

Margot Livesey

The Ring

With every step the rumbling, which seemed to come from underground, grew louder as if they were approaching a subterranean river. Soon there were shouts and sharp clattering noises and a mass of soldiers rounded the corner and came pounding along the track. John and Sara stepped aside into the long grass to let them pass. At close quarters individual men materialised, dressed in green with smudges of khaki, gasping for breath, cursing, wiping the sweat from their foreheads. Sara tried to make out their expressions beneath the black berets. One youth with a fresh complexion distinguished himself by turning to look at her, but she had no sense of his personality; he looked anonymous like the grey figures she sometimes saw crouching on the television screen. Two slightly older men brought up the rear and as they went by, one said to the other, "Once round the Ring and back is six miles. That ought to do for a Sunday morning."

The sound of their passage died away and John and Sara remained alone beneath the trees.

"They looked so young," Sara said. "More like boy scouts than soldiers."

"Well, they probably all came straight out of a school in Liverpool. I remember my father was fond of saying that being an officer during the war was a lot like running a boarding school for boys."

"It's still a shock when you actually see them. They don't look old enough to drive a car, let alone a tank."

John and Sara continued to walk along the farm track. On either side the fences were reinforced with hawthorn hedges; gorse and blackberry bushes grew against them like prickly fortifications. They had come down from London the night before to spend Guy Fawkes with their friends, Kim and Martha. That morning at breakfast John proposed they all visit the hill-fort above Brighton, known as the Chanctonbury Ring. Everyone welcomed this suggestion but, at the

last moment, Kim and Martha had quarreled and John and Sara had to find the site by themselves.

Sara had borrowed Martha's brown golf shoes. They had spiked soles and were constantly picking up pebbles. She was obliged to stop frequently to dislodge them with a stick. She would have liked to use her husband's shoulder for support but she did not want to ask for his help and waited for him to make some gesture in her direction. At one point while balancing on her right foot, swaying idiotically and poking at the sole of her left shoe, she made a joke about needing a boy scout. But John did not move.

"I don't know how Martha can wear these damned shoes."

"They're probably fine for golf," John said. "You could have brought your own."

"Yes, I could, but it's so tempting to rely on Martha."

Sara and Martha were not only the same size, they were also remarkably similar. Both had small hands and feet and springy dark brown curly hair. Even their voices sounded the same so that over the telephone or in a muffled conversation in the dark, they could easily be mistaken for each other. They were both delighted by their resemblance. When they were first married, it had been a pleasantry between the two couples that, as in a story from the Arabian Nights, it would be very simple for the two women to exchange roles.

"Where's the fort?" Sara asked.

"Up on the right, I think. We're probably looking at it without knowing it."

"What did you and Kim talk about in the garden before we left?"

"We discussed wind-surfing, Dickens and herbacious borders. And Martha, I suppose, regaled you with her triumph." John stooped to pick up a stick.

"She did talk about Simon," she said slowly. "But she doesn't regard him as a triumph. She only started seeing him because Kim wouldn't stop whoring around."

"I wouldn't call it whoring around."

"No? What would you call it?" Sara asked and then with swift nonchalance, "Have you seen Kim's latest?"

"Yes. In fact, I introduced them. She's one of my students. You've met her too, don't you remember? That time you turned up to have a drink."

"Oh, yes." Sara tried to sound as if she had only a vague recollection of the meeting.

John walked at a steady pace, flicking at the grass with his stick. They had been invited down for the weekend to give their friends some respite from their constant bickering but Sara feared that she and John

only aggravated the situation. After a moment she asked diffidently, "Do you think this is the end for Kim and Martha?"

"You mean will they get a divorce? I should say it's quite likely. Anything seems preferable to the way things are at the moment."

As he spoke he continued to flick at the grass with his stick. Sara listened carefully but she was distracted by the angry punctuation of the stick, like a snake's tongue. Friends show the possibilities, some pursued, others ignored, of one's own life. Kim and Martha's happiness, the endurance of their alliance, had borne witness to the success of her own marriage. Now she felt she did not know what the future might bring.

They reached the cross-roads and stopped. Both to the north and the south there was a small summit, either of which could be the earthworks of a fort. They were trying to decide which way to turn, when they heard the thunder of feet and saw the soldiers approach again, at a slightly slower pace. After they passed, John and Sara began to climb up in the direction from which the soldiers had come.

John said, "I like the idea that they use barbarian ruins for army manoeuvres."

They reached the top and suddenly realised they were standing on the ramparts. Far below to the south lay the sea with boats pinned to it like butterflies.

"It's vast," Sara said. "I had no idea it was so big."

"This is one of the largest forts in southern England. In some places the ramparts are still twenty feet high and there are traces of a second and possibly a third line of defence."

They walked along the ramparts. From time to time John dropped to his knees to examine a stone. As a boy he had searched avidly for birds' eggs, fossils and tadpoles with only moderate success. But Sara who had never collected anything in her life was always finding things. The next time she had to fix her shoe she saw a stone, the shape of an arrow-head, lying in the long grass. She picked it up and hurried after John. She handed it to him silently.

"Well done. This certainly looks like one although apparently the actual shape is not so important as the chipping of the surface."

"Does it really matter? Even if it wasn't carved into an arrow-head, other people long ago might have mistaken it for one. Some Stone Age girl might have found it on the Downs and brought it here; it could have lain on these ramparts for thousands of years, until I came along."

"But just the fact that it's been here for a long time doesn't distinguish it from any other stone. Whereas if someone worked it into an arrow-head, then it would be a link with the past."

"Perhaps not all the arrow-heads needed to be worked. Perhaps some of them were simply *objets trouvés*."

John slipped the stone into his pocket and quickened his pace. He suggested that they explore the centre of the fort but Sara preferred to wait on the ramparts while he took a look around. She sat down beside the path and watched the shadows of the clouds move across the sea. She wondered if there was something which could give her the same insight into the past which an arrow-head seemed to give John. She had been in a state of amazed confusion ever since Martha confided in her.

At the end of July Martha had telephoned Sara and insisted that they both take some time off to go shopping together. She arrived promptly at nine o'clock and they spent the whole day toiling round the shops. Sara was impressed and somewhat aghast at Martha's determined spending. Finally, in the early evening, they returned to the house to have tea. Martha held up a sweater for Sara's approval and suddenly let it fall to the floor. "I can't stand it," she said. "Kim is in love." Sara looked intently at her friend to see if she was just being dramatic.

"How do you know?"

"I don't know: I suspect, I surmise, I smell it. I kiss him very deeply to see if I can taste this other woman. Of course it isn't the first time but before he was always careless about his affairs. He didn't really mind if I found out. Now he's being very, very careful. After fifteen years he's suddenly turned into the ideal husband. And yet it's horrible because it's absolutely clear that he doesn't give a toss about me."

Sara took Martha's hand and asked if there was anything she could do. Ready for battle, Martha jumped at her offer. She asked her to go to the pub where Kim went after work and see if she couldn't find out what the woman was like. "It's always packed. They won't notice you."

Sara wondered why Martha didn't go herself.

"I can't. If he saw me, it'd be fatal."

Sara was reluctant to spy on Kim but seeing how important it was to Martha, she agreed. The first evening she sat, reading her newspaper, for quite some time before she realised that he was not going to show up. The next day she had barely sat down when he came in followed by two young women and behind them, John. Sara was stunned; she fully expected him to be safely at home. Both women looked round, perhaps to observe the effect of their entrance, but neither of the men seemed to notice the roomful of people. Kim found a table, while John, obviously charged with buying the first round, made his way to the bar. There was one moment when Sara might have followed Martha's plan and remained hidden behind her newspaper. Instead, seeing her husband, with quiet haste she picked up her bag, jacket and drink and

went over and touched him on the shoulder. He turned around. At the sight of her, his smile seemed to flicker briefly, as if there had been a temporary failure in the current of his affection.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was out talking to a client and thought I'd say 'hello' to Kim."

"Kim is popular today, I came along to see him too."

They carried the drinks back to the table and John introduced her to the two women as his wife. Their names were Susan and Lisa. In spite of Kim's determined impartiality, within a few minutes it was obvious to Sara that Lisa was Kim's girl. She never doubted this although she could not have explained why he preferred one to the other. When she looked at the two women, who were both young and pretty, they appeared interchangeable, not only with each other, but with every young woman in the room. John and Kim talked to her with unusual animation and Sara in turn politely questioned Lisa and Susan. After twenty minutes they parted amicably.

Next day Martha wanted a report and pressed her for every last detail. As she described Lisa's conversation, Sara kept thinking about the way Susan had smoothed down her skin tight jeans when she got to her feet. She did her best, however, to be reassuring.

"I don't think you've anything to worry about," she told Martha. "If he had to see her every day, he'd be tired of her in a week."

"I wish that was true, but many men find younger women irresistably fascinating."

"Maybe some men, but not Kim."

"All men are a little that way, even John," Martha declared. "Oh, Sara, what shall I do?"

"I don't know. I haven't much experience with this kind of thing." Sara made a gesture of helplessness.

"Kim gave me his own version of last night. He said he and John just happened to be having a drink with a couple of students and you showed up, which was a pleasant surprise. I'm sure they were on their best behaviour in front of you." She smiled. "It doesn't matter, really it doesn't. Do you remember Lucy? How we were always saying that her husband was a model of devotion. Well, a month ago he came home from work, packed a suitcase, and left. I know Kim would never do anything like that but every day when I'm coming home in the evening I'm afraid he may be gone. It's ridiculous. I'm like a child in the dark, pretending there are ghosts to frighten myself."

Sara never told Martha how distressed she had been to find John at the pub, nor did she tell him the real reason why she had gone there. She persuaded herself that she couldn't trust him not to tell Kim in a moment of male camaraderie.

The wind rustled through the trees and long grass growing in the centre of the fort, but neither this faint sound, nor the noise of a tractor ploughing in a nearby field, seemed to disturb the quiet. Sara thought she must keep still, very still.

John was coming back. He scrambled up the ramparts, slithering on the loose stones, to join her. Sara stood up.

"Did you see anything?"

"No, at least nothing ancient. There were some old beer bottles and the signs of several picnic fires."

"Do you hear how quiet it is? Listen. If we weren't so accustomed to it, they say we'd be able to hear the sound of the earth rushing through space."

"Oh yes. 'There's not the smallest orb . . . but in it's motion like an angel sings.' " John seemed pleased to be able to produce an appropriate quotation. "Did you know I was Lorenzo in our school production of *The Merchant of Venice*? I was dreadful. My tights kept slipping and I was always tugging at them." He did up his jacket. "This place is enormous. You know if we knew where to look, there are three or four more forts around here, and just along the coast there are flint mines."

"And people lived inside the ramparts?"

"I think they must have. According to the guide book there are very few indications of buildings within the walls but that may only mean they were made of wood rather than stone. When archaeologists excavate, they usually start outside the ramparts because that's where the villagers threw their rubbish."

They had come to the southern-most part of the fort which overlooked a golf-course. In spite of the season, several people, wearing brightly coloured clothes, were playing. Her father, Sara remembered, always played right up until Christmas.

"With a good pair of binoculars," John said, "we could see Kim and Martha's house from here. We should have got them to hang out a red flag."

"I wonder if they're still arguing."

"Probably." John picked up a stone and examined it closely.

"What do you think of Simon?"

"Simon? I can't take him seriously."

"Do you think Kim does?"

"I'm not sure. I think he finds him a bit of a joke." John looked at Sara. "He is awfully young."

"Even so he's older than most of Kim's girl-friends."

"That may be true, but what does he have to offer Martha?"

John turned and went on walking. Sara remembered that when Kim first heard about Simon he had called Martha a cradle-snatcher. She had found Simon sitting on a tombstone a little over two months ago. There was a short-cut home from the station through a cemetery which due to overcrowding had not been in use for many years. Simon lived nearby in a communal house and they began to meet, strolling among the graves in the early evening, while the sun set behind the brick terraces. He was a puppeteer with a local puppet theatre and should have had a girl-friend who wore antique flowered dresses and rode a bicycle, not someone like Martha. It was when Martha brought him up to London that Sara had noticed her friend had several grey hairs. At once she became convinced that soon she would look in the mirror and see some grey among her own curly brown hair.

John had taken the guide book out of his pocket and was reading as he walked along.

“Does it say how old this place is?”

“Well, there are several theories. It’s possible that the earliest building on this site was a Druidic temple built around the same time as Stonehenge. Recent excavations suggest that the fort was used throughout the Roman occupation until the Dark Ages. What’s clear is that it must have taken a very long time to build.”

It seemed hopeless to Sara to speculate about such things. These people had been dead for so long that their bones were now part of the chalk downs. She could not unravel the years, any more than she could undo everything which had led to her present estrangement from John. Indeed she could not even remember when their intimacy had first been breached.

They reached the east side of the fort where the ramparts had almost entirely crumbled away. Among the remains there were abundant, glossy holly bushes.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they returned to the car. John drove while Sara looked through the guide book. When they were back on the main road he said, “You know, you may be right and this is only another episode in their marriage. We should keep that in mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we should be careful not to get too involved. I’m sure it helps Martha to know you’re on her side but if it all blows over, then it would be a great pity if you and Kim were no longer on speaking terms.”

“I don’t exactly see you falling over yourself to be friendly to Martha.”

“At least in public I try to be impartial.” John reached over and patted her hand. “I’m not criticising you.”

When they arrived at the house, even before she opened the front door, Sara could hear the sounds of argument. In the tall, narrow building there was no place where Kim and Martha's voices could not be heard. John went upstairs to the bedroom, but Sara was unable to settle to anything. She looked out of a window and saw Simon at the gate. She opened the French windows and went into the garden.

"Hello. Martha borrowed my bicycle. I came to collect it."

"Maybe I could get it for you. It's in the hall," Sara said, but she was so relieved to have left the house that instead of going back, she sat down on the bench.

Simon sat down beside her. For a moment they listened in silence to the shrill sounds of argument.

"I wish they wouldn't quarrel," Simon said.

"They've known each other for a long time," Sara responded defensively. She thought if she had met Simon with his pale skin and Beardsley hair in a cemetery, she would not have believed he was real; even at close quarters, sitting beside her rolling a cigarette, he seemed insubstantial.

"But what's there to quarrel about? If they don't love each other, quarrelling won't bring it back, and if they do, then they should stay together and not quarrel."

"I thought I understood from Martha that you and she wanted to live together."

Simon put the cigarette between his lips and lit it. "Yes we do, at least I do. But the important thing is that we love each other, that's what matters and if we can't live together well then so be it. As long as we can still see each other. At the moment I feel as if I'm having to make up for all Kim's lovers. That's scary."

These explicit remarks, spoken calmly, while Kim and Martha fought in the background, made Sara so uncomfortable that she got up and walked over to the sundial.

"You and Martha are so alike, it's hard to believe you're not sisters," Simon said.

From the way he looked at her Sara knew that he wanted her to touch him, was willing her to do so. She stayed still with one hand resting on the sundial and, when the silence between them became too awkward, and the silence from within the house too sinister, said, "Yes, we're very similar. Meeting Martha was like having a sister for the first time."

"And your husbands are very much alike too, aren't they?"

"How can you say that? They're completely different. Kim is at least six inches taller than John and built like an athlete."

"I wasn't thinking of their physical appearance," Simon said. "You and John aren't in such great shape, are you?" He got up and came over and gently kissed Sara. "I wonder if the sundial tells the correct time by moonlight, or if that's a special kind of time."

Without a word Sara moved away. There was a book lying on the bench and she picked it up. From the house came the sound of Kim shouting, "Bitch, bitch, bitch." Sara turned and saw John staring down at her from the bedroom window.

Simon ran his fingers over the numerals on the dial and said that he had visited Stonehenge for the summer solstice.

"Did the sun strike the heelstone or whatever it's meant to do?" Sara asked.

"No, it didn't. It was cold and grey and misty. Nothing happened but it was wonderful to stay up all night and wait for the dawn."

John appeared in the doorway. "Avebury is more domestic than Stonehenge but not without its charms. Have you ever been there?" He walked over to where Sara was standing and put his hand on her shoulder. There was a small crash from inside the house but no-one moved.

John proceeded to give a full description of the standing stones at Avebury.

When he finished, Simon said, "Maybe one of you could get my bike now."

Sara put down the book and went into the house. When she emerged, Simon took the bike from her at once.

"Give my love to Martha," he said as he closed the gate.

John sat on the bench and glanced through the book.

"Did you see him kiss me?"

"Yes, that's why I came down. I don't think you should steal Martha's boyfriends. Surely the situation is already difficult enough."

"I don't think theft is the issue, only affection," Sara said. "Do you and Kim steal each other's girl-friends or do you call that sharing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Women like Lisa. Look at all the trouble your generosity has caused. It would have been much better if you'd kept her to yourself."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Lisa is one of my students, nothing more." His voice was full of irritation. "Did you know Kim almost left Martha a few years ago?"

"No, I didn't."

"He was in love with a woman called Gwen. Seriously in love with her, and now it looks as if he may leave Martha for someone who isn't really important to him. It seems all wrong."

"So you don't think Lisa is important?"

"No, it's just an infatuation. At the moment he thinks he'd die if he couldn't see her but if Martha didn't make a fuss, he'd get over it."

"And then there'd be someone else, another pretty little student. Why should Martha put up with it? She's thought of leaving him too, but she's always believed that Kim couldn't manage without her."

"Kim, of course, believes the same thing about Martha," John said quietly. "So even their sacrifices were useless. When we were walking I was thinking how different people once were. The builders of the Ring must have pursued the same plan for generations; they believed in the constancy of human nature and the possibility of continuity. How did we become so fickle and inconstant?"

"Their sacrifices may have been unnecessary perhaps, but not useless," Sara said and her eyes were full of tears.

Later as she lay in bed with John breathing steadily beside her, Sara thought about Simon. She remembered the old joke about her and Martha because he had almost mentioned it, hadn't he? Perhaps it was possible. She knew he lived on the other side of the cemetery. Martha had pointed out the house. There had been three bicycles set against the railings and innumerable milk bottles piled up on the doorstep; she would have to be careful not to fall over them. She could open the door and tiptoe into the hall. If she did meet someone they would, in all likelihood, take her for Martha. The stairs would probably creak horrendously as they had at home when she and her younger brother, shuddering with every step, used to sneak down to the kitchen for midnight feasts. Simon slept at the top of the house where hopefully there was only one, inevitable door. It would open quietly. He wouldn't wake but perhaps sigh in his sleep. She would undress in the dark and in a moment be in bed, in his arms. She must take care not to fall asleep. When the time came she would slide stealthily from between the sheets and fumble on her clothes. Before she left, she would kneel down to kiss him. He would say "Goodbye" and then a name; it should be Martha's but perhaps, even half asleep, he would somehow divine the difference and call her by her rightful name. As she lay thinking, wondering if discovery would not be ultimately preferable, John turned towards her in his sleep and murmured something, a name, she was not sure what, Martha or Lisa or Sara or something else altogether.