

THE PORTOBELLO ROAD

by Muriel Spark

One day in my young youth at high summer, lolling with my lovely companions upon a haystack, I found a needle. Already and privately for some years I had been guessing that I was set apart from the common run, but this of the needle attested the fact to my whole public: George, Kathleen and Skinny. I sucked my thumb, for when I had thrust my idle hand deep into the hay, the thumb was where the needle had stuck.

When everyone had recovered George said, 'She put in her thumb and pulled out a plum.' Then away we were into our merciless hacking-hecking laughter again.

The needle had gone fairly deep into the thumbly cushion and a small red river flowed and spread from this tiny puncture. So that nothing of our joy should lag¹, George put in quickly, 'Mind your bloody thumb on my shirt.'

Then hac-hec-hoo, we shrieked into the hot Borderland afternoon. Really I should not care to be so young of heart again. That is my thought every time I turn over my old papers and come across the photograph. Skinny, Kathleen and myself are in the photo atop the haystack. Skinny had just finished analysing the inwards of my find.

'It couldn't have been done by brains. You haven't much brains but you're a lucky wee² thing.'

Everyone agreed that the needle betokened extraordinary luck. As it was becoming a serious conversation, George said, 'I'll take a photo.'

I wrapped my hanky round my thumb and got myself organised. George pointed up from his camera and shouted,

'Look, there's a mouse!'

Kathleen screamed and I screamed although I think we knew there was no mouse. But this gave us an extra session of squalling hee-hoo's. Finally we three composed ourselves for George's picture. We look lovely and it was a great day at the time, but I would not care for it all over again. From that day I was known as Needle.

One Saturday in recent years I was mooching³ down the Portobello Road, threading among the crowds of marketers on the narrow pavement when I saw a woman. She had a haggard, careworn, wealthy look. I had not seen her for nearly five years. How changed she was! But I recognised Kathleen, my friend; her features had already begun to sink and protrude in the way that mouths and noses do in people destined always to be old for their years. When I had last seen her, nearly five years ago, Kathleen, barely thirty, had said,

'I've lost all my looks, it's in the family. All the women are handsome as girls, but we go off early, we go brown and noseey.'

I stood silently among the people, watching. As you will see, I wasn't in a position to speak to Kathleen. I saw her shoving in her avid manner from stall to stall. She was always fond of antique jewellery and of bargains. I wondered that I had not seen her before in the Portobello Road on my Saturday morning *ambles*⁴. Her long stiff-crooked fingers pounced to select a jade ring from amongst the jumble of brooches and pendants, onyx, moonstone and gold, set out on the stall.

'What do you think of this?' she said.

¹ lag – *Here*: delay

² wee – *Scottish*: small

³ mooch – spend time in a place without any particular purpose

⁴ amble – slow walk

I saw then who was with her. I had been half-conscious of the huge man following several paces behind her, and now I noticed him.

`It looks all right,' he said. `How much is it?'

`How much is it?' Kathleen asked the vendor.

I took a good look at this man accompanying Kathleen. It was her husband. The beard was unfamiliar, but I recognised beneath it his enormous mouth, the bright sensuous lips, the large brown eyes forever brimming with pathos⁵.

It was not for me to speak to Kathleen, but I had a sudden inspiration which caused me to say quietly,

`Hallo, George.'

The giant of a man turned round to face the direction of my face. There were so many people—but at length he saw me.

`Hallo, George,' I said again.

Kathleen had started to haggle with the stall-owner, in her old way, over the price of the jade ring. George continued to stare at me, his big mouth slightly parted so that I could see a wide slit of red lips and white teeth between the fair grassy growths of beard and moustache.

`My God!' he said.

`What's the matter?' said Kathleen.

`Hallo, George!' I said again, quite loud this time, and cheerfully.

`Look!' said George. `Look who's there, over beside the fruit stall.'

Kathleen looked but didn't see.

`Who is it?' she said impatiently.

`It's Needle,' he said. `She said "Hallo, George".'

`Needle,' said Kathleen. `Who do you mean? You don't mean our old friend Needle who—'

`Yes. There she is. My God!'

He looked very ill, although when I had said `Hallo, George' I had spoken friendly enough.

`I don't see anyone faintly resembling poor Needle,' said Kathleen looking at him. She was worried.

George pointed straight at me. `Look *there*. I tell you that is Needle.'

`You're ill, George. Heavens, you must be seeing things. Come on home. Needle isn't there. You know as well as I do, Needle is dead.'

I must explain that I departed this life nearly five years ago. But I did not altogether depart this world. There were those odd things still to be done which one's executors can never do properly. Papers to be looked over, even after the executors have torn them up. Lots of business except, of course, on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation, plenty to take an interest in for the time being. I take my recreation on Saturday mornings. If it is a wet Saturday I wander up and down the substantial lanes of Woolworth's as I did when I was young and visible. There is a pleasurable spread of objects on the counters which I now perceive and exploit with a certain detachment, since it suits with my condition of life. Creams, toothpastes, combs and hankies, cotton gloves, flimsy flowering scarves, writing-paper and crayons, ice-cream cones and orangeade, screwdrivers, tins of paint, of glue, of marmalade; I always liked them but far more now that I have no need of any. When

⁵ pathos – страдание, печаль

Saturdays are fine I go instead to the Portobello Road where formerly I would jaunt⁶ with Kathleen in our grown-up days. The barrow-loads do not change much, of apples and rayon vests in common blues and low-taste mauve, of silver plate, trays and teapots long since changed hands from the bygone citizens to dealers, from shops to the new flats and breakable homes, and then over to the barrow-stalls and the dealers again: Georgian spoons, rings, ear-rings of turquoise and opal, patch-boxes with miniature paintings of ladies on ivory, snuff-boxes of silver with Scotch pebbles inset.

Sometimes as occasion arises on a Saturday morning, my friend Kathleen, who is a Catholic, has a Mass said for my soul, and then I am in attendance, as it were, at the church. But most Saturdays I take my delight among the crowds with their aimless purposes, their eternal life not far away, who push past the counters and stalls, who handle, buy, steal, touch, desire and ogle⁷ the merchandise. I hear the tinkling tills, I hear the jangle of loose change and tongues and children wanting to hold and have.

That is how I came to be in the Portobello Road that Saturday morning when I saw George and Kathleen. I would not have spoken had I not been inspired to it. Indeed it's one of the things I can't do now—to speak out, unless inspired. And most extraordinary, on that morning as I spoke, a degree of visibility set in. I suppose from poor George's point of view it was like seeing a ghost when he saw me standing by the fruit barrow repeating in so friendly a manner, 'Hallo, George!'

We were bound for the south. When our education, what we could get of it from the north, was thought to be finished, one by one we were sent to London. John Skinner, whom we called Skinny, went to study more archaeology, George to join his uncle's tobacco farm, Kathleen to stay with her rich connections and to potter⁸ intermittently in the Mayfair hat shop which one of them owned. A little later I also went to London to see life, for it was my ambition to write about life, which first I had to see.

'We four must stick together,' George said very often in that yearning way of his. He was always desperately afraid of neglect. We four looked likely to shift off in different directions and George did not trust the other three of us not to forget all about him. More and more as the time came for him to depart for his uncle's tobacco farm in Africa he said,

'We four must keep in touch.'

And before he left he told each of us anxiously, 'I'll write regularly, once a month. We must keep together for the sake of the old times.' He had three prints taken from the negative of that photo on the haystack, wrote on the back of them 'George took this the day that Needle found the needle' and gave us a copy each. I think we all wished he could become a bit more callous⁹.

During my lifetime I was a drifter, nothing organised. It was difficult for my friends to follow the logic of my life. By the normal reckonings I should have come to starvation, and ruin, which I never did. Of course, I did not live to write about life as I wanted to do. Possibly that is why I am inspired to do so now in these peculiar circumstances.

I taught in a private school in Kensington for almost three months, very small children. I didn't know what to do with them but I was kept fairly busy escorting little boys to the lavatory and telling the little girls to use their handkerchiefs. After that I lived a winter

⁶ jaunt – go for a walk taken for fun

⁷ ogle – смотреть с вождением

⁸ potter – do things in a slow and enjoyable way

⁹ callous – cold-hearted

holiday in London on my small capital, and when that had run out I found a diamond bracelet in the cinema for which I received a reward of fifty pounds. When it was used up I got a job with a publicity man, writing speeches for absorbed industrialists, in which the dictionary of quotations came in very useful. So it went on. I got engaged to Skinny, but shortly after that I was left a small legacy, enough to keep me for six months. This somehow decided me that I didn't love Skinny so I gave him back the ring.

But it was through Skinny that I went to Africa. He was engaged with a party of researchers to investigate King Solomon's mines, that series of ancient workings ranging from the ancient port of Ophir, now called Beira, across Portuguese East Africa and Southern Rhodesia to the mighty jungle-city of Zimbabwe. I accompanied the party as a sort of secretary. Skinny vouched for me, he paid my fare, he sympathised by his action with my inconsequential life although when he spoke of it he disapproved. A life like mine annoys most people; they go to their jobs every day, attend to things, give orders, and get two or three weeks off every year, and it vexes them to see someone else not bothering to do these things and yet getting away with it, not starving, being lucky as they call it. Skinny, when I had broken off our engagement, lectured me about this, but still he took me to Africa knowing I should probably leave his unit within a few months.

We were there a few weeks before we began enquiring for George, who was farming about four hundred miles away to the north. We had not told him of our plans.

Before we left Kathleen told us, 'Give George my love and tell him not to send frantic cables every time I don't answer his letters right away. Tell him I'm busy in the hat shop. You would think he hadn't another friend in the world the way he carries on.'

We had settled first at Fort Victoria, our nearest place of access to the Zimbabwe ruins. There we made enquiries about George. It was clear he hadn't many friends. The older settlers were the most tolerant about the half-caste woman he was living with, as we found, but they were furious about his methods of raising tobacco which we learned were most unprofessional and in some mysterious way disloyal to the whites. We could never discover how it was that George's style of tobacco farming gave the blacks opinions about themselves, but that's what the older settlers claimed. The newer immigrants thought he was unsociable and, of course, his living with that nig made visiting impossible.

I must say I was myself a bit off-put¹⁰ by this news about the brown woman. I was brought up in a university town to which came Indian, African and Asiatic students in a variety of tints and hues. I was brought up to avoid them for reasons connected with local reputation and God's ordinances¹¹. You cannot easily go against what you were brought up to do unless you are a rebel by nature.

Anyhow, we visited George eventually, taking advantage of the offer of transport from some people bound north in search of game. He had heard of our arrival in Rhodesia and though he was glad, almost relieved, to see us he pursued a policy of sullenness for the first hour.

'We wanted to give you a surprise, George.'

'How were we to know that you'd get to hear of our arrival, George? News here must travel faster than light, George.'

'We did hope to give you a surprise, George.'

¹⁰ off-put – смущать, быть неприятным

¹¹ ordinances – laws

At last he said, 'Well, I must say it's good to see you. All we need now is Kathleen. We four simply must stick together. You find when you're in a place like this, there's nothing like old friends.'

He showed us his drying sheds. He showed us a paddock where he was experimenting with a horse and a zebra mare, attempting to mate them. They were frolicking happily, but not together.

'It's been done before,' George said. 'It makes a fine strong beast, more intelligent than a mule and sturdier than a horse. But I'm not having any success with this pair, they won't look at each other.'

After a while, he said, 'Come in for a drink and meet Matilda.'

She was dark brown, with a hollow chest and round shoulders, a gawky¹² woman, very snappy with the house-boys. We said pleasant things as we drank before dinner, but we found George difficult. For some reason he began to rail at me for breaking off my engagement to Skinny, saying what a dirty trick it was after all those good times in the old days. I diverted attention to Matilda. I supposed, I said, she knew this part of the country well?

'No,' said she, 'I been a-shellitered my life. I not put out to working. Me nothing to go from place to place is allowed like dirty girls does.' In her speech she gave every syllable equal stress.

George explained, 'Her father was a white magistrate in Natal. She had a sheltered upbringing, different from the other coloureds, you see.'

'Man, me no black-eyed Susan,' said Matilda, 'no, no.'

On the whole, George treated her as a servant. She was about four months advanced in pregnancy, but he made her get up and fetch for him, many times. Soap: that was one of the things Matilda had to fetch. George made his own bath soap, showed it proudly, gave us the recipe which I did not trouble to remember; I was fond of nice soaps during my lifetime and George's smelt of brilliantine and looked likely to soil one's skin.

'D'yo brahn?' Matilda asked me.

George said, 'She is asking if you go brown in the sun.'

'No, I go freckled.'

'I got sister-in-law go freckles.'

She never spoke another word to Skinny nor to me, and we never saw her again.

Some months later I said to Skinny,

'I'm fed up with being a camp-follower.'

He was not surprised that I was leaving his unit, but he hated my way of expressing it.

'Don't talk like that. Are you going back to England or staying?'

'Staying, for a while.'

'Well, don't wander too far off.'

I was able to live on the fee I got for writing a gossip column in a local weekly, which wasn't my idea of writing about life, of course. I made friends, more than I could cope with, after I left Skinny's little band of archaeologists. I had the attractions of being newly out from England and of wanting to see life. Of the countless young men and go-ahead families I only kept up with one family when I returned to my native land. I think that was because they were the most representative, they stood for all the rest: people in those parts are very typical of each other, as one group of standing stones in that wilderness is like the next.

¹² gawky - clumsy

I met George once more in a hotel in Bulawayo. We drank highballs¹³ and spoke of war. Skinny's party were just then deciding whether to remain in the country or return home. They had reached an exciting part of their research, and whenever I got a chance to visit Zimbabwe he would take me for a moonlight walk in the ruined temple and try to make me see phantom Phoenicians flitting ahead of us, or along the walls. I had half a mind to marry Skinny; perhaps, I thought, when his studies were finished. The impending war was in our bones: so I remarked to George as we sat drinking highballs in the hotel in the hard bright sunny July winter of that year.

George was inquisitive about my relations with Skinny. He tried to pump me for about half an hour and when at last I said, 'You are becoming aggressive, George,' he stopped. He became quite pathetic. He said, 'War or no war I'm clearing out of this.'

'It's the heat does it,' I said.

'I'm clearing out in any case. I've lost a fortune in tobacco. My uncle is making a fuss. It's the other bloody planters; once you get the wrong side of them you're finished in this wide land.'

'What about Matilda?' I asked.

He said, 'She'll be all right. She's got hundreds of relatives.'

I had already heard about the baby girl. Coal black, by repute, with George's features. And another on the way, they said.

'What about the child?'

He didn't say anything to that. He ordered more highballs and when they arrived he swizzled his for a long time with a stick. 'Why didn't you ask me to your twenty-first?' he said then.

'I didn't have anything special, no party, George.'

'You didn't ask me to your twenty-first,' he said. 'Kathleen writes to me regularly.'

This wasn't true. Kathleen sent me letters fairly often in which she said, 'Don't tell George I wrote to you as he will be expecting word from me and I can't be bothered actually.'

'But you,' said George, 'don't seem to have any sense of old friendships, you and Skinny.'

'Oh, George!' I said.

'Remember the times we had,' George said. 'We used to have times.' His large brown eyes began to water.

'I'll have to be getting along,' I said.

'Please don't go. Don't leave me just yet. I've something to tell you.'

'Something nice?' I laid on an eager smile. All responses to George had to be overdone.

'You don't know how lucky you are,' George said.

'How?' I said. Sometimes I got tired of being called lucky by everybody. There were times when, privately practising my writings about life, I knew the bitter side of my fortune. When I failed again and again to reproduce life in some satisfactory and perfect form, I was the more imprisoned, for all my carefree living, within my craving for this satisfaction. Sometimes, in my impotence and need I secreted a venom¹⁴ which infected all my life for days on end and which spurted out indiscriminately on Skinny or on anyone who crossed my path.

¹³ highball – виски с содовой и льдом

¹⁴ venom – *fig*: hatred

`You aren't bound by anyone,' George said. `You come and go as you please. Something always turns up for you. You're free, and you don't know your luck.'

`You're a damn sight more free than I am,' I said sharply. `You've got your rich uncle.'

`He's losing interest in me,' George said. `He's had enough.'

`Oh well, you're young yet. What was it you wanted to tell me?'

`A secret,' George said. `Remember we used to have those secrets.'

`Oh, yes we did.'

`Did you ever tell any of mine?'

`Oh no, George.' In reality, I couldn't remember any particular secret out of the dozens we must have exchanged from our schooldays onwards.

`Well, this is a secret, mind. Promise not to tell.'

`Promise.'

`I'm married.'

`Married, George! Oh, who to?'

`Matilda.'

`How dreadful!' I spoke before I could think, but he agreed with me.

`Yes, it's awful, but what could I do?'

`You might have asked my advice,' I said pompously.

`I'm two years older than you are. I don't ask advice from you, Needle, little beast.'

`Don't ask for sympathy then.'

`A nice friend you are,' he said, `I must say after all these years.'

`Poor George!' I said.

`There are three white men to one white woman in this country,' said George. `An isolated planter doesn't see a white woman and if he sees one she doesn't see him. What could I do? I needed the woman.'

I was nearly sick. One, because of my Scottish upbringing. Two, because of my horror of corny phrases like `I needed the woman', which George repeated twice again.

`And Matilda got tough,' said George, `after you and Skinny came to visit us. She had some friends at the Mission, and she packed up and went to them.'

`You should have let her go,' I said.

`I went after her,' George said. `She insisted on being married, so I married her. Crazy as I was, I took her to the Congo and married her there.'

`Well, you can't clear off and leave her now, surely,' I said.

`I can't stand the woman and I can't stand the country. I didn't realize what it would be like. Two years of the country and three months of my wife has been enough.'

`Will you get a divorce?'

`No. Matilda's Catholic. She won't divorce.'

George was fairly getting through the highballs, and I wasn't far behind him. His brown eyes floated shiny and liquid as he told me how he had written to tell his uncle of his plight, `Of course, I didn't say we were married, that would have been too much for him. He's a prejudiced hardened old Colonial. I only said I'd had a child by a coloured woman and was expecting another, and he perfectly understood. He came at once by plane a few weeks ago. He's made a settlement on her, providing she keeps her mouth shut about her association with me.'

`But as your wife she has a claim on you, in any case.'

`If she claimed as my wife she wouldn't get the money. Matilda knows what she's doing, greedy bitch she is. She'll keep her mouth shut.'

‘Only, you won’t be able to marry again, will you?’

‘Not unless she dies,’ he said. ‘And she’s as strong as a trek ox.’

‘Well, I’m sorry, George.’

‘Good of you to say so,’ he said. ‘But I see by your chin that you disapprove of me.’

‘Oh, George, I quite understand. You were lonely, I suppose.’

‘You didn’t even ask me to your twenty-first. If you and Skinny had been nicer to me, I would never have lost my head and marry the woman, never.’

‘You didn’t ask me to your wedding,’ I said.

‘You’re a catty bissom¹⁵, Needle, not like what you were in the old times. Mind you keep the secret,’ George said.

‘Can’t I tell Skinny? He would be very sorry for you, George.’

‘You mustn’t tell anyone. Keep it a secret. Promise.’

‘Promise,’ I said. I understood that he wished to enforce some sort of bond between us with this secret, and I thought, ‘Oh well, I suppose he’s lonely. Keeping his secret won’t do any harm.’

I returned to England with Skinny’s party just before the war.

I did not see George again till just before my death, five years ago.

After the war Skinny returned to his studies. He had two more exams, and I thought I might marry him when the exams were over.

‘You might do worse than Skinny,’ Kathleen used to say to me on our Saturday morning excursions to the antique shops and the junk stalls.

She too was getting on in years. The remainder of our families in Scotland were hinting that it was time we settled down with husbands. Kathleen was a little younger than me but looked much older. She knew her chances were diminishing but at that time I did not think she cared very much. As for myself, the main attraction of marrying Skinny was his prospective expeditions to Mesopotamia. My desire to marry him had to be stimulated by the continual reading of books about Babylon; perhaps Skinny felt this, because he supplied the books.

Kathleen kept an antique shop near Lambeth, was doing very nicely, lived in a Chelsea square, but for all that she must have wanted to be married and have children. She would stop and look into all the prams which the mothers had left outside shops.

Before Skinny’s final exam he fell ill and was sent to a sanatorium in Switzerland.

‘You’re fortunate after all not to be married to him,’ Kathleen said. ‘You might have caught T.B.’

I was fortunate, I was lucky... so everyone kept telling me on different occasions. Although it annoyed me to hear, I knew they were right. It took me very small effort to make a living; book reviews, odd jobs for Kathleen, a few months with the publicity man again, getting up speeches about literature and art. I was waiting to write about life and it seemed to me that the good fortune lay in this, whenever it should be. And until then I was assured of my charmed life, the necessities of existence always coming my way.

I visited Skinny twice in the two years that he was in the sanatorium. He was almost cured, and expected to be home within a few months. I told Kathleen after my last visit.

‘Maybe I’ll marry Skinny when he’s well again.’

‘Make it definite, Needle, and not so much of the maybe.’

¹⁵ *bissom* – Scottish: a term applied jocularly to a woman or young girl.

This was five years ago, in the last year of my life, Kathleen and I have become very close friends. We met several times each week, and after Saturday-morning excursions in the Portobello Road very often I would accompany Kathleen to her aunt's house in Kent for a long week-end.

One day in the June of that year I met Kathleen specially for lunch because she had phoned me to say she had news.

'Guess who came into the shop this afternoon,' she said.

'Who?'

'George.'

We had half imagined George was dead. We had received no letters in the past ten years. Early in the war we had heard rumours of his keeping a nightclub in Durban, but nothing after that. We could have made inquiries if we had felt so. As the years passed we ceased to mention George except in passing, as someone more or less dead.

Kathleen was excited about George's turning up. She had forgotten her impatience with him in former days; she said, 'It was so wonderful to see old George. He seems to need a friend, feels neglected, out of touch with things.'

'He needs mothering, I suppose.'

Kathleen didn't notice the malice¹⁶. She declared, 'That's exactly the case with George. It always has been. I can see it now.'

She seemed ready to come to any rapid conclusion about George. In the course of the morning he had told her of his wartime nightclub, his game-shooting expeditions since. It was clear he had not mentioned Matilda. He had put on weight, Kathleen told me, but he could carry it.

I was curious to see this version of George, but I was leaving for Scotland next day and did not see him till September of that year just before my death.

While I was in Scotland I gathered from Kathleen's letters that she was seeing George very frequently, finding enjoyable company in him, looking after him. 'You'll be surprised to see how he has developed.' George had an old relative in Kent whom he visited at week-ends; this old lady lived a few miles from Kathleen's aunt, which made it easy for him to travel down together on Saturdays, and go for long country walks.

'You'll see such a difference in George,' Kathleen said on my return to London in September. I was to meet him that night, a Saturday. Kathleen's aunt was abroad, and I was to keep Kathleen company in the empty house. George had left London for Kent a few days earlier. 'He's actually helping with the harvest down there!' Kathleen told me lovingly.

Kathleen and I planned to travel together, but on that Saturday she was delayed in London on some business. It was arranged that I should go ahead of her in the early afternoon to see to the provisions for our party; Kathleen had invited George to dinner at her aunt's house that night.

'I should be with you by seven,' she said. 'Sure you won't mind the empty house? I hate arriving at empty houses myself.'

I said no, I liked an empty house.

So I did when I got there. I had never found the house more likeable. A large vicarage in about eight acres. Most of the rooms shut and sheeted, there being only one servant. I discovered that I wouldn't need to go shopping. Kathleen's aunt had left many delicate supplies with notes attached to them: 'Eat this up please, see also fridge' and 'A treat for

¹⁶ malice - злоба

three hungry people 2 bottles beaune¹⁷ for yr party on black kn table.’ It was like a treasure hunt as I followed clue after clue through the cool silent domestic quarters. A house in which there are no people – but with all the signs of tenancy – can be a most tranquil good place. On my previous visits I had seen the rooms overflowing with Kathleen, her aunt, and the little fat maidservant; they were always on the move. As I wandered through that part of the house which was in use, opening windows to let in the air of September, I was not conscious that I, Needle, was taking up any space at all, I might have been a ghost.

The only thing to be fetched was the milk. I waited till after four when the milking should be done, then set off for the farm which lay across two fields at the back of the orchard. There, when the byreman¹⁸ was handing me the bottle, I saw George.

‘Hallo, George,’ I said.

‘Needle! What are you doing here?’ he said.

‘Fetching milk’, I said.

‘So am I. Well, it’s good to see you, I must say.’

As we paid the farm-hand, George said, ‘I’ll walk back with you part of the way. But I mustn’t stop, my old cousin’s without any milk for her tea. How’s Kathleen?’

‘She was kept in London. She’s coming on later.’

We had reached the end of the first field. George’s way led to the left and on to the main road.

‘We’ll see you tonight, then?’ I said.

‘Yes, and talk about old times.’

‘Grand,’ I said.

But George got over the stile¹⁹ with me.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘I’d like to talk to you, Needle.’

‘We’ll talk tonight, George. Better not keep your cousin waiting for the milk.’ I found myself speaking to him almost as if he were a child.

‘No. I want to talk to you alone. This is a good opportunity.’

We began to cross the second field. I had been hoping to have the house to myself for a couple more hours and I was rather petulant.

‘See,’ he said suddenly, ‘that haystack.’

‘Yes,’ I said absently.

‘Let’s sit there and talk. I’d like to see you up on a haystack again. I still keep that photo. Remember that time when – ‘

‘I found the needle,’ I said very quickly, to get it over.

But I was glad to rest. The stack had been broken up, but we managed to find a nest in it. I buried my bottle of milk in the hay for coolness. George placed his carefully at the foot of the stack.

‘My old cousin is a bit hazy in her head. She hasn’t the least sense of time. If I tell her I’ve only been gone ten minutes, she’ll believe it.’

I giggled and looked at him. His face had grown much larger, his lips full, wide, and with a ripe colour that is strange in a man. His brown eyes were abounding as before with some inarticulate plea²⁰.

‘So you’re going to marry Skinny after all these years?’

¹⁷ beaune – французское вино

¹⁸ byreman - дояр

¹⁹ stile - ступеньки для перехода через ограждение, разделяющее поля

²⁰ plea – an urgent or emotional request for something

‘I really don’t know, George.’

‘You played him up properly.’

‘It isn’t for you to judge. I have my own reasons for what I do.’

‘Don’t get sharp,’ he said, ‘I was only funning. ‘To prove it, he lifted a tuft of hay and brushed my face with it.

‘D’you know,’ he said next, ‘I didn’t think you and Skinny treated me very decently in Rhodesia.’

‘Well, we were busy. And we were younger then, we had a lot to do and see.’

‘A touch of selfishness,’ he said.

‘I’ll have to be getting along, George.’ I made to get down from the stack. He pulled me back. ‘Wait, I’ve got something to tell you.’

‘O.K., George. Tell me.’

‘First promise not to tell Kathleen. She wants it kept a secret so that she can tell you herself.’

‘All right. Promise.’

‘I’m going to marry Kathleen.’

‘But you’re already married.’

Sometimes I heard news of Matilda from the one Rhodesian family with whom I had still kept up. The referred to her as ‘George’s Dark Lady’ and of course they did not know he was married to her. She had apparently made a good thing out of George, they said, for she minced around all tarted up²¹ and never did a stroke of work. According to accounts, she was a living example of the folly of behaving as George did.

‘I married Matilda in the Congo,’ George was saying.

‘It would still be bigamy²²,’ I said.

He was furious when I used that word bigamy. He lifted a handful of hay as if he would throw it in my face, but controlling himself he fanned it at me playfully.

‘I am not sure that the Congo marriage was valid,’ he continued. ‘Anyway, as far as I’m concerned, it isn’t.’

‘You can’t do a thing like that,’ I said.

‘I need Kathleen. She’s been decent to me. I think we were always meant for each other, me and Kathleen.’

‘I’ll have to be going,’ I said.

But he put his knee over my ankles, so that I couldn’t move. I sat still and gazed into space. He tickled my face with a wisp of hay.

‘Smile up, Needle,’ he said, ‘let’s talk like old times.’

‘Well?’

‘No one knows about my marriage to Matilda except you and me.’

‘And Matilda.’

‘She’ll hold her tongue so long as she gets her payments. My uncle left an annuity²³ for the purpose, his lawyers see to it.’

‘Let me go, George.’

‘You promised to keep it a secret, you promised.’

‘Yes, I promised.’

²¹ tart up – make oneself look attractive, for example, by wearing nice clothes

²² bigamy – the crime of being married to more than one person at the same time

²³ annuity - ежегодная выплата

‘And now that you’re going to marry Skinny, we’ll be properly coupled off as we should have been years ago. We should have been – but youth! – youth got in the way, didn’t it?’

‘Life got in the way,’ I said.

‘But everything’s going to be all right now. You’ll keep my secret, won’t you? You promised.’ He had released my feet. I edged a little farther from him.

I said, ‘If Kathleen intends to marry you, I shall tell her that you’re already married.’

‘You wouldn’t do a dirty trick like that, Needle? You’re going to be happy with Skinny, you wouldn’t stand in the way of my – ‘

‘I must, Kathleen’s my best friend,’ I said swiftly.

He looked as if he would murder me and he did, he stuffed hay into my mouth until it could hold no more, kneeling on my body to keep it still, holding both my wrists tight in his huge left hand. I saw the red full lines of his mouth and the white slit of his teeth last thing on earth. Not another soul passed by as he pressed my body into the stack, as he made a deep nest for me, tearing up the hay to make a groove the length of my corpse, and finally pulling the warm dry stuff in a mound over this concealment, so natural-looking in a broken haystack. Then he climbed down, took up his bottle of milk, and went his way. I suppose that was why he looked so unwell when I stood, nearly five years later, by the barrow in the Portobello Road and said in easy tones, ‘Hallo, George!’

The Haystack Murder was one of the notorious crimes of that year.

My friends said, ‘A girl who had everything to live for.’

After a search that lasted twenty hours, when my body was found, the evening papers said, “ ‘Needle’ is found: in a haystack!”

Kathleen, speaking from that Catholic point of view which takes some getting used to, said, ‘She was at Confession only the day before she died – wasn’t she lucky?’

The poor byre-hand who sold us milk was grilled²⁴ for hour after hour by the local police, and later by Scotland Yard. So was George. He admitted walking as far as the haystack with me, but he denied lingering there.

‘You hadn’t seen your friend for ten years?’ the Inspector asked him.

‘That’s right,’ said George.

‘And you didn’t stop to have a chat?’

‘No. We’d arranged to meet later at dinner. My cousin was waiting for the milk, I couldn’t stop.’

His old cousin swore that he hadn’t been gone more than ten minutes in all, and she believed it to the day of her death a few months later. There was a microscopic evidence of hay on George’s jacket, of course, but the same evidence was on every man’s jacket in the district that fine harvest year. Unfortunately, the byreman’s hands were even mightier than George’s. The marks on my wrists had been done by such hands, so the laboratory charts indicated when my post-mortem was all completed. But the wrist-marks weren’t enough to pin down the crime to either man. If I hadn’t been wearing my long-sleeved cardigan, it was said, the bruises might have matched up properly with someone’s fingers.

Kathleen, to prove that George had absolutely no motive, told the police that she was engaged to him. George thought this a little foolish. They checked up on his life in Africa right back to his living with Matilda. But the marriage didn’t come out – who would think of looking up registers in the Congo? George was relieved when the inquiries were over

²⁴ grill - interrogate

without the marriage to Matilda being disclosed. He was able to have his nervous breakdown at the same time as Kathleen had hers, and they recovered together and got married, long after the police had shifted their inquiries to an Air Force camp five miles from Kathleen's aunt's home. Only a lot of excitement and drinks came of those investigations. The Haystack Murder was one of the unsolved crimes that year.

Shortly afterwards the byre-hand emigrated to Canada to start afresh, with the help of Skinny who felt sorry for him.

After seeing George taken away home by Kathleen that Saturday in the Portobello Road, I thought that perhaps I might be seeing more of him in similar circumstances. The next Saturday I looked out for him, and at last there he was without Kathleen, half-worried, half-hopeful.

I dashed his hopes. I said, 'Hallo, George!'

He looked in my direction, rooted in the midst of the flowing market-mongers in that convivial street. I thought to myself, 'He looks as if he had a mouthful of hay.' It was the new bristly maize-coloured beard and moustache surrounding his great mouth suggested the thought.

'Hallo, George!' I said again.

I might have been inspired to say more on that agreeable morning, but he didn't wait. He was away down a side-street and along another street and down one more, zig-zag, as fast and as devious as he could take himself from the Portobello Road.

Nevertheless he was back again next week. Poor Kathleen had brought him in her car. She left it at the top of the street and got out with him, holding him by the arm. She was clinging close to George, and, poor Kathleen – I hate to say how she looked.

And George was haggard. His eyes seemed to have got smaller as if he had been recently in pain. He advanced up the road with Kathleen on his arm, letting himself lurch from side to side with his wife bobbing beside him, as the crowd asserted their rights of way.

'Oh, George!' I said. 'You don't look at all well, George.'

'Look!' said George. 'Over there by the hardware barrow. That's Needle.'

Kathleen was crying. 'Come back home, dear,' she said.

'Oh, you don't look well, George!' I said.

They took him to a nursing home. He was fairly quiet, except on Saturday mornings when they had a hard time of it to keep him indoors and away from the Portobello Road. But a couple of months later he did escape. It was a Monday.

They searched for him in the Portobello Road, but actually he had gone off to Kent to the village near the scene of the Haystack Murder. There he went to the police and gave himself up, but they could tell from the way he was talking that there was something wrong with the man.

'I saw Needle in the Portobello Road three Saturdays running,' he explained, 'and they put me in a private ward but I got away while the nurses were seeing to the new patient. You remember the murder of Needle – well, I did it. Now you know the truth, and that will keep bloody Needle's mouth shut.'

Dozens of poor mad fellows confess to every murder. The police obtained the ambulance to take him back to the nursing home. He wasn't there long. Kathleen gave up her shop and devoted herself to looking after him at home. But she found that the Saturday morning were a strain. He insisted on going to see me in the Portobello Road and would come back to insist that he'd murdered Needle. Once he tried to tell her something about

Matilda, but Kathleen was so kind and solicitous²⁵, I don't think he had the courage to remember what he had to say.

Skinny had always been rather reserved with George since the murder. But he was kind to Kathleen. It was he who persuaded them to emigrate to Canada so that George should be well out of reach of the Portobello Road.

George had recovered somewhat in Canada but of course he will never be the old George again, as Kathleen writes to Skinny. 'That Haystack tragedy did for George,' she writes. 'I feel sorrier for George sometimes than I am for poor Needle. But I do often have Masses said for Needle's soul.'

I doubt if George will ever see me again in the Portobello Road. He broods much over the crumpled snapshot he took of us on the haystack. Kathleen does not like the photograph, I don't wonder. For my part, I consider it quite a jolly snap but I don't think we were any of us so lovely as we look in it, gazing over the ripe cornfields. Skinny with his humorous expression, I secure in my difference from the rest, Kathleen with her head prettily perched on her hand, each reflecting fearlessly in the face of George's camera the glory of the world, as if it would never pass.

²⁵ solicitous – concerned and caring