fall down. When nothing happened Pop startled him with a sentence so sharp that it sounded like a rebuke:

‘Built like a rock!-wouldn’t fall down in a thousand years!’

With hardly a pause for breath Pop enthusiastically invited Mrs Jerebohm to take a good deck at the panelling that went with the stairs. It was linen-fold. Magnificent stuff. Class. There were walls of it. Acres. Talk about fumed oak. Fumed oak wasn’t thought of when that was made. You could get ten pounds a square foot for it where it stood. And that was giving it away. And did she see the top of the stairs? The Tudor rose? The Tudor rose was everywhere.

Mrs Jerebohm, speechless, stood partly mesmerized. At the very top of the stairs, lighting a broad panelled landing, a high window set with a design of fleur-de-lis, swans and bulrushes in stained glass of half a dozen colours threw down such leaves of brilliant light, driven by the strong afternoon sun, that she was temporarily dazzled and had to pick her way from step to step, like a child, in her ascent of the stairs.

A man from Birmingham had offered him a thousand pounds for the window alone, she heard Pop say in a voice that reached her as an unreal echo, like some line from a far distant over-romantic opera, but he had turned it down.

‘Class,’ Mr Jerebohm was half-admitting to himself. ‘Class.’

‘How old is the house?’ Mrs Jerebohm brought herself to say. Her voice too was like an echo.

Pop said he thought it was Georgian or Tudor or something. Fifteenth century.

Mr Jerebohm, with bloater-like smile, was quick to seize on these transparent contradictions and nudged Pinkie quietly at the elbow as they turned the bend of the stairs. It served to prove his point about how simple the yokels were.

‘How many bedrooms did you say?’ Mrs Jerebohm, unable to keep entrancement out of her voice, almost hiccupped as she framed the question. ‘Was it ten?’

Twelve, Pop thought. Might be fifteen. If it was too many they could always shut the top floor away.

‘There’s a beauty of a room for you!’ he said with almost a bark of delight. A huge double door, crowned by a vast oaken pediment, was thrown open to reveal a bedroom half as large as a tennis court. ‘Ain’t that a beauty? Didn’t I tell you it was like St Paul’s?’

Mrs Jerebohm, stupefied by sheer size and acreage of panelling, heard three pairs of footsteps echo about her as if in a cave. Above them, at the same time, the chirpy solo voice of Pop was urging her to take a good eyeful of the view from a vast blue-and-pink window that might have come out of an abbey.

‘Drink that in!’ he said. ‘Take a swig at that!’

Mrs Jerebohm, in half-ecstatic rumination, found herself positively gulping at two acres of thistles, willow-herb and docks among which numbers of black conical cypresses and a half-derelict pergola of roses stuck up in the air like a sad fleet wrecked and abandoned. Beyond them a line of turkey oaks, black too in the blistering perpendicular light of full afternoon,

cut off completely whatever view was lurking behind.

‘In winter,’ Pop started to say with a new, more vibrant lyricism, ‘in winter, when the leaves are down, and the light’s right, and it’s a clear day, in winter, Mrs Jerebohm, you can stand here and see the sea.’

In a rush of disbelief, lyrical too, Mrs Jerebohm seven times repeated the words in heavy lisps.

‘The sea?-the sea? No? Really? The sea?’ she said ‘You mean we can really see the sea?’

‘Smoke of ships in the channel,’ Pop said impassively, ‘coming from all over the world.’

‘Oh! Sunbeam,’ Mrs Jerebohm said, lisping, ‘you hear that? You can actually see ships out there. Ships!’

Mr Jerebohm, impressed though still wary, had no time to make any sort of comment before Pop struck him a resounding but friendly blow in the middle of the back. Mr Jerebohm recoiled uneasily but Pop, totally unaffected, merely told him:

‘This is the place where you got to use your loaf, old man. Get your imagination to work. Have a deck down there.’

As Pop waved a careless hand in a quick flexible curve in the direction of the impossible thistles Mr Jerebohm had ducked, as if confident of another approaching blow, but Pop merely urged him, taking a great deep breath:

‘Imagine roses down there. Imagine acres of roses, A couple o’ thousand roses.’

Without another word he suddenly flung open a casement in the church-like window, again drawing a long deep breath.

‘What price that air, eh? Take a sniff at that. Like medicine. Old man, that’s pure concentrated iodine.’

‘Iodine?’ Mr Jerebohm, incredulous, snapped sharp bloater-like lips. ‘Iodine? What on earth’s iodine got to do with it?’

With stiff wariness Mr Jerebohm waited for an answer determined not to be caught by any cock-and-bull nonsense of that sort.

‘Air here’s stiff with it,’ Pop said. ‘Saturated. Due to being practically surrounded by sea.’

To the speechless astonishment of both Mr Jerebohm and Pinkie he proceeded to toss off careless scraps of topography.

‘Got to remember this country is almost an island. Didn’t know that? Fact. Two-thirds of its boundaries are water. It’s an island on an island. Understand me?’

Before Mr Jerebohm could begin to say whether he understood him or not Pop thundered out:

‘Nobody hardly ever dies here. People live for ever, same as tortoises. Everything grows ’ell for leather. Cherries, strawberries, hops, apples, pears, corn, sheep. Everything! Not called the Garden of England for nothing, this place. Not called the Garden of England for nothing, old man.’

Suddenly, after Pop had closed the casement with a gesture almost dramatically regretful, Mrs Jerebohm felt quite overpowered, in a faint sort of way, by the projected grandeur of seascape, roses, iodine, and heights, and asked diffidently if perhaps she could see the

kitchens?

‘Certainly!’ Promptly Pop started to lead the way downstairs, freely admitting as he did so that the kitchens were perhaps a bit on the large side, though of course that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing these days. It gave you a lot more room to put telly in for the maids.

That, Mrs Jerebohm said, reminded her of something. Help. What about help? Could help be got? In London that, of course, was the great problem. Would she be able to get help in the country?

‘Sacks of it,’ Pop said. ‘Bags.’ If his conscience pricked him slightly as he recalled the constant eager race of village women to get to the rich pastures of strawberry fields, cherry orchards, and hop gardens and all the rest, when families cleaned up sixty or seventy pounds a week, tax free, he momentarily appeased it by reminding himself that, after all, business was business. A fib or two was legitimate. You had to allow for a fib or two here and there. ‘All the help you want. Only a question of paying on the right scale and giving ’em plenty o’ telly.’

Lispingly Mrs Jerebohm confessed that she was relieved to hear it. The question had been bothering her. It was the thing on which everything depended.

‘Quite,’ Pop said blandly. ‘Quite.’

A moment later he opened the door to the kitchens. A vast funereal dungeon opened up, half-dark, its windows overgrown with rampant elderberry trees. The air was drugged with mould.

‘Something would have to be done with this,’ Mr Jerebohm said. ‘Not much iodine here.’

Pop, severely ignoring the sarcasm about iodine, freely admitted once again that it was all a bit on the large side but anyway you could always put in a ping-pong table for the maids. Help ’em to keep their figures down. He laughed resoundingly. They got fat and lazy quick enough as it was.

Mr Jerebohm, in turn ignoring the joke, started to retreat with relief from the dankness of the kitchen dungeons, saying:

‘You’re quite sure about the help? What about chaps for the garden and that sort of thing?’

‘Oceans of ’em,’ Pop said. ‘No trouble at all.’

His conscience, pricking him slightly a second time, forced him to think of farm labourers who ran about in cars or mounted on splendid, glistening, highly expensive motorbikes and how his friend the Brigadier couldn’t get a boy to clean his shoes, and he wondered, not for the first time, what Ma would say. Ma was strict about the truth. Still, you’d got to allow a fib or two here and there.

‘Well, I hope you’re right.’ Mr Jerebohm told himself he wasn’t sold yet. Much experience with house-agents, the liars, cheats, and swindlers, had left him sceptical, cautious, and, as he liked to tell himself, sharp as a fox. ‘It’s of paramount importance.’

Pop, recoiling slightly from the word paramount as if it meant something shifty, said:

‘Well, now, what else?’ He too was relieved to escape from the kitchens’ dank elder-mould-darknesses and he was bound to admit they ponged a bit. ‘What about a look at the outside?’

He searched the air for a breath of Mrs Jerebohm’s light and exquisite perfume and, as he caught it, made her smile with perceptible pleasure by saying:

'That scent of Mrs Jerebohm's reminds me of Ma's garden. She grows verbena there.'

'You see, we'd plan to do a fair amount of entertaining,' Mr Jerebohm said. 'That's why I spoke about the chaps. Shooting parties and that sort of thing. Lot of people at weekends.'

'Beautiful shooting country,' Pop said. 'Marvellous. Bags of cover. What about a look at the lake now?'

Mr Jerebohm said yes, he was ready to have a look at the lake if Pinkie was.

'You go,' she said. 'I'd like to wander round the house again.'

As she started to go upstairs Pop, in the moment before departing, called up after her:

'If you change your mind it's straight down from the front of the house. You'll see the path. There's a white gate at the bottom.'

As he skirted the seed-smoking thistle forest with Mr Jerebohm Pop put to him what he thought to be an important question:

'What business you in?'

'Stock Exchange.'

'Plenty o' work?'

'Mustn't grumble.'

'Hot weather affected you at all?' Pop said. 'It's caned a lot of people.'

'Not really.' Mr Jerebohm couldn't help smiling behind his hand. Really the yokels were pretty simple. And when you thought of it how could they be otherwise?

'There's the lake for you,' Pop said. 'Beautiful water-lilies, eh? Always remind me of fried eggs floating about on plates.' The lake, low after months of drought, stretched glassy in the sun. On banks of grey cracked mud flies buzzed in thick black-blue swarms. An odd invisible moorhen or two croaked among fringes of cane-dry reeds and out on the central depths great spreads of water-lilies shone motionless in the sun.

Pop picked up a stone, aimed it at a distant clump of reeds and threw it. It might have been a signal. A line of wild duck got up, circled, and headed for the centre of the lake, crying brokenly as they flew.

'Thought so,' Pop said. 'Whole place is lousy with 'em.'

Pheasants? Mr Jerebohm supposed.

'Wild duck.' Dammit, these Londoners were pretty simple when you came to think of it. 'Like wild duck? Ma does 'em with orange sauce. Puts a glass o' red wine in too. I love 'em. Shot so many last winter though I got a bit sick of 'em by the end.'

For a painful moment or two Mr Jerebohm's sharply watering mouth told him he would never, never get tired of wild duck. He longed suddenly and passionately for wild duck with red wine and orange sauce, tired as he was of living on Yoghurt, toast fingers, consommé, and undressed salads in order to help Pinkie keep her weight down.

'And all this goes with the house? The lake and everything?' he said. 'What's beyond?'

'Parkland. See the big cedar?'

Mr Jerebohm stared at a tall dark object on the skyline and might as well have been looking at a factory chimney. 'Starts there. Quite a few deer in it still. Used to be a pretty big herd. Like venison?'

God! Mr Jerebohm thought. Venison?

‘Ma always does it in a big slow double pan in plenty of butter,’ Pop said. ‘Nothing else, just fresh butter. We always have red currant jelly with it. The meat fair falls apart. Perfick. tell you, old man, perfick.’

Mr Jerebohm, who had lunched exceptionally early, in unison with Pinkie, on thin slices of lean ham, butterless rye biscuits and China tea, thought ‘God!’ again in agony, feeling his stomach perform involuntary sickening acrobatics of hunger. There was something not fair about talk of food sometimes.

‘Not sure how the trout are holding up,’ Pop said. He’d got to be fair about the trout. No use over-praising the trout. To be perfickly fair the herons fetched them almost as fast as you restocked and you never really knew how they were. ‘Caught sight of two or three fat ones though last time I came down. Still, it’s cheap to re-stock if you wanted to.’

Mr Jerebohm, staring hard at the lake as if in hope of seeing a fish rise, resisted with great difficulty a powerful and insidious temptation to ask how Ma dealt with trout.

‘Same with pheasants,’ Pop said. ‘You’d have to start thinking of re-stocking soon if you wanted to shoot this autumn.’

‘I thought you said the place was stiff with them?’

‘Old birds,’ Pop said with swiftness, unperturbed. ‘Pretty wild too. You want a couple o’ hundred young ’uns. It’s not too late. They’re well advanced this summer. Hot wevver.’

Mr Jerebohm, deeply tormented again by agonies of hunger, suddenly abandoned all thought of foxiness and dizzily saw himself as the proud master of all he surveyed. The whole scene was simply splendid. This, he thought, was it. Lake, trout, pheasants, park, deer, wild duck, venison—God, he thought, this must be it.

Rapture left him abruptly a moment later, leaving him rational again.

‘What, by the way, are you asking?’

‘Going to farm?’ Pop said.

The question, short and simple though it was, was an astute one. If Mr Jerebohm was going to farm he naturally wanted to lose money. Pop knew most of the dodges and this was the popular one. You made it in the city and lost it on the land. The countryside had never been so full of ragged-trousered brokers—what he called the Piccadilly farmers—pouring their money down the furrows.

‘Roughly the idea,’ Mr Jerebohm said. ‘Pleasure too of course. Mrs J. is mad keen to have a nice rural domain.’

‘I’ve been asking nineteen thousand.’

That ought to dove-tail it all right, Pop thought. Mr Jerebohm, though speechless, didn’t flinch. A few thistle seeds, borne on the lightest of winds, floated angel-wise down the bank of the lake, here and there settling on reeds and water. Mr Jerebohm watched them with eyes that might have been idle but were sharp enough to see a fish rise in a startled circle, a moment later, far out among the water-lilies.

‘Big ’un there,’ Pop said. ‘Ever have ’em blue? The trout I mean. We had ’em in France once and Ma got the recipe. You want plenty o’ brown butter. You get ’em fair swimming in brown butter and then they’re perfick.’

Mr Jerebohm disgorged a low, hungry sigh. He felt he couldn't bear much more of the poetry of eating and wished to God Pinkie would come and help him out a bit. In vain he looked back in the direction of the house and then said, snapping:

'I'll give you twelve.' Sentimentality was out. Absolutely out. You had to be firm from the beginning. The class was there all right but you had to be firm.

Pop laughed in a certain dry, easy fashion.

'I think it's about time I went home,' he said. 'Ma'll be wondering where I've got to.'

'Oh? It's a perfectly good offer in my view.'

Pop laughed again, this time more loudly.

'Well, maybe in your view, old man,' he said, 'but that ain't mine, is it?'

Again Mr Jerebohm wished to God Pinkie would come to help him out a bit. There were times when he needed Pinkie.

'To be perfectly honest I really ought to consult my wife about it first and then let you know,' he said. 'I don't want to be precipitate.'

'Should think not an' all,' Pop said, at the same time wondering what the hell precipitate meant. It sounded like something catching.

'Shall we start to walk back?' Mr Jerebohm said. The afternoon was really shatteringly hot. Sweat was pouring off him in uncomfortable streams. Where on earth was Pinkie? 'I could give you word by Monday.'

Monday, Pop said, might be too late. The chap from Birmingham was coming down again to look at the window and another chap was after the panelling. You didn't see linen-fold like that every day. It was worth all of fifteen hundred if it was worth a bob and once these demolition rats got to work you wouldn't see the place for dust.

The expression 'demolition rats' disturbed Mr Jerebohm to the core. It was even worse than venison with red currant jelly and wild duck with orange sauce. God Almighty, where on earth was Pinkie? As he followed Pop up the path he again looked towards the house in vain.

With inexpressible relief he heard Pop say, less than a minute later:

'Ain't that your missus standing up there under the trees?' Pop paused to point to a grassy knoll, a hundred yards away, crowned by a ring of big sweet chestnuts. 'Waving her hand.'

'Waving both hands!'

It was clear, Mr Jerebohm thought, that Pinkie was in a state of some excitement: unless, as was possible, she was trying out some new slimming exercise. Both arms were waving madly above her head, the hands wagging like spiders.

'Sunbeam!' she started to call. 'Sunbeam!'

The excited lisping call dragged Mr Jerebohm up the slope of parched grass to the knoll as if he had been attached to Pinkie by a rope. He felt unutterably glad to see her and wondered, twice and aloud, what it could be that so excited her?

'Probably came across some buried treasure,' Pop said. 'They say Cromwell was here. One of his prisoners escaped from a window in the house -'

Mr Jerebohm, utterly uninterested in Cromwell, half ran forward to meet Pinkie, who lisped lilingly in return:

‘Come and see what I’ve found. You wouldn’t guess in a thousand years.’

Pop started to follow Mr Jerebohm and his wife through the chestnut trees. Masses of prematurely fallen blossom, in dry pollened tassels, had fallen from the trees and clouds of pungent yellow dust were raised as Mr and Mrs Jerebohm ran.

‘There! I discovered it. I just absolutely ran across it. I wasn’t thinking of a thing and suddenly it sort of conjured itself out of nowhere. It just sort of dove-tailed –’

A kind of pepper box, in white stone, with a domed roof and a marble seat inside, sat with forlorn elegance among the chestnut trees. Black piles of decaying faggots were propped against one side.

‘It’s a summer house, isn’t it? The sort they built in the eighteenth century?’ Pinkie said. ‘Didn’t they call them follies?’

Folly or not, Pop thought, the chap who built this thing was on my side.

‘And the view. You must look at the view.’

Turning, Pop had to admit that the view was pretty stunning. It was better than perfect. The lake, sown with water-lilies and framed with long fingers of reed, could now be seen entire, with park and cedars spread out in a mature, calm background. It needed only a herd of deer to run lightly across the cloudless blue horizon to set the last romantic seal on it and send Mrs Jerebohm finally and sedately mad.

‘Come and sit inside a minute,’ Pinkie said to Mr Jerebohm. ‘You’ll get the full flavour then.’

Though the shady marble struck with ice-cold shock on Mr Jerebohm’s seat Pinkie might have been cased in armour for all she noticed the chill on hers.

‘Sunbeam, we’ve absolutely got to have it. What is he asking?’

‘Nineteen thousand.’

‘Is it an awful, awful lot?’

‘I offered him twelve.’

‘Would he split do you suppose?’

‘I expect so. I could have a stab.’

Mr Jerebohm knew, in his heart, that whether he had a stab or not it really didn’t matter. The folly had finally achieved what roses, panelling, iodine, and seascape had failed to do. Whatever doubt remained after trout, venison, duck, and pheasant had done their all-tormenting work had gone for ever.

‘Try him with fifteen,’ Pinkie said. ‘We’ve got to get it laced up somehow. I couldn’t bear .’

A sudden dread of colic made Mr Jerebohm rise quickly from the marble seat, his rump half-frozen. It was a positive relief to get out into the hot, stifling air.

‘Well, Larkin, my wife and I have talked it over. I’ll give you fifteen.’

‘Couldn’t do it,’ Pop said, speaking with great blandness. ‘The demolition rats would give me more than that.’

Mrs Jerebohm recoiled from the expression ‘demolition rats’ as Mr Jerebohm himself had done down by the lakeside. It was an expression so nauseating that she actually had a vision of real rats, live and repulsive, gnawing away the stone and marble of her beloved folly, and

she pinched Mr Jerebohm sharply on the arm.

‘I’ll split the difference,’ Mr Jerebohm said.

‘Fair enough,’ Pop said. ‘Seventeen thousand.’

Mr Jerebohm had no time to protest against the neatness of Pop’s arithmetic before Mrs Jerebohm lisped:

‘Oh! Splendid. Splendid. I’m so glad we’ve got it all sewn up.’

Sewn up it was, an’ all, Pop thought. Ma would be pleased. And Mariette. They could have the swimming pool easy now. And probably even heated.

‘Well, that’s it then, Larkin.’ Mr Jerebohm shook Pop not uncordially by the hand. Mrs Jerebohm, smiling with winning, crossed teeth, shook hands too. ‘Thank you. I’ll tell my solicitors to contact you. Presume you’d like some sort of deposit?’

Wouldn’t cause him no pain, Pop said. Couldn’t manage cash? he supposed.

Mr Jerebohm said he didn’t see why not. There were times when it was better that way. The times being what they were, in fact, it actually suited him.

As the three of them walked back to the house Pop turned to Mrs Jerebohm’s tight, white suited figure and asked if there wasn’t perhaps something else she wanted to see? The kitchen garden? The asparagus beds? The greenhouses?

‘You could grow some beautiful orchids there.’

Orchids were one touch of poetry too much for Mrs Jerebohm, who said rather peremptorily that thanks, there was nothing else they wanted. At the same moment Mrs Jerebohm pointed across the valley, where smoke from the strawberry fields was still drifting across the blue brilliant sky.

‘A fire!’ she said. ‘Isn’t that a fire?’

Yes, Pop said, it was a fire and went on to explain how, for the first time in living memory they were burning off the strawberry fields. The strawberry lark was over for the year. In a couple of weeks harvest would be over too. Everything would be over. It would all be finished months ahead of time, thanks to the marvellous summer, and he offered Pinkie Jerebohm the final crumb of comfort needed to make her day supremely happy.

‘The women’ll all be coming in from the fields early this year. You’ll get all the help you want in the house. Been a perfectly wonderful summer, don’t you think, absolutely perfect?’

It certainly had, Mrs Jerebohm said, it certainly had, and with one long ecstatic backward glance at the lake and its lilies she felt her eyes slowly fill with tears of joy.

This, she told herself, was paradise.

*

That night Pop felt the deal called for a bottle of champagne in bed with Ma and an extra good cigar. As he sat in bed, sipping and puffing and watching Ma brush her hair at the dressing table, he caught pleasant glimpses of her body, vast and soft, under the forget-me-not blue nightgown, thin as gossamer, he had bought her for Christmas.

‘Think the kids were pleased about the swimming pool,’ he said, ‘don’t you? I thought the twins would die.’

At the supper table he had been surrounded by children choking with excitement. The

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