

Part 1

Fosse

Chapter 1

Lost Gods

I have never believed, as some people do, in omens and forewarnings, for the dramatic things in my life have generally come upon me as suddenly as a tropical thunderstorm. But I have observed that in a queer way I have been sometimes prepared for them by my mind drifting into an unexpected mood. I would remember something I had not thought of for years, or start without reason an unusual line of thought. That was what happened to me on an October evening when I got into the train at Victoria.

That afternoon I had done what for me was a rare thing, and attended a debate in the House of Commons. Lamancha was to make a full-dress speech, and Lamancha on such an occasion is worth hearing. But it was not my friend's eloquence that filled my mind or his deadly handling of interruptions, but a reply which the Colonial Secretary gave to a question before the debate began. A name can sometimes be like a scent or a tune, a key to long-buried memories. When old Melbury spoke the word 'Lombard,' my thoughts were set racing down dim alleys of the past. He quoted a memorandum written years ago and incorporated in the report of a certain Commission; 'A very able memorandum,' he called it, 'by a certain Mr. Lombard,' which contained the point he wished to make. Able! I should think it was. And the writer! To be described as 'a certain Mr. Lombard' showed how completely the man I once knew had dropped out of the world's ken.

I did not do justice to Lamancha's speech, for I thought of Lombard all through it. I thought of him in my taxi going to the station, and, when I had found my compartment, his face came between me and the pages of my evening paper. I had not thought much about him for years, but now Melbury's chance quotation had started a set of pictures which flitted like a film series before my eyes. I saw Lombard as I had last seen him, dressed a little differently from to-day, a little fuller in the face than we lean kine who have survived the War, with eyes not blurred from

motoring, and voice not high-pitched like ours to override the din of our environment. I saw his smile, the odd quick lift of his chin—and I realized that I was growing old and had left some wonderful things behind me.

The compartment filled up with City men going home to their comfortable southern suburbs. They all had evening papers, and some had morning papers to finish. Most of them appeared to make this journey regularly, for they knew each other, and exchanged market gossip or commented on public affairs. A friendly confidential party; and I sat in my corner looking out of the window at another landscape than what some poet has called 'smoky dwarf houses,' and seeing a young man's face which was very different from theirs.

Lombard had come out to East Africa as secretary to a Government Commission, a Commission which he very soon manipulated as he pleased. I met him there when I was sent up on a prospecting job. He was very young then, not more than twenty-five, and he was in his first years at the Bar. He had been at one of the lesser public schools and at Cambridge, had been a good scholar, and was as full as he could hold of books. I remembered our first meeting in a cold camp on the Uasin Gishu plateau, when he quoted and translated a Greek line about the bitter little wind before dawn. But he never paraded his learning, for his desire was to be in complete harmony with his surroundings, and to look very much the pioneer. Those were the old days in East Africa, before the 'Happy Valley' and the remittance man and settlers who wanted self-government, and people's hopes were high. He was full of the heroes of the past, like Roddy Owen and Vandeleur and the Portals, and, except that he was a poor horseman, he had something in common with them. With his light figure and bleached fair hair and brown skin he looked the very model of the adventurous Englishman. I thought that there might be a touch of the Jew in his ancestry—something high-coloured and foreign at any rate, for he was more expansive and quickly fired than the rest of us. But on the whole he was as English as a Hampshire water-meadow... .

The compartment was blue with pipe-smoke. My companions were talking about rock-gardens. The man in the corner opposite me was apparently an authority on the subject, and he had much to say about different firms of nursery gardeners. He was blond, plump, and baldish, and had a pleasant voice whose tones woke a recollection which I could not fix. I thought that I had probably seen him at some company meeting... .

My mind went back to Lombard. I remembered how we had sat on a rock one evening looking over the trough of Equatoria, and, as the sun crimsoned the distant olive-green forests, he had told me his ambitions. In those days the after-glow of Cecil Rhodes's spell still lay on Africa, and men could dream dreams. Lombard's were majestic. 'I have got my inspiration,' he told me. His old hankerings after legal or literary or political success at home had gone. He had found a new and masterful purpose.

It was a very young man's talk. I was about his own age, but I had knocked about a bit and saw its crudity. Yet it most deeply impressed me. There were fire and poetry in it, and there was also a pleasant shrewdness. He had had his 'call' and was hastening to answer it. Henceforth his life was to be dedicated to one end, the building up of a British Equatoria, with the highlands of the East and South as the white man's base. It was to be both white man's and black man's country, a new kingdom of Prester John. It was to link up South Africa with Egypt and the Sudan, and thereby complete Rhodes's plan. It was to be a magnet to attract our youth and a settlement ground for our surplus population. It was to carry with it a spiritual renaissance for England. 'When I think,' he cried, 'of the stuffy life at home! We must bring air into it, and instead of a blind alley give 'em open country...'

The talk in the compartment was now of golf. Matches were being fixed up for the following Sunday. My *vis-à-vis* had evidently some repute as a golfer, and was describing how he had managed to lower his handicap. Golf 'shop' is to me the most dismal thing on earth, and I shut my ears to it. 'So I took my mashie, you know, my *little* mashie'—the words seemed to have all the stuffiness of which Lombard had complained. Here in perfection was the smug suburban life from which he had revolted. My thoughts went back to that hilltop three thousand miles and thirty years away...

All of us at that time had talked a little grandiloquently, but with Lombard it was less a rhapsody than a passionate confession of faith. He was not quite certain about the next step in his own career. He had been offered a post on the staff of the Governor of X—, which might be a good jumping-off ground. There was the business side, too. He had the chance of going into the firm of Y—, which was about to spend large sums on African development. Money was important, he said, and cited Rhodes and Beit. He had not made up his mind, but ways and means did not greatly trouble him. His goal was so clear that he would find a road to it.

I do not think that I have ever had a stronger impression of a consuming purpose. Here was one who would never be content to settle among the fatted calves of the world. He might fail, but he would fail superbly.

'Some day,' I said, 'there will be a new British Dominion, and it will be called Lombardy. You have the right sort of name for Empire-making.'

I spoke quite seriously, and he took it seriously.

'Yes, I have thought of that,' he said, 'but it would have to be Lombardia.'

That was not the last time I saw him, for a year later he came down to Rhodesia, again on Government business, and we went through a rather odd experience together. But it was that hour in the African twilight that stuck in my memory. Here was a man dedicated to a crusade, ready to bend every power of mind and body to a high ambition, and to sacrifice all the softer things of life. I had felt myself in the presence of a young knight-errant, gravely entering upon his vows of service... .

I looked round the compartment at the flabby eupeptic faces which offered so stark a contrast to the one I remembered. The talk was still of golf, and the plump man was enlarging on a new steel-shafted driver. Well, it required all kinds to make a world... .

I had not seen Lombard for more than a quarter of a century. I had not even heard his name till that afternoon when Melbury mentioned him in the House. But at first I had often thought of him and waited for his *avatar*. I felt about him as Browning felt about Waring in the poem, for I believed that sooner or later—and rather soon than late—he would in some way or other make for himself a resounding name. I pictured him striding towards his goal, scorning half-achievements and easy repute, waiting patiently on the big chance and the great moment. Death alone, I was convinced, would stop him. And then the War came... .

The compartment had nearly emptied. Only my *vis-à-vis* remained. He had put up his feet on the seat and was skimming a motoring journal... .

Yes, I decided, the War had done it. Lombard would of course have fought—he was the kind of man who must—and in some obscure action in some part of the world-wide battlefield death had closed his dreams. Another case of unfulfilled renown. The thought made me melancholy. The fatted calves had always the best of it. Brains and high ambitions had perished, and the world was for the comfortable folk like the man opposite me.

We passed a station, and the next was obviously my companion's destination, for he got up, stretched his legs, and took down a parcel from the rack. He was carrying back the fish for dinner. He folded up his

papers and lit a cigarette. Then for the first time he had a proper look at me, and in his face I saw slowly the dawning of recognition. He hesitated, and then he spoke my name.

'Hannay?' he said. 'Isn't it Dick Hannay?'

The voice did the trick with me, for I remembered those precise tones which he had never managed to slur and broaden after our outland fashion. My eyes cleared, and a response clicked in my brain. I saw, behind the well-covered cheeks and the full chin and the high varnish of good living, a leaner and younger face.

'Lombard!' I cried. 'I haven't seen or heard of you for twenty years. Do you know that the Colonial Secretary referred to you in the House this afternoon? I have been thinking of you ever since.'

He grinned and he held out his hand.

'What did he say? Nothing uncomplimentary, I hope. We've been having a bit of a controversy with his department over Irak. I've often heard of *you*, and read about you in the papers, and I've been hoping to run across you some day. You made some splash in the War. You're a K.C.B., aren't you? They offered me a knighthood too, but my firm thought I'd better stand out. Bad luck we didn't spot each other sooner, for I should have liked a yarn with you.'

'So should I,' was my answer. 'We have plenty to talk about.'

He replied to the question in my eye.

'Those were funny old times we had together. Lord, they seem a long way off now. What have I been doing since? Well, I went in for oil. I wish I had taken it up sooner, for I wasted several years chasing my tail. My firm made a pot of money in the War, and we haven't done so badly since.'

He was friendly and obviously glad to see me, but after so long a gap in our acquaintance he found it difficult to come to close quarters. So did I. I could only stare at his bland comfortable face and try in vain to recapture in it something that had gone for ever.

He felt the constraint. As we slackened speed, he dusted his hat, adjusted an aquascutum on his arm, and looked out of the window. I seemed to detect some effort in his geniality.

'I live down here,' he said. 'We mustn't lose sight of each other now we have foregathered. What about lunching together one day—my club's the Junior Carlton? Or better still, come down to us for a week-end. I can give you quite a decent game of golf.'

The train drew up at a trim little platform covered with smooth yellow gravel, and a red station house, like a Wesleyan chapel, which in June

would be smothered with Dorothy Perkins roses. There was a long line of fading geraniums, and several plots of chrysanthemums. Beyond the fence I could see a glistening tarmac road and the trees and lawns of big-gish villas. I noticed a shining Daimler drawn up at the station entrance, and on the platform was a woman like a full-blown peony, to whom Lombard waved his hand.

'My wife,' he said, as he got out. 'I'd like you to meet her... . It's been great seeing you again. I've got a nice little place down here... . Promise you'll come to us for some week-end. Beryl will write to you.'

I continued my journey—I was going down to the Solent to see about laying up my boat, for I had lately taken to a mild sort of yachting—in an odd frame of mind. I experienced what was rare with me—a considerable dissatisfaction with life. Lombard had been absorbed into the great, solid, complacent middle class which he had once despised, and was apparently happy in it. The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barndoor fowl. Well, if he was satisfied, it was no business of mine, but I had a dreary sense of the fragility of hopes and dreams.

It was about myself that I felt most dismally. Lombard's youth had gone, but so had my own. Lombard was settled like Moab on his lees, but so was I. We all make pictures of ourselves that we try to live up to, and mine had always been of somebody hard and taut who could preserve to the last day of life a decent vigour of spirit. Well, I kept my body in fair training by exercise, but I realized that my soul was in danger of fatty degeneration. I was too comfortable. I had all the blessings a man can have, but I wasn't earning them. I tried to tell myself that I deserved a little peace and quiet, but I got no good from that reflection, for it meant that I had accepted old age. What were my hobbies and my easy days but the consolations of senility? I looked at my face in the mirror in the carriage back, and it disgusted me, for it reminded me of my recent companions who had pattered about golf. Then I became angry with myself. 'You are a fool,' I said. 'You are becoming soft and elderly, which is the law of life, and you haven't the grit to grow old cheerfully.' That put a stopper on my complaints, but it left me dejected and only half convinced.

Chapter 2

Hanham Flats

All that autumn and early winter I had an uneasy feeling at the back of my mind. I had my pleasant country-gentleman's existence, but some of the zest had gone out of it. Instead of feeling, as I usually did, that it was the only life for a white man, I had an ugly suspicion that satisfaction with it meant that I had grown decrepit. And at the same time I had a queer expectation that an event was about to happen which would jog me out of my rut into something much less comfortable, and that I had better bask while the sun shone, for it wouldn't shine long. Oddly enough, that comforted me. I wasn't looking for any more difficult jobs in this world, but the mere possibility of one coming along allowed me to enjoy my slippared days with a quieter conscience.

In the week before Christmas came the second of the chain of happenings which were the prelude to this story. My son came into it, and here I must beg leave to introduce Peter John, now in his fourteenth year.

The kind of son I had hoped for when he was born was the typical English boy, good at games, fairly intelligent, reasonably honest and clean, the kind of public-school product you read about in books. I say had 'hoped for,' for it was the conventional notion most fathers entertain, though I doubt if I should have had much patience with the reality. Anyhow, Peter John was nothing like that. He didn't care a rush for the public-school spirit. He was rather a delicate child, but after he had passed his seventh birthday his health improved, and at his preparatory school he was a sturdy young ruffian who had no ailments except the conventional mumps and measles. He was tall for his age and rather handsome in his own way. Mary's glorious hair in him took the form of a sandy thatch inclining to red, but he had her blue eyes and her long, slim hands and feet. He had my mouth and my shape of head, but he had a slightly sullen air which he could have got from neither of us. I have seen him when he was perfectly happy looking the picture of gloom. He was very quiet in his manner; had a pleasant, low voice; talked little, and

then with prodigiously long words. That came of his favourite reading, which was the Prophet Isaiah, Izaak Walton, and an eighteenth-century book on falconry translated from the French. One of his school reports said he spoke to his masters as Dr. Johnson might have addressed a street-arab.

He was never meant for any kind of schoolboy, for talk about 'playing the game' and the 'team spirit' and 'the honour of the old House' simply made him sick. He was pretty bad at his books, though he learned to slog along at them, but he was a hopeless duffer at games, which indeed he absolutely refused to learn. He detested his preparatory school, and twice ran away from it. He took the lowest form at his public school, where, however, he was happier, since he was left more to himself. He was the kind of boy who is the despair of masters, for he kept them at arm's length, and, though very gentle and well-mannered, could not help showing that he didn't think much of them. He didn't think much of the other boys either, but most were wise enough not to resent this, for he was for his weight one of the handiest people with his fists I have ever seen.

Peter John's lack of scholastic success used to worry Mary sometimes, but I felt that he was going his own way and picking up a pretty good education. He was truthful and plucky and kindly, and that was what I chiefly cared about. Also his mind never stopped working on his own subjects. He scarcely knew a bat from a ball, but he could cast a perfect dry-fly. He was as likely to be seen with a doll as with a tennis-racquet, but before he was twelve he was a good enough shot with his 16-bore to hold his own at any covert shoot. He had a funny aversion to horses, and wouldn't get into a saddle, but he was a genius with other animals. He could last out a long day in a deer forest when he had just entered his teens. Also he had made himself a fine field naturalist, and even Archie Roylance respected his knowledge of birds. He took up boxing very early and entirely of his own accord, because he didn't like the notion of being hit in the face, and thought that he had better conquer that funk. It proved to be a game in which he was a natural master, for he had a long reach and was wonderfully light on his feet. I would add that in his solemn way he was the friendliest of souls. The whole countryside within twenty miles of Fosse had a good word for him. One habit of his was to call everybody 'Mr.' and it was a queer thing to hear him 'mistering' some ragamuffin that I had helped on the Bench to send to jail a few months before. Peter John was getting his education from wild nature

and every brand of country folk, and I considered that it was about as good a kind as any.

But it made him rather a misfit as a schoolboy, since he had none of the ordinary ambitions. He wouldn't have thanked you for putting him into the Eleven or the Boat, and the innocent snobbery of boys left him untouched. He simply wasn't running for the same stakes. I think he was respected by other boys, and on the whole rather liked by the masters, for he was always being forgiven for his breaches of discipline. Certainly he had an amazing knack of getting away with things. He twice stayed out all night, and wasn't expelled for it, since no one thought of disbelieving his explanation that in one case he had been timing a badger, and in the other waiting for an expected flight of grey-lags. He must have poached and never been caught, for he once sent his mother a brace of woodcock with his compliments, after she had complained in a letter that the birds were scarce with us. Also he kept hawks from his second week as a lower boy and nobody seemed to mind. At the date of which I write he was in his fourth half at school, and had at various times possessed goshawks, sparrow-hawks, merlins, and innumerable kestrels. The whole aviary in bandboxes used to accompany him backwards and forwards in the car. He had generally a hawk of sorts tucked away in his change coat, and once a party of American tourists got the surprise of their lives when they stopped a gentle-looking child to ask some question about the chapel, and suddenly saw a bird come out of the heavens and dive under his jacket.

Mary announced at breakfast that Peter John was cutting down costs and reducing his establishment. Archie Roylance, who was staying with us, looked up sympathetically from his porridge bowl.

'What? Sending his horses to Tattersall's and shutting up the old home? Poor old chap!'

'He has lost his she-goshawk, Jezebel,' Mary said, 'and can't afford another. Also white horse-leather for jesses costs too much. He has nothing left now except a couple of kestrels. If you want to live with death, Archie, keep hawks. They perish at the slightest provocation. Hang themselves, or have apoplexy, or a clot or something, or they get lost and catch their jesses in a tree and die of starvation. I'm always being heart-broken by Peter John coming in with a sad face in the morning to tell me that another bird is dead. Last summer he had four kestrels, called Violet, Slingsby, Guy, and Lionel. The most beloved little birds. They sat all day on their perches on the lawn, and scolded like fishwives if one of

Dick's cockers came near them, for they couldn't abide black dogs. Not one is left. Jezebel killed one, two died of heart-disease, and one broke its neck in the stable-yard. Peter John got two eyasses to take their place from the Winstanleys' keeper, but they'll go the same road. And now Jezebel is a corpse. I never liked her, for she was as big as an eagle and had a most malevolent eye, but she was the joy of his soul, and it was wonderful to see her come back to the lure out of the clouds. Now he says he can't afford to buy any more and is putting down his establishment. He spent most of his allowance on hawks, and was always corresponding with distressed Austrian noblemen about them.'

Just then Peter John came in. He was apt to be late for breakfast, for, though he rose early, he had usually a lot to do in the morning. He was wearing old beagling breeches, and a leather-patched jacket which a tramp would have declined.

'I say, I'm sorry about your bad luck,' Archie told him. 'But you mustn't chuck falconry. Did you ever have a peregrine?'

'You mustn't talk like that,' Mary said. 'Say tassel-gentle or falcon-gentle, according to the sex. Peter John likes the old names, which he gets out of Gervase Markhan.'

'Because,' Archie continued, 'if you'd like it I can get you one.'

Peter John's eye brightened.

'Eyass or passage-hawk?' he asked.

'Eyass,' said Archie, who understood the language. 'Wattie Laidlaw got it out of a nest last spring. It's a female—a falcon, I suppose you'd call it—and an uncommon fine bird. She has been well manned too, and Wattie has killed several brace of grouse with her. But she can't go on with him, for he has too much to do, and he wrote last week that he wanted to find a home for her. I thought of young David Warcliff, but he has gone to France to cram for the Diplomatic. So what about it, my lad? She's yours for the taking.'

The upshot was that Peter John had some happy days making new hoods and leashes and jesses, and that a week later the peregrine arrived in a box from Crask. She was in a vile temper, and had damaged two of her tail feathers, so that he had to spend a day with the imping needle. If you keep hawks you have to be a pretty efficient nursemaid, and feed them and wash them and mend for them. She hadn't a name, so Peter John christened her Morag, as a tribute to her Highland ancestry. He spent most of his time in solitary communion with her till she got to know him, and in the first days of the New Year he had her in good train.

Always in January, if the weather is right, I go down to the Norfolk coast for a few days' goose-shooting. This year I had meant to take Peter John with me, for I thought that it would be a sport after his own heart. But it was plain that he couldn't leave Morag, and, as I wanted company, I agreed to her coming. So on the night of January 7 Peter John, his bird, and myself found ourselves in the Rose and Crown at Hanham, looking out over darkening mudflats which were being scourged by a south-west gale.

Peter John found quarters for Morag in an outhouse, and after supper went to bed, for he had to be up at four next morning. I looked into the bar for a word with the old fowlers, particularly my own man, Samson Grose, whom I had appointed to meet me there. There were only two in the place besides Samson, Joe Whipple and the elder Green, both famous names on the Hanham Flats, for the rest were at the evening flight and would look in later on their way home for the fowler's jorum of hot rum-and-milk. All three were elderly—two had fought in the Boer War—and they had the sallow skins and yellowish eyeballs of those who spend their lives between the Barrier Sands and the sea. I never met a tougher, and I never saw a less healthy-looking, breed than the Hanham men. They are a class by themselves, neither quite of the land nor quite of the water.

Samson had good news. The Baltic must be freezing, for wild fowl were coming in plentifully, though too thin to be worth shooting. Chiefly widgeon and teal, but he had seen a little bunch of pintail. I asked about geese. Plenty of brent, he said, which were no good, for they couldn't be eaten, and a few barnacle and bean. The white-fronts and the pink-foot were there, though they had been mortal hard to get near, but this gale was the right thing to keep them low. The evening flight was the better just now, Samson thought, for there was no moon, and geese, whose eyesight is no keener than yours or mine, left the shore fields early to get back to the sea, and one hadn't to wait so long. He fixed 4.15 as the time he was to meet us at the inn-door next morning; for dawn would not be till close on eight, and that gave us plenty of time to get well out into the mud and dig our 'graves.'

The three fowlers left for home, and I went into the bar-parlour to have a talk with the hostess, Mrs. Pottinger. When I first visited Hanham she and Job her husband were a handsome middle-aged pair, but Job had had his back broken in Hanham Great Wood when he was drawing timber, and his widow had suddenly become an old woman. It was a lonely business at the Rose and Crown, on the edge of the salt marshes

and a couple of miles from any village, but that she minded not at all. Grieving for Job, and a kind of recurring fever which is common in those parts in the autumn, a sort of mild malaria, had taken the vigour out of her, and put a pathos like a dog's into her fine dark eyes. She ran the little inn for the fowlers, who had been Joe's friends, and did a small transport business with a couple of barges in the creek and an ancient carrier's cart along the shore. She took me in as a guest because Job had liked me, but, though the house had three or four snug little bedrooms, she did not hold it out as a place for visitors, and would have shut the door in the face of an inquisitive stranger.

I found her having a late cup of tea and looking better than I remembered her last time. A fire burned pleasantly, and window and roof-beams shook in the gale. She was full of inquiries about Peter John, who in his old-fashioned way had at once paid his respects to her and begged her tolerance for Morag. She shook her head when she heard that he was going out next morning. 'Pore little lad,' she said. 'Young bones want long lays abed.' Then she broke to me what I should never have suspected, that there was another guest in the Rose and Crown.

'Nice, quiet, young gentleman,' she said, 'and not so young neither, for he'll never see thirty-five again. Name of Smith—Mr. James Smith. He has been ill and wanted a place where folks wouldn't worrit him, and he heard of this house through my cousin Nance, her that's married on a groom at Lord Hanham's racin' stables. He wrote to me that pleadingly that I hadn't the heart to refuse, and now he's been a fortnight in the red room and become, as you might say, a part of the 'ousehold. Keeps hisself to hisself, but very pleasant when spoke to.'

I asked if Mr. Smith was a sportsman.

'No. He ain't no gunner. He lies late and goes early to bed, and in between walks up and down about the shore from Trim Head to Whaffle Creek. But this night he has gone out with the gunners—for the first time. He persuaded Jeb Smart to take him, for, like your little gentleman son, he has a fancy for them wild birds.'

Mrs. Pottinger roused herself with difficulty out of her chair, for in spite of her grief she had put on weight since her husband's death.

'I think I hear them,' she said. 'Job always said I had the ears of a wild goose. I must see if Sue has kept up the fire in the bar, and got the milk 'ot. The pore things will be perished, for it's a wind to blow the tail off a cow, as folks say.'

Sure enough it was the returning fowlers. Two men, whose short frieze jackets made them seem as broad as they were long, were

stamping their feet on the brick floor. A third was peeling off an airman's leather coat with a fleece lining, and revealing long legs in trench-boots and a long body in home-spun. I thought him one of the biggest fellows I had ever seen.

I knew the two Smarts, Jeb and Zeb—their shortened Christian names were a perpetual confusion—and they introduced me to the third, for Mrs. Pottinger, after satisfying herself that all was well, had retreated to her parlour. The fowlers drank their rum-and-milk and between gulps gave me their news. They had not done much—only a 'Charlie,' which is a goose that has been pricked by a shot and has dropped out of the flight. But they thought well of the chances in the morning, for the gale would last for twenty-four hours, there were plenty of white-fronts and pink-foot now out on the sea, and in that hurricane they would fly in low. Jeb and Zeb had never much conversation, and in three minutes they grunted good-night and took the road.

I was left with the third of the party. As I have said, he was a very big man, clean-shaven except for a small fair moustache, and with a shock of sandy hair which had certainly not been cut by a good barber. He was wearing an old suit of home-spun tweeds, and he had a pull-over of a coarse black-and-white pattern, the kind of thing you see in a Grimsby trawler. I would have set him down as a farmer of sorts, but for the fact that his skin was oddly pallid, and that his hands were not those of a man who had ever done manual toil. He had bowed to me in a way which was not quite English. I said something about the weather, and he replied in good English with just a suspicion of a foreign accent.

Clearly he had not expected to find another guest in the Rose and Crown, for his first glance at me had been one of extreme surprise. More than surprise. I could have sworn that it was alarm, almost panic, till something about me reassured him. But his eyes kept searching my face, as if they were looking for something which he dreaded to find there. Then, when I spoke, he appeared to be more at his ease. I told him that I had come to Hanham for some years, and that I had brought my boy with me, and hoped to show him a little sport.

'Your boy?' he asked. 'He is young?'

When I told him nearly fourteen, he seemed to be relieved.

'The boy—he is fond of shooting?'

I said that Peter John had never been after geese before, but that he was mad about birds.

'I too,' he said. 'I do not shoot, but I love to watch the birds. There are many here which I have not seen before, and some which I have seen rarely are here in multitudes.'

As I went to bed I speculated about Mr. Smith. That he was a foreigner I judged both from his slight accent and from his rather elaborate English. I thought that he might be a German or a Dutchman or a Swede, perhaps a field-naturalist who was visiting Hanham just as Archie Roylance used to visit Texel. I liked his face, which was kindly and shy, and I decided that, since he seemed to be a lonely fellow, Peter John and I would offer to take him out with us. But there were two things about him that puzzled me. One was that I had a dim consciousness of having seen him before, or at least some one very like him. The set of his jaw and the way his nose sprang sharply from below his forehead were familiar. The other was that spasm of fright in his eyes when he had first seen me. He could not be a criminal in hiding—he looked far too honest and wholesome for that—but he was in fear, in fear of some one or something coming suddenly upon him even in this outlandish corner of England. I fell asleep wondering what might lurk in the past of this simple, substantial being.

At four o'clock we were called, and after a cup of tea joined Samson on the jetty, and by the light of an exiguous electric torch started to find our way over the dry sand, and out into the salt marshes. The gale had dropped a little, but the wind blew cruelly on our right cheek, and the whole dark world was an ice-box. Peter John and I wore rubber knee-boots, beastly things to walk in, and, not having Samson's experience, we plunged several times up to the waist in the little creeks. Both of us had 8-bore guns firing cartridges three and a half inches long, while Samson had a 12-bore with a barrel as long as a Boer *roer*. By and by we were free of the crab grass and out on the oozy mud-flats. There Samson halted us, and with the coal-shovels from our goose-bags we started to dig our 'graves,' piling up a rampart of mud on the sea side from which the birds were coming. After that there fell a silence like death, while each of us crouched in our holes about a hundred yards apart, peering up with chattering teeth into the thick darkness, and waiting for that slow lightning which would mean the dawn.

A little after six there came a sound above us like the roar of a second gale, the first having subsided to a fairly steady south-west wind. I knew from experience what it was, and I had warned Peter John about it. It was thousands and thousands of waders, stints and knots and redshanks and the like, flying in batches, each batch making the noise of a great

wave on a beach. Then for a little there was stillness again, and the darkness thinned ever so little, so that I believed that I must be seeing at least fifty yards. But I wasn't, for when the duck began I could only hear the beat of their wings, though I knew that they were flying low.

There was another spell of eerie quiet, and then it seemed that the world was changing. The clouds were drifting apart, and I suddenly saw a brilliant star-sown patch of sky. Then the whole horizon turned from velvet-black to grey, grey rimmed in the east with a strip of intense yellow light. I looked behind me and could see the outlines of the low coast, with blurs which I knew were woods, and with one church-steeple pricking fantastically into the pale brume.

It was the time for the geese, and in an instant they were on us. They came in wedge after wedge, shadowy as ghosts against the faintly flushing clouds, but cut sharp against the violet lagoon of clear sky. They were not babbling, as they do in an evening flight from the fields to the sea, but chuckling and talking low to themselves. From the sound I knew they were pink-foot, for the white-fronts make a throatier noise. It was a sight that always takes my breath away, this multitude of wild living things surging out of the darkness and the deep, as steady in their discipline as a Guards battalion. I never wanted to shoot and I never shot first; it was only the thunder of Samson's 12-bore that woke me to my job.

An old gander, which was the leading bird in one wedge, suddenly trumpeted. Him Samson got; he fell with a thud five yards from my head, and the echo of the shot woke the marshes for miles. It was all our bag. The birds flew pretty high, and Peter John had the best chance, but no sign of life came from his trench. As soon as the geese had passed, and a double wedge of whistling widgeon had followed very high up, I walked over to investigate. I found my son sitting on his mud rampart with a rapt face. 'I couldn't shoot,' he stammered; 'they were too beautiful. To-morrow I'll bring Morag. I don't mind hawking a goose, for that's a fair fight, but I won't kill them with a gun.' I respected his feelings, but I thought him optimistic, for, till he had learned to judge their pace, I was pretty sure that he would never get near them.

We had a gargantuan breakfast, and then tumbled into bed for four hours. After luncheon we went out on the sand dunes with the falcon, where Peter John to his joy saw a ruff. He wouldn't fly Morag, because he said it was a shame to match a well-fed bird of prey against the thin and weary waders which had flown from the Baltic. On our road back we met Smith, who had been for a long walk, and I introduced Peter John. The two took to each other at once, in the way a shy man often

makes friends with a boy. Smith obviously knew a good deal about birds, but I wondered what had been his observation ground, for he was keenly interested in ducks like teal and widgeon, which are common objects of the seashore, while he spoke of rarities like the purple sandpiper as if they were old acquaintances. Otherwise he was not communicative, and he had the same sad, watchful look that I had noticed the night before. But he brightened up when I suggested that he should come with us next morning.

That evening's flight was a wash-out. The wind capriciously died away, and out of the marshes a fog crept which the gunners call a 'thick.' We tried another part of the mud-flats, hoping that the weather would clear. Clear it did for about half an hour, when there was a wonderful scarlet and opal sunset. But the mist crept down again with the darkening, and all we could see was the occasional white glimmer of a duck's wing. The geese came from the shore about half-past five, not chuckling as in the morning, but making a prodigious clamour, and not in wedges, but in one continuous flight. We heard them right enough, but we could see nothing above us except a thing like a grey woollen comforter. At six o'clock we gave it up, and went back to supper, after which I read *King Solomon's Mines* aloud to Peter John before a blazing fire, and added comments on it from my own experience.

I thought that the weather was inclining to frost and had not much hope for next morning. But the gale had not finished, and I was awakened to the rattle of windows and the blatter of sleet on the roof. We found Smith waiting for us with Samson, looking as if he had been up for hours or had not slept, for his eyes were not gummy like Peter John's and mine. We had a peculiarly unpleasant walk over the crab grass, bent double to avoid the blizzard, and when we got to the mud our hands were so icy that they could hardly grip the coal-shovels. Smith, who had no gun, helped Peter John to dig his 'grave,' the latter being encumbered by Morag, who needed some attention. Never was an angrier bird, to judge by her vindictive squeaks and the glimpses I had in the fitful torchlight of her bright, furious eyes.

We had a miserable vigil, during which the sleet died away and the wind slightly abated. My hole was close to a creek, and I remember that, just as dawn was breaking, the shiny, water-proof head of a seal popped up beside me. After that came the usual ritual—the thunderous flocks of waders, the skeins of duck, and then in the first light the wedges of geese, this time mainly white-fronts. They were a little later than usual,

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