

G. F. GREEN

## ROOM WANTED

*In these same streets you shall wander,  
and in the same purlieux you shall roam . . .  
There is no ship to take you to other lands, there is no road.  
You have so shattered your life here, in this small corner  
that in all the world you have ruined it.*

The afternoon was warm, where the peonies pressed large against palings sheltering the brick row fronts; and warm as breath in the narrow street. Thomas Clarke's shoes trod slowly the marred macadam, as if formed of the same material. Under a hazy middle distance of factories, an old man raked soil round his new green privet, which soon would smell. Clarke attended to all this, whilst he wanted merely a room. He was a spare young man, in a city suit, his worn pin-spot tie tight in his neat collar. A cheap rainproof damped his arm and his fingers ached stiffly at his laden suitcase. His hat was pushed from scant hair, his eyes steady or kind, but his face pale for want of sun or interest or action. As he glanced at the street sides, his mouth and hands were brief, as if the day strained his nerves.

He noticed the card FURNISHED ROOM TO LET, turning through the gap in the fence. He put down his suitcase and rapped. The door opened on an old decrepit woman, heavy in black worsted. Her smeared eyes stared, as if unaware of him or the sunny street, while by greyish strands of hair, her lower lip hung crumbled like bread. She breathed rhythmically as a clock. He saw her thick rucked stockings, her cracked shoes trodden at the ankles. He followed her into the hall, darkened suddenly as the door shut. A smell, stale though antiseptic, of his boyhood's Sunday School or, since, of a cheap woman's bedroom, of

secretive loathed work, mauled his face. He followed her up the close linoed stairs. She paused often for breath, but her fat hand on the banister dragged her on. They reached the top landing where she unlocked and pushed open a door.

"This is the room," she said.

She entered as if she inhabited this, as also the other rooms, her hand, dirt in its cracked nails, aiding her on the brass and black railed double bed, where a wool counterpane lay. She drew back soiled lace curtains from the french window. Dim light showed faded brown walls, the texts and pictures, the mirror above bric-à-brac on the draped mantelpiece. It felt as in the room of someone dead, yet but for them it was empty. She turned and watched him easing his hurt hand.

"How much do you want?" he said.

"Fifteen. It's what I've had up to now."

"Alright, I'll take it."

She moved across the threadbare carpet, whilst the room seemed airless, as if already he was alone.

"Wait."

He wished to talk to her, to make the most of his few instructions.

"There's a lady—a girl—coming to see me. Will you show her up? Her name's Ellen—Miss Ellen Reid."

"Who'll she ask for?"

"Mr. Clarke," he said. "Thomas Clarke."

He watched her hand seek the banister, going slowly down the tall stair well; then he shut the door on himself in the room. He saw the brown walls, the text at the bed head JESUS GUARD THY SLEEP, and the dull red carpet armchair, empty by the window. His hand traced the knitted counterpane, knowing the craving to touch and alter, to shift the derelict time away, waiting in an unoccupied room. He raised his suitcase on to the bed, nervously unpacking it. His familiar possessions, the shirts worn day to day, the broken hairbrush, the slippers, weighted his loneliness like mimicry. He put them in drawers, on the washstand, then turned toward the shut

window. A fire escape gripped the grey walled well, its iron perforated platform level with him. He watched it as if its dead lack of interest could make him one with it and cure him, whilst beyond, the smoky evening light crept on the slate roofs. A rap like a shot of dope in his limbs, jerked him round.

In the open door, a girl in white frock, slight blue coat and no stockings, came where the dark armed woman shut the door.

"Come in," he said.

Ellen lightly entered, a child—he remembered she was fifteen—laying her coat on the bed. Her lank limbs were bare, her throat, her face to her fair hair, cooler amidst the worn heavy room that scarcely held her, as a child, strayed into a cave, retains the daylight in its hands and eyes. She seemed to hold torn flowers from the fields. Her small alive gestures brought him to earlier days, breathing the cold air of a gully, where rowan dashed red drops to the falls, his wrists and face chilled with its secret, singing force. Watching her, he had to imagine her in that room, so far was the time and place they should have met in.

"Sit down," he said.

She sat in the armchair, her lithe arms on the pattern, where light fell from the shut window. He stared at her, whilst the room grew closer.

"You had a good journey?" he said. "Did you see Travers as I told you?"

"Yes, I saw him."

"When she died, your mother told Travers you were to see him, if I was away; or if I couldn't help you. Did he tell you? Was the journey alright from Newbridge?"

"Yes, it took about two hours."

"Not long."

He turned, pacing the thin carpet, where the airless room made the unseen dust warm, as if they were huddled in a den. He gazed at the dark, gilt-framed oil painting beyond the bed.

"Did you read," he said, "or look out of the window

on the journey?"

"I read a bit."

"What?"

He stared at the picture's brown-ochre, in its hard rich gold, echoed by the brass bed knob.

"It was about a wreck in Cornwall and two fishermen go in a cave and get trapped."

He was forced to look at her.

"Was it good?"

"Yes, I liked it."

The brown walls were like felt to the closed window. He saw the slight child, her tilt of nose and cheek, whilst the things of the room formed his words. He sweated with the need to flee.

"Have you your money on you?" he said.

"Yes."

He saw her eyes startle, the two curls dropped on her brow.

"Give it to me."

She sought in the low neck of her frock. The air crammed arid where a round sea view in crimson plush frame obsessed him. He leaned near her. His fingers almost touched hers on the notes, as if he would tear them, but her hand fell. He held the money, then threw it on the bed.

"What books do you read?" he said.

He grasped the rough chair back round her frail body.

"I don't know."

"Idiot," he said quietly. "What have you read?"

The room stifled him, where he saw her for an instant, a scared child amongst it.

"What do you read?" he said. "Did you pass Craner's Iron Works in the train from Newbridge? Tell me."

She cringed frightened against the chair. He turned, his face drawn as if in pain, grasping the bed rods. He stared straight, but felt past his shoulder her hurt form like a wounded bird. His eyes fixed as through murk, on a parchment hair-tidy, its dry faded hair spilling through its torn sides. He clenched the smooth rail.

"Go from here," he said. "Do you hear, Ellen?"

She left the chair, picking up her coat and money from the bed.

"Get lodgings," he said, "and let me know. We haven't talked yet. We've arranged nothing."

The door shut, leaving him in the hot silence. He leapt forward, unlocked and flung open the window. Grey light fell on the roofs and the untenanted zig-zag of the fire escape. He stared blankly as if he saw these things outside for the first time. Then he sank against the curtains, crushed to his face like a child's lace handkerchief, where he breathed the cold air.

He reached toward the next night a fishing inn on a long lake, narrow between the dark green shouldered fells. He left his suitcase, and tired from his journey walked to the lake's edge. The evening was solitary, cold and clear as a bell, while grey water at his feet lapped the sleek stones and near a fence, a sheep cropped the reedy grass. Its sound spread from him through the dale, as if he were a stone flung in the still air. He stood and heard, and watched the hills, no more thinking. The swollen crash of a burn reached his mind, as if this were a huge mill where the slightest noise took aeons of time, the thin remote breath of peat logged marsh its only other product. Darkening, the senseless element possessed him, a tyrant releasing his limbs and mind to bondage. At the far end of the lake he saw a boat rowed under the fell's shade. He shivered, his face nervously set, as if someone trod his grave, then turned to the hotel.

In the well aired bedroom he took off his shirt, and washed from the blue flowered jug and bowl. The water struck cold to his hands and face. Wind from the fells stirred the fresh lace curtains, breathed on his bared back, to the clean fawn walls, where light failed as on the lake. He dried his fingers, pacing the carpet, as if to check time against a sure, feared yet needed assignation. As he tied his tie, he saw by the dim mirror, reflecting the brass and black railed bed, the round, red-plush framed sea view, so that

his throat and hands halted in drear anxiety. He felt the closer air, backing from the dusty, littered mantelpiece, till his fingers held the bed rails. The brown walls nearing him, narrowed his guts and mind, like a presence. His eyes stared through dusk at the increasingly familiar things with hatred and desire. The arid air throbbed in his throat as if he spoke. He swung, as if he already acted, and saw the carpet armchair before the grey, unstirred lace curtains, empty. Horror damped through him like cloth, whilst he drew from the bed, alone across the room, and fled.

Wherever he went, the solid hotel, slum, seaside apartment, the room after his first new relief closed on him. As he washed or lay in bed, he saw the text, the bric-à-brac, breathing the darker air. He was forced to act, yet amongst its familiar things, his eyes and hands found no one. The crowding absence tortured his limbs, his ignorant desperate mind, exhausting his strength. Intangible, he could not resist the lack of presence, which corrupted him each night in the dreadful fetid room, as decay must control his body. He knew only his weak hands on the bed rods, the suitcase handle, as haunted by this evil he fled. As weeks became months where he existed in impotent flight or search, he appeared ageless, his youth shrunk beyond its roots, as through deathly winter.

One evening he came down a damp street till he saw the card FURNISHED ROOM TO LET. He turned through the fence's gap across its rank garden and dropping his suitcase, knocked. An old woman let him in, leading up close linoed stairs to the dark landing.

"This is the room," she said.

He entered the known room whilst the door closed. He saw the mantelpiece, the patterned carpet, the shut french windows. He inhabited there as a lifetime's hated home, feeling no longer strength nor desire to go. He lay defeated, by the brass and black rungs, the room absorbing him, his frayed suit, his inert arms and legs. It shaded his ashen face, his thin mute line of mouth, watching dusk fall on the fire escape through the soiled lace. He breathed rapidly, his

fingers crooked in the bedspread, when a knock tensed his brain. He leapt facing the door, as Ellen came, driving him in terror to the draped mantelpiece. Her limbs were naked, her child's astonished face, undefended to her bare hands. The room surrounded her like fog, caging her fresh voice.

"Tom, where have you . . ."

He backed to the carpet armchair. Her fair frail head passed the litter, the brown walls whilst the air dried as he crouched, staring at her. Her small throat paused by the hair-tidy's spilt dead hair, and she smiled. He could touch her. His face taut with decision, he grasped the chair.

"Get out," he screamed.

Silence held his voice. He threw back the window as if to leap, but chill air struck him. He fainted on the iron platform. The wind touched his face, calm featured like a youth's asleep. It stirred the light curtains in the clean, empty room.

STEPHEN SPENDER

## SEPTEMBER JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER 3RD.

I am going to keep a journal because I cannot accept the fact that I feel so shattered that I cannot write at all. Today I read in the paper a story by Seymour Hicks of a request he gave to Wilde after his imprisonment, to write a play. Wilde said: "I will write a wonderful play with wonderful lines and wonderful dialogue." As he said this, Hicks realised that he would never write again.

I feel as if I could not write again. Words seem to break in my mind like sticks when I put them down on paper. I cannot see how to spell some of them. Sentences are covered with leaves, and I really cannot see the line of the branch that carries the green meanings.

It so happens that the world has broken just at the moment when my own life has broken. I mean not my life but my relationship with A——. Everything I read in the papers about broken faith, broken pledges, disloyalty, etc., seems about her. At the same time, not being a great statesman, I cannot use those words or call down the curses of God on her. For all I know, God may be on the side of the faithless, in private life, at all events. Or rather, I don't mean God, but that the very introduction of moral ideas makes everything, at this stage, meaningless. The moment I start thinking of right and wrong, I think, they may have done me a wrong, but I wonder Are they happy? Perhaps they have the secret of happiness, which I have lost. Perhaps their enjoyment of happiness makes them right and makes everything in my own mind, which is an endless argument, irrelevant.

Anyhow, I know that she cannot bear being with me when my forehead is split with anxiety. I drive a wedge through