

TWO WOMEN

DONALD COWIE

“ALL my life I have wanted to see England,” said the old lady, and her words were so doleful that the young girl seated opposite paused in her contemplation of the white glare beyond the cool New Zealand verandah, the narrow, shell-paved path, the strange trees, flamboyant flowers, curious shrubs and tapering plateau of croquet lawn, and ceased to dwell upon the happiness of this rambling, creeper-tangled old house.

Instead she glanced with new interest at the old lady her companion, whose eyes were hooded like a hawk's, whose nose was broad and flat, cheekbones high and pronounced, mouth tight and firm, skin brown-taut like a native Maori's. She was not a handsome old lady; and yet she had been admired; and now, with those doleful words upon her lips, she was almost to be pitied.

“That is a pity,” said the young girl, “for I have found it difficult to get away from England.”

“You do not understand,” said the old lady. “I was born and bred here. My father and mother were the first settlers in this part of New Zealand, and all my life I have known nothing but this house, that my father built with his own hands. This house and this neighbourhood have been my world for seventy-nine years. My father came from Glasgow and my mother from London. When I was a child, my mother taught me about England. She loved her new home, but she never forgot her old one. I had a brother, and he was so fired by my mother's descriptions that he ran down to a ship in the bay one night, and sailed for England. He never returned. I was a girl, else I would have followed him.”

“And you were never able to go for a trip home?”

“Never. We thought at first that my father would make so much money out of his wool that he would one day be rich enough to return to England, but he trusted all his savings to a mining ‘expert’, as they call them, and when he had lost everything he was too old to start all over again. That made me the breadwinner. Yes, I had to work like a man.”

“I'm sorry.”

"Oh, it didn't matter so much in those days. But when I got older, it did seem hard that I should be condemned to this place for the rest of my life. A young fellow came courting, but I never had time. Then there was a big slump, when wool values went down to nothing, and we had to kill the sheep and burn them on the beach. Father didn't last long after that.

"When mother and father had gone, I kept on the farm because there was nothing else to do. But there wasn't any money in the place then, there isn't now, and I don't think there ever will be.

"All my life I've wanted to see England, but I've never had the chance.

"That's why I asked you to come up and talk. You can tell me about the things I've always wanted to see."

The young girl thought there were tears in the old lady's eyes, and she turned away to hide her own emotion, twisting hands together between sharp knees. "I came out here because I wanted to get away from England," she said. "England's not all it's cracked up to be. I don't like to say it, but you've come to look on England as a beautiful dream. Oh, I hate to say it, but I simply had to get away from England. Perhaps it was my own fault. But the whole scheme of things is different out here. You have the sunshine, and the bush, and the freedom."

"Yes, my dear, so much freedom that for seventy-nine years I've been cooped up in this one place. But we don't want to waste time on New Zealand. Tell me, have you ever been to Hampton Court Palace?"

"No, I can't say that I ever have."

"But, my dear, how could you miss such an experience? The first place I'd go to would be Hampton Court Palace. Do you know Lely's Beauties of the Court of Charles II? They're in the picture gallery at Hampton Court. Then there are specimens of Holbein and Kneller, as well as a collection of Raphael cartoons. And the gardens! I have always been able to picture them in my mind's eye, picture them as they stretch from the noble balustrades down to sweet Thames, forty-four acres, just as they were in the time of King William, with their raised terraces, formal flower-plots and shady, trim arcades. Not to mention the Maze! I would take an old book down to the furthest edge of the gardens, over Thames, and study Wren's magnificent southern front, and I would remember Cardinal Wolsey, and bluff King Hal, and poor young

Edward, and silly Jane Seymour and unlucky Charles; yes, and Cromwell and the Hampton Court Conference. Oh, my dear, thousands of things!

"Then I would go down to Richmond Royal Park, standing over and about the quiet river, with the great oak-trees, and the placid deer and the last home of Elizabeth. I would visit the graves of Thomson and Keen in the nearby parish churchyard. And I would be reminded of that other Richmond, in Swaledale, that was first held in fief by a Count of Bretagne, then came into the hands of the Crown when an Earl of Richmond succeeded Richard III. as Henry VII. My dear, you must go to Richmond! If only I could get away from this place—"

With tears in her eyes for the old lady, the young girl walked back to the township in the bush. The old lady knew only an idealised England, culled from history books and works of blinded love. But here was untrammelled beauty. Up among the pines tiptoed the breeze, and miles away sounded the thudding fall of a forest giant. Down in the green gully, among the tree-fern, a blue mountain-duck trailed its cheeky brood. Cicadas hummed their orchestra in grass, sibilant to the vegetation's rustle now, and smooth to the soft breeze, among the pink-blossomed honeysuckle trees, the lofty rimu, tinted rangioras, worm-eaten hinaus, tawas, flaming ratas, ghostly kahikateas.

Above all stretched the pure blue sky, like the dome upon Como, but so much more brilliant as it contrasted with the dark greens, flaming pinks and burning yellows of the bush below. And through the leafy lacework gleamed the sun-caught waters of the distant bay, clear, fresh and invigorating. Oh, for words to fix the picture among sweet memories, and for special knowledge to make it secure!

Down through the erratic timber ran the rough grey road, and now, by the homestead among those stately cabbage trees and nikau palms, was the long tussock slope splashed with white sheep. Music in the air of cattle, and sheep, a rooster and a lazy dog; above all the pure blue sky with the solitary finger of cotton-wool smoke, where the wife of the musterer prepared his tardy meal.

Then through the dear bush road to the creeper-tangled house again, far above the radiant bay, with the sudden, breath-taking view across the hills and sea; and the old lady was waiting, talking to the farm boy as if he were more than her equal.

"Now that's another thing that's so different", said the young girl. "In England there is so much class distinction."

"That is your view", said the old lady. "But I have a different perspective. England to me is so old that she can afford class distinction. New Zealand is so young that she can't afford anything but level mediocrity. But we don't want to waste time talking about New Zealand. I am sick of the place. Tell me, now, have you ever been to the Lake District? My child, your education has been sadly neglected. One of these days! Oh, dear, but I shall never be able to afford it! Now this is what I'd do. First I would stay at Ambleside, and that little book of Wordsworth's describing the district would never be far from my hand. You don't know it? Oh, a delightful book, my dear, the first good guide-book ever written. I'll lend it to you if you like. A first edition, I think, but I'm not sure. Well, with Wordsworth's book and with the *Lyrical Ballads* I would walk the hills above Windermere, and the dear English skies, the flowers and the brooks would make me a final philosophy. You remember?—

To me the meanest flower that blows
can give,
Thoughts that do often lie too deep
for tears.

"Or, if not the Lake District, then Cornwall. Here is a book that I simply can't leave alone—H. V. Morton's *In Search of England*. A trifle on the sentimental side, perhaps, but I often think you can't be too sentimental about England. That is the trouble with all of us to-day. We are afraid to be sentimental. In one of those dear little Cornish towns they have a floral dance each year. Everybody joins in. Then there is the famous old tune. You know? Bother me, but I have completely forgotten it."

"I was thinking of something else", said the young girl. "I was thinking of the Rhondda Valley. You haven't heard of that, have you? It's in the heart of the South Wales mining area, and most of the inhabitants have been unemployed since the War. It's a dreadful place, all slag-heaps, mine-shafts and mean little houses. It rains most of the time. Here is a festering sore in the heart of England."

"Now listen to me," said the old lady, "you're taking the wrong view of things. You think that because New Zealand hasn't got a Rhondda Valley, it's a better place than England.

You're wrong; I know you're wrong. You might as well say that England is a better place than New Zealand because it hasn't got any active volcanoes. You can't have a great and beautiful palace without a rubbish heap somewhere in the background. You wouldn't deny yourself the palace to save the rubbish heap. Here we have neither palace nor rubbish heap, so far. That's why I've always wanted to see England. I would visit the Rhondda Valley, the slums of Glasgow, the Black Country, the Edinburgh Canongate and Limehouse. They tell me that people there live half-a-dozen in a room, like rabbits in a hutch. I would want to see those things, as I would want to see the King opening Parliament, and the Beefeaters guarding the Tower. I would want to see Christopher Wren's churches patterning the dear, smoky London sky—the London symphony, as that man Cohen-Portheim has called it—and the stern office buildings with the little black-hatted men scurrying below, and the clean, red busses.

"Here there is only the service-car every other day, and, on Saturdays, Tom Bowden's truck."

Down through the darkening bush road sped the young girl; and, as she walked quickly to avoid her thoughts, the memory of red busses and stern office buildings persisted until a clear note of song, a tui exultant, came like a benison to banish foreboding.

And the next morning was bright, so bright that the young girl was once more amazed at the beauty of it all. It was a film over her brain, forbidding reason, compelling blind acquiescence. The half-dozen children at the school where she taught were once again seedlings of a life-work; the past was far below, a dim horizon of lost endeavour.

Up the bush road again sang the deafening choir, tuis, kakas, parrakeets, fantails, pio-pios; and the music was a flame darting from fern to fern, frond to frond, from mossy bough to high, snake-twined trunk. Through the lacery gleamed the distant, distant water, and across the water what might have been a toyland steamer majestically crept.

"I shall tell the old lady that her vision has been warped by long residence among too much beauty", said the young girl to herself, as she followed the sinuous path through the strange trees, flamboyant flowers and curious shrubs. "I shall tell her that she is ungrateful, and that she can see no further than her own flat, broad nose.

“Perhaps it is because her eyes are hooded like a hawk’s”, reflected the young girl as she crossed the white plateau of croquet lawn; and when she stepped out of the glare into the dim verandah, she was anxious to see the old lady again.

But the rambling, creeper-tangled old house was strangely silent. Observing this, the young girl was afraid.

Then she saw that the old lady was lying on a bed inside a room that looked out upon the verandah; and she knew at once that the old lady was ill. She might even have been dying.

The young girl had no voice, but the old lady raised her head, and stared with her hawk-hooded eyes. “Now I shall never go”, she said in a mournful voice.

Then the young girl turned and fled down the narrow sinuous path, and down the deep, bush-clad road, and past the quiet homestead of white sheep.

And ever she fled.