

THE TWO BROTHERS

FRANCES GREGG

THE younger brother rose cautiously. It was long since the dying man on the bed had stirred. He must not be disturbed. He looked peaceful as he lay. There was nothing in the face that was not benign, nothing in the noble structure of the features unbeautiful. If only he might die as he was then, if only he might not speak! What malevolence, what diabolical power was behind that beautiful mask? He looked young as he lay there, younger than he was, and yet he was young to die, only forty: and the consumptive who watched by his side would be little more than half that when, as he knew, he would so shortly follow.

Now he must get to the window. He must have air. If he should cough it would rouse that dying brother; he would speak; it was unbearable that he should ever speak again. Yet to others it was terrible "to think of that voice forever stilled," as they had expressed it; that voice that had made his brother famous, for it was a great man who lay there dying.

They had come, those people to whom he had lectured, those passionate disciples; when they heard that the Master was dying, they had crowded into the town. They had stood for hours in the road under his window. The nearest to him among them had petitioned to see him, to have one last word to carry back from him to those who waited. But the great man had refused them, he would see no one, no one, even of his family, except his youngest brother.

The young man shuddered.

They had brought the message to him, "except my youngest brother"; and he had gone. It was twenty hours ago now. For twenty hours he had been harried by his brother's words. Now at last he slept. And the younger brother was alone.

It wearied him to think how the little groups of people would lift up their faces, white in the failing light, when he came to the window. He must look beyond them, over their heads to the water, to the little shut-in bay. Yet even there he could not be

alone. His brother had looked upon it with him. "More beautiful than Naples," he had said, and to the younger man it had become a thing impure. It could never be his again except through that desecrating mind. He had so spoken just after the incident of the flowers.

They had sent so many, his admirers, and he had had them all in his room. He had taken a curious gross pleasure in the number of them, all for him. And then with exquisite delicacy he had sorted them, classifying them exactly and tenderly. In the end he had sent them away. "Mr. Waiter," he had said—how like him that was, that servility more base than contempt!—"Mr. Waiter, give all these to the black gentleman who ran off with the white girl. Poor dear, he was mobbed by some mad Americans. Tell them I wish them to sleep upon these to-night, upon flowers."

How vulgar it was, how blatantly vulgar the conception! How it was stamped with that something flagrant and inept, that had come to mean his brother to the younger man!

Suddenly he started, for a rich voice poured into the silence of the room. The great man was dreaming that he again addressed his people: "The old religions, my friends, the old religions cannot be so lightly cast aside. Ah, my friends, can you not see, back in the dim recesses of Time, a temple strewn about with broken altars, each one draped in the tattered banner of some lost faith?"

The room was silent again. How those people below would have liked to hear those few words! The young man sighed as he looked at them, pressed so close below the window. He must make them a sign, a sign that there was still life. And he must go back to his post. His brother had spoken, he would soon wake.

The crowd stirred with relief at his gesture. Strange! Once he too had been like them, had given the same adulation, the same credulity. Was he wrong? Was it only self-pity and self-love that stood in his way now? Was his brother really too great for him to understand? He could do beautiful things—beautiful—and *brutal*! His words before he slept had been of that last.

He had cried out that he was "alone—alone!" Ever so tentatively the young man had said, "I am here——"

"Ah, you——" His brother did not finish. The young man's face paled with the cruelty of it. There had not been even contempt in his brother's tone; he was put aside, he was nothing, less than nothing. A passionate cry, "But I loved you!" rose to his lips and died before utterance. What was love, or hate, or any one of the human emotions to that satyr-like monster who had deformed the universe for him?

He turned again to the bed, bending down to peer into the placid face. Was there no sign, no secret imprint upon it, to purify his love or to make just his hate? His brother's eyes opened, bewildered, frightened. With an inadequate gesture he tried to touch the young face. "Ah, you——" he said. It was the tone of a homesick child, satisfied to see a loved face. There was infinite pathos in it, heartbreaking wistfulness. The young man burst into great gulping sobs. Tears flooded his face. He stood convulsed, at the mercy of his emotion. When he recovered he met the caustic gaze of his brother's eyes. He stood confronted with the grotesquerie of his emotion, the snuffing, the uncouth sounds, the need of his handkerchief. All those soul-purging emotions that had for the moment clustered over them, like ancient deities, were gone; nothing remained in the room but his *gaucherie*.

"Now, my friend, let us discuss the nature of tears." It was the old tone, the tone that had rung through his adolescence, that relieving tone of abstract interest, spacious, full of time. "I have never wept," his brother went on, "in all my life I have never wept at all—nor I believe has she."

The young man shivered. It had come at last, the thing he had longed for, and dreaded most. His brother had spoken of her, of that invisible third, who had stood like a sentient being between them through all the long hours they had waited together for death.

"Speak to me of her—speak to me!" the young man cried out. "Why did you do it—why—why——?"

A look of ineffable self-content blurred all the fine lines of the elder man's face. "Why?" he said. His voice was gentle

now, slow, and lisped ever so slightly over the words. "Why? My friend, has ever mortal had chance of doing what I did? She was so frail, so chaste, like a vestal, a thing consecrated, meant for dedication, for perpetual chastity. And she was ignorant of the world, and not too young, twenty-seven, older than you. I have not let her forget that! And I watched her seduction, her destruction. To see her shame and humiliation was exquisite to me. She knew nothing—nothing when she married him."

"But why to him—why did you marry her to him——?"

"Why to him, to your best friend, my little brother? To him who had been our sister's lover, whose little ways you knew? That you might know how he would deal with her, and never was flesh more provocative than hers! And it was easy, she believed in me as a great tragic world-spirit as sad as her own. And she loves me now. What, my little brother, you all thought I could never hold the love of a woman, and a good woman! How many years are gone—three—four—and her heart is still mine! She is mine—mine! I have shown you my power."

"But why"—the young man's shrill tone broke with discordance upon the elder's rich, purring note—"why did you bring me into it?"

"See, my friend, we already speak as though I were dead. You ask, and I answer—the truth. Why did I bring you into it? Why? Had I not that thought from the beginning? He could only appreciate her body—but you could love her soul, *and her body*, my little brother, and her body! And she was gone, she could never be yours, your friend's wife. Did I not see it all from the beginning—how you would yearn to her, when you saw her like a bruised white petal in the hollow of his great hand! And she turned to you as to the sun. But I did not let her mistake. I recalled to her what such attraction led to. I brought to her mind her mutilation. And in the midst of her pain I caressed her, and she knew that I scorned her love, and her love went on. And you were jealous, you, our young conqueror of women, were jealous of your elder brother, your brother who could never keep the love of a woman. Well—I have shown you——"

The dying man's voice broke and was sucked away into the silence. The room grew darker. There was no sound of breathing. The younger man wondered if his brother were dead—dead and the last question unasked. What if the room were really empty, if he were really alone at last? He must chance that terror. The question palpitated through his lips, "Did you not care that I suffered?"

"Care!" The answer rang out, clear and triumphant as the note of a trumpet. "Did I not care! Ah, do not remind me! Shall I ever forget your suffering? How fragile it was—how pallid—how exotic—how languorous! I must not think of it—it is too exciting—it will kill me! Ah, I have been a God—I have played as a God with your emotions!"

The triumphant note rang through all the long corridors of the young man's soul, mocking their emptiness, taunting the misery that lurked in the grey shadows. "A God—a God!"—the word flamed against his parched brain. And again he was struck with doubt. Was he wrong? Was it something febrile and inadequate in him, was it his paucity of soul, was there really perhaps something God-like in the man's power, in his inhumanity?

The darkness deepened. If there had been but a moon! Would he know, would it come to him by instinct when the room was empty at last? The young man leaped to his feet as a cry shattered the night.

"I am alone—alone! Send for her, say that I am dying, she will come—to me."

Could he do it? Could he do this last thing for his brother? To have her there—the two of them—for a last sensation for that dying man? There was time. A messenger could bring her by dawn. Could his brother live so long? Souls, they said, went out with the ebb of the tide. She could come at the dawn—the tide changed then.

It was done. And now there was still the night to be borne. If only he might not think! If he might sleep! Would the night never pass? It was the weight upon his chest that kept the night back. And now the bay was flooding over them both. But he could yet save them if only his brother would not cling so about his neck. The shore was so little away—only not that shore—

the distant one—she was calling to him to bring the torturer there. But he need not struggle—here was release—visible Death stood at his side. What was it Death was saying—“Fool—fool——”

The young man struggled into wakefulness. He had slept in his chair. The messenger stood at his elbow with a letter in his hand. She had not come. The light of the dawn hovered in the shadows. And through the window he could see the little multi-colored bay far out from the land. The bed was shaken by the gasps of the dying man.

“Fool—fool,” the querulous tone whistled through the blue lips, “fool—you slept—could you not watch with me one hour? There is a letter—read—the film is already over my eyes——”

The young man’s sleep-sodden brain was shocked into life as he read the few words. This to a dying man! This! Here was vengeance—vengeance for them both! Yet, could he read this to that tortured creature upon the bed? How subtly she had phrased it! If he omitted the brutality, that feminine, unrelieved brutality, he might read the rest. He knew his brother’s mind. How he would twist each subtlety to his own glory! Could he risk their flavor of concentrated bitterness? Oh, why not read it as it stood? He deserved it. It was just. *Read it*—as one might spit in a dead man’s face!

The racked chest of the dying man lifted again to speak: “Read—read, my brother—see—I choke—Death has already his hand at my throat——” The face was again one of child-like dependence, again that heartbreaking wistfulness. “Quick—my brother, read—or I shall not hear—the waters of Lethe are loud in my ears—read—my brother——”

And the young man made as though he read: “My heart is broken that I cannot come to you. I have always loved you. In all my life no other shall reign in my heart.”

A light flooded the dying face. It became noble, pure, irradiated. There was dignity, grace, power, beauty. He held out his hand for the paper. His fingers closed over it with magnificent possession. He sat upright, his hand, with the protruding white edges of paper, thrust before him. For a moment he struggled for breath, then, “I have not failed!” he cried. The golden

voice filled the room, and seemed to break and ripple upon some void beyond. Involuntarily the younger brother turned; it seemed some Presence must be there to answer, to reassure that ecstatic agony. Only the golden dawn flooded the room. When he turned again, sunken against the pillow the dead face of a smirking coxcomb confronted him.

IN THE WEST OF IRELAND

ARTHUR STURGES HILDEBRAND

IN the train from Dublin to Galway, I fell into talk with a farmer and a wounded soldier. The soldier was rather drunk and very friendly, and he told us about life in the trenches, and how it feels to be shot, and he showed us the place where the bullet came out of his neck, and the ugly shrapnel wound in his leg.

"And did you lose your eye?" asked the farmer in an awed, respectful voice.

"Sure I did," said the soldier, winding on his bandages again. He made us feel that it was a slight thing, and quite natural, to lose an eye.

"Well, I thought I had my troubles," said the farmer, smiling at me, "but I expect I'm not so badly off, after all."

"Why, what might your trouble be?" asked the soldier.

"I've just come back from America," said the farmer. "I've been travelling since the twenty-fourth of last month. I was one night in Liverpool going out, and one night coming back, and I was four days in the blooming immigrant station in New York."

"Sure, you must be destroyed," said the soldier. "Wouldn't they let you in?"

"They would not," said the farmer, with a sad smile.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered. He seemed weary of trying to understand it, and bewildered, like a driven sheep.

"That's too bad now," said the soldier. "Well, I knew a man once. . . ."

I looked out of the window, and tried to justify my country for turning away this sad, simple man. I watched his face as he bent forward to listen to the soldier's rambling story. It was a browned, animal-like face, with no firmness around the mouth, and dull, dreamy eyes that had had the animation taken from them by long gazing across stony fields and barren boglands and, lately, the sea. I wondered how he had found the