

The Fox



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Doris Lessing

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The Fox

D.H. Lawrence



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ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.oneworldclassics.com

The Fox first published in 1923
This edition first published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2009
Notes and background material © Oneworld Classics Ltd, 2009

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

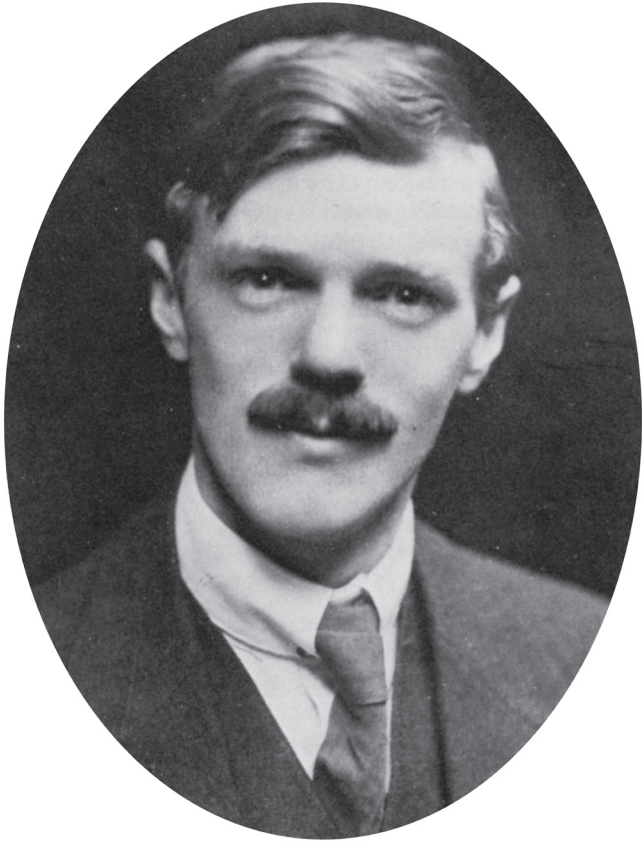
ISBN: 978-1-84749-096-4

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D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930)



Lydia Lawrence,
D.H. Lawrence's mother



Ernest Lawrence,
D.H. Lawrence's brother



Jessie Chambers



Frieda Lawrence

The Fox

THE TWO GIRLS were usually known by their surnames, Banford and March. They had taken the farm together, intending to work it all by themselves: that is, they were going to rear chickens, make a living by poultry and add to this by keeping a cow and raising one or two young beasts. Unfortunately things did not turn out well.

Banford was a small, thin, delicate thing with spectacles. She, however, was the principal investor, for March had little or no money. Banford's father, who was a tradesman in Islington, gave his daughter the start for her health's sake, and because he loved her, and because it did not look as if she would marry. March was more robust. She had learnt carpentry and joinery at the evening classes in Islington. She would be the man about the place. They had, moreover, Banford's old grandfather living with them at the start. He had been a farmer. But unfortunately the old man died after he had been at Bailey Farm for a year. Then the two girls were left alone.

They were neither of them young: that is, they were near thirty. But they certainly were not old. They set out quite gallantly with their enterprise. They had numbers of chickens, black Leghorns and white Leghorns, Plymouths and Wyandottes; also some ducks; also two heifers in the fields. One heifer unfortunately refused absolutely to stay in the Bailey Farm closes. No matter how March made up the fences, the heifer was out, wild in the woods, or trespassing on the neighbouring pasture, and March and Banford were away, flying after her, with more haste than success. So this heifer they sold in despair. Then, just before the other beast was expecting her first calf, the old man died, and the girls, afraid of the coming event, sold her in a panic, and limited their attentions to fowls and ducks.

In spite of a little chagrin, it was a relief to have no more cattle on hand. Life was not made merely to be slaved away. Both girls agreed in this. The fowls were quite enough trouble. March had set up her carpenter's bench at the end of the open shed. Here she worked, making coops and doors and other appurtenances. The fowls were housed in the bigger building, which had served as barn and cowshed in old days. They had a beautiful home, and should have been perfectly content.

Indeed they looked well enough. But the girls were disgusted at their tendency to strange illnesses, at their exacting way of life and at their refusal – obstinate refusal – to lay eggs.

March did most of the outdoor work. When she was out and about, in her puttees and breeches, her belted coat and her loose cap, she looked almost like some graceful, loose-balanced young man, for her shoulders were straight, and her movements easy and confident, even tinged with a little indifference or irony. But her face was not a man's face, ever. The wisps of her crisp dark hair blew about her as she stooped, her eyes were big and wide and dark, when she looked up again, strange, startled, shy and sardonic at once. Her mouth, too, was almost pinched as if in pain and irony. There was something odd and unexplained about her. She would stand balanced on one hip, looking at the fowls pattering about in the obnoxious fine mud of the sloping yard, and calling to her favourite white hen, which came in answer to her name. But there was an almost satirical flicker in March's big, dark eyes as she looked at her three-toed flock pottering about under her gaze, and the same slight dangerous satire in her voice as she spoke to the favoured Patty, who pecked at March's boot by way of friendly demonstration.

Fowls did not flourish at Bailey Farm, in spite of all that March did for them. When she provided hot food for them in the morning, according to rule, she noticed that it made them heavy and dozy for hours. She expected to see them lean against the pillars of the shed in their languid processes of digestion. And she knew quite well that they ought to be busily scratching and foraging about if they were to come to any good. So she decided to give them their hot food at night, and let them sleep on it. Which she did. But it made no difference.

War conditions, again, were very unfavourable to poultry-keeping. Food was scarce and bad. And when the Daylight Saving Bill was passed, the fowls obstinately refused to go to bed, as usual, about nine o'clock in the summertime. That was late enough, indeed, for there was no peace till they were shut up and asleep. Now they cheerfully walked around, without so much as glancing at the barn, until ten o'clock or later. Both Banford and March disbelieved in living for work alone. They wanted to read or take a cycle ride in the evening, or perhaps March wished to paint curvilinear swans on porcelain, with green background, or else make a marvellous fire screen by processes of elaborate cabinet-work. For she was a creature of odd whims and

unsatisfied tendencies. But from all these things she was prevented by the stupid fowls.

One evil there was greater than any other. Bailey Farm was a little homestead, with ancient wooden barn and two-gabled farmhouse, lying just one field removed from the edge of the wood. Since the War the fox was a demon. He carried off the hens under the very noses of March and Banford. Banford would start and stare through her big spectacles with all her eyes, as another squawk and flutter took place at her heels. Too late! Another white Leghorn gone. It was disheartening.

They did what they could to remedy it. When it became permitted to shoot foxes, they stood sentinel with their guns, the two of them, at the favoured hours. But it was no good. The fox was too quick for them. So another year passed, and another, and they were living on their losses, as Banford said. They let their farmhouse one summer, and retired to live in a railway carriage that was deposited as a sort of outhouse in a corner of the field. This amused them, and helped their finances. Nonetheless, things looked dark.

Although they were usually the best of friends, because Banford, though nervous and delicate, was a warm, generous soul, and March, though so odd and absent in herself, had a strange magnanimity, yet in the long solitude they were apt to become a little irritable with one another, tired of one another. March had four fifths of the work to do, and though she did not mind, there seemed no relief, and it made her eyes flash curiously sometimes. Then Banford, feeling more nerve-worn than ever, would become despondent, and March would speak sharply to her. They seemed to be losing ground somehow, losing hope as the months went by. There alone in the fields by the wood, with the wide country stretching hollow and dim to the round hills of the White Horse in the far distance, they seemed to have to live too much off themselves. There was nothing to keep them up – and no hope.

The fox really exasperated them both. As soon as they had let the fowls out in the early summer mornings they had to take their guns and keep guard – and then again, as soon as evening began to mellow, they must go once more. And he was so sly. He slid along in the deep grass; he was difficult as a serpent to see. And he seemed to circumvent the girls deliberately. Once or twice March had caught sight of the white tip of his brush, or the ruddy shadow of him in the deep grass, and she had let fire at him. But he made no account of this.

One evening March was standing with her back to the sunset, her gun under her arm, her hair pushed under her cap. She was half watching, half musing. It was her constant state. Her eyes were keen and observant, but her inner mind took no notice of what she saw. She was always lapsing into this odd, rapt state, her mouth rather screwed up. It was a question whether she was there, actually consciously present, or not.

The trees on the wood edge were a darkish, brownish green in the full light – for it was the end of August. Beyond, the naked, copper-like shafts and limbs of the pine trees shone in the air. Nearer, the rough grass, with its long brownish stalks all agleam, was full of light. The fowls were round about – the ducks were still swimming on the pond under the pine trees. March looked at it all, saw it all and did not see it. She heard Banford speaking to the fowls in the distance, and she did not hear. What was she thinking about? Heaven knows. Her consciousness was, as it were, held back.

She lowered her eyes, and suddenly saw the fox. He was looking up at her. His chin was pressed down, and his eyes were looking up. They met her eyes. And he knew her. She was spellbound – she knew he knew her. So he looked into her eyes, and her soul failed her. He knew her, he was not daunted.

She struggled, confusedly she came to herself, and saw him making off, with slow leaps over some fallen boughs – slow, impudent jumps. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and ran smoothly away. She saw his brush held smooth like a feather, she saw his white buttocks twinkle. And he was gone softly, soft as the wind.

She put her gun to her shoulder, but even then pursed her mouth, knowing it was nonsense to pretend to fire. So she began to walk slowly after him, in the direction he had gone, slowly, pertinaciously. She expected to find him. In her heart she was determined to find him. What she would do when she saw him again she did not consider. But she was determined to find him. So she walked abstractedly about on the edge of the wood, with wide, vivid dark eyes, and a faint flush in her cheeks. She did not think. In strange mindlessness she walked hither and thither.

At last she became aware that Banford was calling her. She made an effort of attention, turned, and gave some sort of screaming call in answer. Then again she was striding off towards the homestead. The

red sun was setting, the fowls were retiring towards their roost. She watched them, white creatures, black creatures, gathering to the barn. She watched them spellbound, without seeing them. But her automatic intelligence told her when it was time to shut the door.

She went indoors to supper, which Banford had set on the table. Banford chatted easily. March seemed to listen, in her distant, manly way. She answered a brief word now and then. But all the time she was as if spellbound. And as soon as supper was over, she rose again to go out, without saying why.

She took her gun again and went to look for the fox. For he had lifted his eyes upon her, and his knowing look seemed to have entered her brain. She did not so much think of him – she was possessed by him. She saw his dark, shrewd, unabashed eye looking into her, knowing her. She felt him invisibly master her spirit. She knew the way he lowered his chin as he looked up, she knew his muzzle, the golden brown and the greyish white. And again she saw him glance over his shoulder at her, half inviting, half contemptuous and cunning. So she went, with her great startled eyes glowing, her gun under her arm, along the wood edge. Meanwhile the night fell, and a great moon rose above the pine trees. And again Banford was calling.

So she went indoors. She was silent and busy. She examined her gun and cleaned it, musing abstractedly by the lamplight. Then she went out again, under the great moon, to see if everything was right. When she saw the dark crests of the pine trees against the blood-red sky, again her heart beat to the fox, the fox. She wanted to follow him with her gun.

It was some days before she mentioned the affair to Banford. Then suddenly, one evening she said:

“The fox was right at my feet on Saturday night.”

“Where?” said Banford, her eyes opening behind her spectacles.

“When I stood just above the pond.”

“Did you fire?” cried Banford.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why, I was too much surprised, I suppose.”

It was the same old, slow, laconic way of speech March always had. Banford stared at her friend for a few moments.

“You saw him?” she cried.

“Oh yes! He was looking up at me, cool as anything.”

“I tell you,” cried Banford, “the cheek! They’re not afraid of us, Nellie.”

“Oh, no,” said March.

“Pity you didn’t get a shot at him,” said Banford.

“Isn’t it a pity! I’ve been looking for him ever since. But I don’t suppose he’ll come so near again.”

“I don’t suppose he will,” said Banford.

And she proceeded to forget about it, except that she was more indignant than ever at the impudence of the beggars. March was also not conscious that she thought of the fox. But whenever she fell into her half-musing, when she was half rapt, and half-intelligently aware of what passed under her vision, then it was the fox which somehow dominated her unconsciousness, possessed the blank half of her musing. And so it was for weeks and months. No matter whether she had been climbing the trees for the apples, or beating down the last of the damsons, or whether she had been digging out the ditch from the duck pond, or clearing out the barn when she had finished, or when she had straightened herself, and pushed the wisps of hair away again from her forehead, and pursed up her mouth again in an odd, screwed fashion, much too old for her years, there was sure to come over her mind the old spell of the fox, as it came when he was looking at her. It was as if she could smell him at these times. And it always recurred at unexpected moments, just as she was going to sleep at night, or just as she was pouring the water into the teapot to make tea – it was the fox, it came over her like a spell.

So the months passed. She still looked for him unconsciously when she went towards the wood. He had become a settled effect in her spirit, a state permanently established, not continuous, but always recurring. She did not know what she felt or thought – only the state came over her, as when he looked at her.

The months passed, the dark evenings came – heavy, dark November, when March went about in high boots, ankle-deep in mud, when the night began to fall at four o’clock, and the day never properly dawned. Both girls dreaded these times. They dreaded the almost continuous darkness that enveloped them on their desolate little farm near the wood. Banford was physically afraid. She was afraid of tramps, afraid lest someone should come prowling around. March was not so much

afraid as uncomfortable and disturbed. She felt discomfort and gloom in all her physique.

Usually the two girls had tea in the sitting room. March lit a fire at dusk, and put on the wood she had chopped and sawed during the day. Then the long evening was in front: dark, sodden, black outside; lonely and rather oppressive inside, a little dismal. March was content not to talk, but Banford could not keep still. Merely listening to the wind in the pines outside, or the drip of water, was too much for her.

One evening the girls had washed up the tea things in the kitchen, and March had put on her house shoes, and taken up a roll of crochet-work, which she worked at slowly from time to time. So she lapsed into silence. Banford stared at the red fire which, being of wood, needed constant attention. She was afraid to begin to read too early, because her eyes would not bear any strain. So she sat staring at the fire, listening to the distant sounds – sound of cattle lowing, of a dull, heavy moist wind, of the rattle of the evening train on the little railway not far off. She was almost fascinated by the red glow of the fire.

Suddenly both girls started and lifted their heads. They heard a footstep – distinctly a footstep. Banford recoiled in fear. March stood listening. Then rapidly she approached the door that led into the kitchen. At the same time they heard the footsteps approach the back door. They waited a second. The back door opened softly. Banford gave a loud cry. A man's voice said softly:

“Hello!”

March recoiled, and took a gun from a corner.

“What do you want?” she cried, in a sharp voice.

Again the soft, softly vibrating man's voice said:

“Hello! What's wrong?”

“I shall shoot!” cried March. “What do you want?”

“Why, what's wrong? What's wrong?” came the soft, wondering, rather scared voice, and a young soldier, with his heavy kit on his back, advanced into the dim light.

“Why,” he said, “who lives here then?”

“We live here,” said March. “What do you want?”

“Oh!” came the long, melodious, wonder note from the young soldier. “Doesn't William Grenfel live here then?”

“No – you know he doesn’t.”

“Do I? Do I? I don’t, you see. He *did* live here, because he was my grandfather, and I lived here myself five years ago. What’s become of him then?”

The young man – or youth, for he would not be more than twenty, now advanced and stood in the inner doorway. March, already under the influence of his strange, soft, modulated voice, stared at him spellbound. He had a ruddy, roundish face, with fairish hair, rather long, flattened to his forehead with sweat. His eyes were blue, and very bright and sharp. On his cheeks, on the fresh ruddy skin were fine, fair hairs, like a down, but sharper. It gave him a slightly glistening look. Having his heavy sack on his shoulders, he stooped, thrusting his head forwards. His hat was loose in one hand. He stared brightly, very keenly from girl to girl, particularly at March, who stood pale, with great dilated eyes, in her belted coat and puttees, her hair knotted in a big crisp knot behind. She still had the gun in her hand. Behind her, Banford, clinging to the sofa arm, was shrinking away, with half-averted head.

“I thought my grandfather still lived here? I wonder if he’s dead.”

“We’ve been here for three years,” said Banford, who was beginning to recover her wits, seeing something boyish in the round head with its rather long, sweaty hair.

“Three years! You don’t say so! And you don’t know who was here before you?”

“I know it was an old man who lived by himself.”

“Ay! Yes, that’s him! And what became of him then?”

“He died. I know he died...”

“Ay! He’s dead then!”

The youth stared at them without changing colour or expression. If he had any expression, besides a slight baffled look of wonder, it was one of sharp curiosity concerning the two girls – sharp, impersonal curiosity, the curiosity of that round young head.

But to March, he was the fox. Whether it was the thrusting forward of his head, or the glisten of fine whitish hairs on the ruddy cheekbones, or the bright, keen eyes, that can never be said – but the boy was to her the fox, and she could not see him otherwise.

“How was it you didn’t know if your grandfather was alive or dead?” asked Banford, recovering her natural sharpness.

“Ay, that’s it,” replied the softly breathing youth. “You see, I joined up in Canada, and I hadn’t heard for three or four years. I ran away to Canada.”

“And now have you just come from France?”

“Well – from Salonika really.”

There was a pause, nobody knowing quite what to say.

“So you’ve nowhere to go now?” said Banford rather lamely.

“Oh, I know some people in the village. Anyhow, I can go to the Swan.”

“You came on the train, I suppose. Would you like to sit down a bit?”

“Well – I don’t mind.”

He gave an odd little groan as he swung off his kit. Banford looked at March.

“Put the gun down,” she said. “We’ll make a cup of tea.”

“Ay,” said the youth. “We’ve seen enough of rifles.”

He sat down rather tired on the sofa, leaning forwards.

March recovered her presence of mind, and went into the kitchen. There she heard the soft young voice musing:

“Well, to think I should come back and find it like this!” He did not seem sad, not at all – only rather interestedly surprised.

“And what a difference in the place, eh?” he continued, looking round the room.

“You see a difference, do you?” said Banford.

“Yes – don’t I!”

His eyes were unnaturally clear and bright, though it was the brightness of abundant health.

March was busy in the kitchen preparing another meal. It was about seven o’clock. All the time, while she was active, she was attending to the youth in the sitting room, not so much listening to what he said, as feeling the soft run of his voice. She primmed up her mouth tighter and tighter, puckering it as if it were sewed, in her effort to keep her will uppermost. Yet her large eyes dilated and glowed in spite of her; she lost herself. Rapidly and carelessly she prepared the meal, cutting large chunks of bread and margarine – for there was no butter. She racked her brain to think of something else to put on the tray – she had only bread, margarine and jam, and the larder was bare. Unable to conjure anything up, she went into the sitting room with her tray.

She did not want to be noticed. Above all, she did not want him to look at her. But when she came in, and was busy setting the table just behind him, he pulled himself up from his sprawling, and turned and looked over his shoulder. She became pale and wan.

The youth watched her as she bent over the table, looked at her slim, well-shapen legs, at the belted coat, dropping around her thighs, at the knot of dark hair, and his curiosity, vivid and widely alert, was again arrested by her.

The lamp was shaded with a dark-green shade so that the light was thrown downwards, the upper half of the room was dim. His face moved bright under the light, but March loomed shadowy in the distance.

She turned round, but kept her eyes sideways, dropping and lifting her dark lashes. Her mouth unpuckered as she said to Banford, "Will you pour out?"

Then she went into the kitchen again.

"Have your tea where you are, will you?" said Banford to the youth. "Unless you'd rather come to the table."

"Well," said he, "I'm nice and comfortable here, aren't I? I will have it here, if you don't mind."

"There's nothing but bread and jam," she said. And she put his plate on a stool by him. She was very happy now, waiting on him. For she loved company. And now she was no more afraid of him than if he were her own younger brother. He was such a boy.

"Nellie," she called. "I've poured you a cup out."

March appeared in the doorway, took her cup and sat down in a corner, as far from the light as possible. She was very sensitive in her knees. Having no skirts to cover them, and being forced to sit with them boldly exposed, she suffered. She shrank and shrank, trying not to be seen. And the youth, sprawling low on the couch, glanced up at her, with long, steady, penetrating looks, till she was almost ready to disappear. Yet she held her cup balanced, she drank her tea, screwed up her mouth and held her head averted. Her desire to be invisible was so strong that it quite baffled the youth. He felt he could not see her distinctly. She seemed like a shadow within the shadow. And ever his eyes came back to her, searching, unremitting, with unconscious fixed attention.

Meanwhile he was talking softly and smoothly to Banford, who loved nothing so much as gossip, and who was full of perky interest, like a

bird. Also he ate largely and quickly and voraciously, so that March had to cut more chunks of bread and margarine, for the roughness of which Banford apologized.

“Oh, well,” said March, suddenly speaking, “if there’s no butter to put on it, it’s no good trying to make dainty pieces.”

Again the youth watched her, and he laughed, with a sudden, quick laugh, showing his teeth and wrinkling his nose.

“It isn’t, is it,” he answered in his soft, near voice.

It appeared he was Cornish by birth and upbringing. When he was twelve years old he had come to Bailey Farm with his grandfather, with whom he had never agreed very well. So he had run away to Canada, and worked far away in the west. Now he was here – and that was the end of it.

He was very curious about the girls, to find out exactly what they were doing. His questions were those of a farm youth – acute, practical, a little mocking. He was very much amused by their attitude to their losses – for they were amusing on the score of heifers and fowls.

“Oh, well,” broke in March, “we don’t believe in living for nothing but work.”

“Don’t you?” he answered. And again the quick young laugh came over his face. He kept his eyes steadily on the obscure woman in the corner.

“But what will you do when you’ve used up all your capital?” he said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” answered March laconically. “Hire ourselves out for land workers, I suppose.”

“Yes, but there won’t be any demand for women land workers now the War’s over,” said the youth.

“Oh, we’ll see. We shall hold on a bit longer yet,” said March, with a plangent, half-sad, half-ironical indifference.

“There wants a man about the place,” said the youth softly. Banford burst out laughing.

“Take care what you say,” she interrupted. “We consider ourselves quite efficient.”

“Oh,” came March’s slow, plangent voice, “it isn’t a case of efficiency, I’m afraid. If you’re going to do farming you must be at it from morning till night, and you might as well be a beast yourself.”

“Yes, that’s it,” said the youth. “You aren’t willing to put yourselves into it.”

"We aren't," said March, "and we know it."

"We want some of our time for ourselves," said Banford.

The youth threw himself back on the sofa, his face tight with laughter, and laughed silently but thoroughly. The calm scorn of the girls tickled him tremendously.

"Yes," he said, "but why did you begin then?"

"Oh," said March, "we had a better opinion of the nature of fowls then than we have now."

"Of nature altogether, I'm afraid," said Banford. "Don't talk to me about nature."

Again the face of the youth tightened with delighted laughter. "You haven't a very high opinion of fowls and cattle, have you?" he said.

"Oh no – quite a low one," said March.

He laughed out.

"Neither fowls nor heifers," said Banford, "nor goats nor the weather."

The youth broke into a sharp yap of laughter, delighted. The girls began to laugh too, March turning aside her face and wrinkling her mouth in amusement.

"Oh, well," said Banford, "we don't mind, do we, Nellie?"

"No," said March, "we don't mind."

The youth was very pleased. He had eaten and drunk his fill. Banford began to question him. His name was Henry Grenfel – no, he was not called Harry, always Henry. He continued to answer with courteous simplicity, grave and charming. March, who was not included, cast long, slow glances at him from her recess, as he sat there on the sofa, his hands clasping his knees, his face under the lamp bright and alert, turned to Banford. She became almost peaceful at last. He was identified with the fox – and he was here in full presence. She need not go after him any more. There in the shadow of her corner she gave herself up to a warm, relaxed peace, almost like sleep, accepting the spell that was on her. But she wished to remain hidden. She was only fully at peace whilst he forgot her, talking to Banford. Hidden in the shadow of the corner, she need not any more be divided in herself, trying to keep up two planes of consciousness. She could at last lapse into the odour of the fox.

For the youth, sitting before the fire in his uniform, sent a faint but distinct odour into the room, indefinable, but something like a wild

creature. March no longer tried to reserve herself from it. She was still and soft in her corner, like a passive creature in its cave.

At last the talk dwindled. The youth relaxed his clasp of his knees, pulled himself together a little and looked round. Again he became aware of the silent, half-invisible woman in the corner.

"Well," he said unwillingly, "I suppose I'd better be going, or they'll be in bed at the Swan."

"I'm afraid they're in bed anyhow," said Banford. "They've all got this influenza."

"Have they!" he exclaimed. And he pondered. "Well," he continued, "I shall find a place somewhere."

"I'd say you could stay here, only..." Banford began.

He turned and watched her, holding his head forwards.

"What?..." he asked.

"Oh, well," she said, "propriety, I suppose..." She was rather confused.

"It wouldn't be improper, would it?" he said, gently surprised.

"Not as far as we're concerned," said Banford.

"And not as far as *I'm* concerned," he said, with grave naivety. "After all, it's my own home in a way."

Banford smiled at this.

"It's what the village will have to say," she said.

There was a moment's blank pause.

"What do you say, Nellie?" asked Banford.

"I don't mind," said March, in her distinct tone. "The village doesn't matter to me, anyhow."

"No," said the youth, quick and soft. "Why should it? I mean, what should they say?"

"Oh, well," came March's plangent, laconic voice, "they'll easily find something to say. But it makes no difference what they say. We can look after ourselves."

"Of course you can," said the youth.

"Well, then, stop if you like," said Banford. "The spare room is quite ready."

His face shone with pleasure.

"If you're quite sure it isn't troubling you too much," he said, with that soft courtesy which distinguished him.

"Oh, it's no trouble," they both said.

He looked, smiling with delight, from one to another.

"It's awfully nice not to have to turn out again, isn't it?" he said gratefully.

"I suppose it is," said Banford.

March disappeared to attend the room. Banford was as pleased and thoughtful as if she had her own brother home from France. It gave her just the same kind of gratification to attend on him, to get out the bath for him, and everything. Her natural warmth and kindness had now an outlet. And the youth luxuriated in her sisterly attention. But it puzzled him slightly to know that March was silently working for him too. She was so curiously silent and obliterated. It seemed to him he had not really seen her. He felt he should not know her if he met her in the road.

That night March dreamt vividly. She dreamt she heard a singing outside, which she could not understand, a singing that roamed round the house, in the fields and in the darkness. It moved her so, that she felt she must weep. She went out, and suddenly she knew it was the fox singing. He was very yellow and bright, like corn. She went nearer to him, but he ran away and ceased singing. He seemed near, and she wanted to touch him. She stretched out her hand, but suddenly he bit her wrist, and at the same instant as she drew back, the fox, turning round to bound away, whisked his brush across her face, and it seemed his brush was on fire, for it seared and burned her mouth with a great pain. She awoke with the pain of it, and lay trembling as if she were really seared.

In the morning, however, she only remembered it as a distant memory. She arose and was busy preparing the house and attending to the fowls. Banford flew into the village on her bicycle to try and buy food. She was a hospitable soul. But alas, in the year 1918 there was not much food to buy. The youth came downstairs in his shirtsleeves. He was young and fresh, but he walked with his head thrust forwards so that his shoulders seemed raised and rounded, as if he had a slight curvature of the spine. It must have been only a manner of bearing himself, for he was young and vigorous. He washed himself and went outside whilst the women were preparing breakfast.

He saw everything, and examined everything. His curiosity was quick and insatiable. He compared the state of things with that which he remembered before, and cast over in his mind the effect of the

changes. He watched the fowls and the ducks, to see their condition, he noticed the flight of wood pigeons overhead – they were very numerous; he saw the few apples high up, which March had not been able to reach; he remarked that they had borrowed a draw pump, presumably to empty the big soft-water cistern which was on the north side of the house.

“It’s a funny, dilapidated old place,” he said to the girls, as he sat at breakfast.

His eyes were wise and childish, with thinking about things. He did not say much, but ate largely. March kept her face averted. She, too, in the early morning, could not be aware of him, though something about the glint of his khaki reminded her of the brilliance of her dream fox.

During the day the girls went about their business. In the morning he attended to the guns, shot a rabbit and a wild duck that was flying high towards the wood. That was a great addition to the empty larder. The girls felt that already he had earned his keep. He said nothing about leaving, however. In the afternoon he went to the village. He came back at teatime. He had the same alert, forward-reaching look on his roundish face. He hung his hat on a peg with a little swinging gesture. He was thinking about something.

“Well,” he said to the girls, as he sat at table. “What am I going to do?”

“How do you mean – what are you going to do?” said Banford.

“Where am I going to find a place in the village to stay?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Banford. “Where do you think of staying?”

“Well...” he hesitated, “at the Swan they’ve got this flu, and at the Plough and Harrow they’ve got the soldiers who are collecting the hay for the army – besides, in the private houses, there’s ten men and a corporal altogether billeted in the village, they tell me. I’m not sure where I could get a bed.”

He left the matter to them. He was rather calm about it. March sat with her elbows on the table, her two hands supporting her chin, looking at him unconsciously. Suddenly he lifted his clouded blue eyes, and unthinkingly looked straight into March’s eyes. He was startled as well as she. He too recoiled a little. March felt the same sly, taunting, knowing spark leap out of his eyes, as he turned his head aside, and fall into her soul, as it had fallen from the dark eyes of the fox. She pursed her mouth as if in pain – as if asleep too.

“Well, I don’t know...” Banford was saying. She seemed reluctant, as if she were afraid of being imposed upon. She looked at March. But with her weak, troubled sight, she only saw the usual semi-abstraction on her friend’s face. “Why don’t you speak, Nellie?” she said.

But March was wide-eyed and silent, and the youth, as if fascinated, was watching her without moving his eyes.

“Go on – answer something,” said Banford. And March turned her head slightly aside, as if coming to consciousness, or trying to come to consciousness.

“What do you expect me to say?” she asked automatically.

“Say what you think,” said Banford.

“It’s all the same to me,” said March.

And again there was silence. A pointed light seemed to be on the boy’s eyes, penetrating like a needle.

“So it is to me,” said Banford. “You can stop on here if you like.”

A smile like a cunning little flame came over his face suddenly and involuntarily. He dropped his head quickly to hide it, and remained with his head dropped, his face hidden.

“You can stop on here if you like. You can please yourself, Henry,” Banford concluded.

Still he did not reply, but remained with his head dropped. Then he lifted his face. It was bright with a curious light, as if exultant, and his eyes were strangely clear as he watched March. She turned her face aside, her mouth suffering as if wounded, and her consciousness dim.

Banford became a little puzzled. She watched the steady, pellucid gaze of the youth’s eyes as he looked at March, with the invisible smile gleaming on his face. She did not know how he was smiling, for no feature moved. It seemed only in the gleam, almost the glitter of the fine hairs on his cheeks. Then he looked, with quite a changed look, at Banford.

“I’m sure,” he said in his soft, courteous voice, “you’re awfully good. You’re too good. You don’t want to be bothered with me, I’m sure.”

“Cut a bit of bread, Nellie,” said Banford uneasily – adding: “It’s no bother, if you like to stay. It’s like having my own brother here for a few days. He’s a boy like you are.”

“That’s awfully kind of you,” the lad repeated. “I should like to stay ever so much, if you’re sure I’m not a trouble to you.”

“No, of course you’re no trouble. I tell you, it’s a pleasure to have somebody in the house beside ourselves,” said warm-hearted Banford.

“But Miss March?” he said in his soft voice, looking at her.

“Oh, it’s quite all right as far as I’m concerned,” said March vaguely. His face beamed, and he almost rubbed his hands with pleasure.

“Well then,” he said, “I should love it, if you’d let me pay my board and help with the work.”

“You’ve no need to talk about board,” said Banford.

One or two days went by, and the youth stayed on at the farm. Banford was quite charmed by him. He was so soft and courteous in speech, not wanting to say much himself, preferring to hear what she had to say, and to laugh in his quick, half-mocking way. He helped readily with the work – but not too much. He loved to be out alone with the gun in his hands, to watch, to see. For his sharp-eyed, impersonal curiosity was insatiable, and he was most free when he was quite alone, half hidden, watching.

Particularly he watched March. She was a strange character to him. Her figure, like a graceful young man’s, piqued him. Her dark eyes made something rise in his soul, with a curious elate excitement when he looked into them – an excitement he was afraid to let be seen, it was so keen and secret. And then her odd, shrewd speech made him laugh outright. He felt he must go further, he was inevitably impelled. But he put away the thought of her, and went off towards the wood’s edge with the gun.

The dusk was falling as he came home, and with the dusk, a fine, late November rain. He saw the firelight leaping in the window of the sitting room, a leaping light in the little cluster of the dark buildings. And he thought to himself, it would be a good thing to have this place for his own. And then the thought entered him shrewdly – why not marry March? He stood still in the middle of the field for some moments, the dead rabbit hanging still in his hand, arrested by this thought. His mind waited in amazement – it seemed to calculate – and then he smiled curiously to himself in acquiescence. Why not? Why not, indeed? It was a good idea. What if it was rather ridiculous? What did it matter? What if she was older than he? It didn’t matter. When he thought of her dark, startled, vulnerable eyes he smiled subtly to himself. He was older than she, really. He was master of her.

He scarcely admitted his intention even to himself. He kept it as a secret even from himself. It was all too uncertain as yet. He would have to see how things went. Yes, he would have to see how things went. If he wasn't careful, she would just simply mock at the idea. He knew, sly and subtle as he was, that if he went to her plainly and said: "Miss March, I love you and want you to marry me," her inevitable answer would be: "Get out. I don't want any of that tomfoolery." This was her attitude to men and their "tomfoolery". If he was not careful, she would turn round on him with her savage, sardonic ridicule, and dismiss him from the farm and from her own mind for ever. He would have to go gently. He would have to catch her as you catch a deer or a woodcock when you go out shooting. It's no good walking out into the forest and saying to the deer: "Please fall to my gun." No, it is a slow, subtle battle. When you really go out to get a deer, you gather yourself together, you coil yourself inside yourself and you advance secretly, before dawn, into the mountains. It is not so much what you do, when you go out hunting, as how you feel. You have to be subtle and cunning and absolutely fatally ready. It becomes like a fate. Your own fate overtakes and determines the fate of the deer you are hunting. First of all, even before you come in sight of your quarry, there is a strange battle, like mesmerism. Your own soul, as a hunter, has gone out to fasten on the soul of the deer, even before you see any deer. And the soul of the deer fights to escape. Even before the deer has any wind of you, it is so. It is a subtle, profound battle of wills, which takes place in the invisible. And it is a battle never finished till your bullet goes home. When you are *really* worked up to the true pitch, and you come at last into range, you don't then aim as you do when you are firing at a bottle. It is your own *will* which carries the bullet into the heart of your quarry. The bullet's flight home is a sheer projection of your own fate into the fate of the deer. It happens like a supreme wish, a supreme act of volition, not as a dodge of cleverness.

He was a huntsman in spirit, not a farmer, and not a soldier stuck in a regiment. And it was as a young hunter that he wanted to bring down March as his quarry, to make her his wife. So he gathered himself subtly together, seemed to withdraw into a kind of invisibility. He was not quite sure how he would go on. And March was suspicious as a hare. So he remained in appearance just the nice, odd stranger-youth, staying for a fortnight on the place.

He had been sawing logs for the fire in the afternoon. Darkness came very early. It was still a cold, raw mist. It was getting almost too dark to see. A pile of short sawed logs lay beside the trestle. March came to carry them indoors, or into the shed, as he was busy sawing the last log. He was working in his shirtsleeves, and did not notice her approach. She came unwillingly, as if shy. He saw her stooping to the bright-ended logs, and he stopped sawing. A fire like lightning flew down his legs in the nerves.

“March?” he said, in his quiet young voice.

She looked up from the logs she was piling.

“Yes!” she said.

He looked down on her in the dusk. He could see her not too distinctly.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said.

“Did you? What was it?” she said. Already the fright was in her voice. But she was too much mistress of herself.

“Why...” his voice seemed to draw out soft and subtle, it penetrated her nerves. “Why, what do you think it is?”

She stood up, placed her hands on her hips, and stood looking at him, transfixed, without answering. Again he burned with a sudden power.

“Well,” he said, and his voice was so soft it seemed rather like a subtle touch, like the merest touch of a cat’s paw, a feeling rather than a sound. “Well – I wanted to ask you to marry me.”

March felt rather than heard him. She was trying in vain to turn aside her face. A great relaxation seemed to have come over her. She stood silent, her head slightly on one side. He seemed to be bending towards her, invisibly smiling. It seemed to her fine sparks came out of him.

Then very suddenly she said, “Don’t try any of your tomfoolery on me.”

A quiver went over his nerves. He had missed. He waited a moment to collect himself again. Then he said, putting all the strange softness into his voice, as if he were imperceptibly stroking her:

“Why, it’s not tomfoolery. It’s not tomfoolery. I mean it. I mean it. What makes you disbelieve me?”

He sounded hurt. And his voice had such a curious power over her, making her feel loose and relaxed. She struggled somewhere for her

own power. She felt for a moment that she was lost – lost – lost. The word seemed to rock in her as if she were dying. Suddenly again she spoke.

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” she said, in a brief and transient stroke of scorn. “What nonsense! I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“Yes, I do know what I’m talking about. Yes, I do,” he persisted softly, as if he were producing his voice in her blood. “I know quite well what I’m talking about. You’re not old enough to be my mother. That isn’t true. And what does it matter even if it was. You can marry me whatever age we are. What is age to me? And what is age to you! Age is nothing.”

A swoon went over her as he concluded. He spoke rapidly – in the rapid Cornish fashion – and his voice seemed to sound in her somewhere where she was helpless against it. “Age is nothing!” The soft, heavy insistence of it made her sway dimly out there in the darkness. She could not answer.

A great exultance leapt like fire over his limbs. He felt he had won.

“I want to marry you, you see. Why shouldn’t I?” he proceeded, soft and rapid. He waited for her to answer. In the dusk he saw her almost phosphorescent. Her eyelids were dropped, her face half averted and unconscious. She seemed to be in his power. But he waited, watchful. He dared not yet touch her.

“Say then,” he said. “Say then you’ll marry me. Say... say!” He was softly insistent.

“What?” she asked, faint, from a distance, like one in pain. His voice was now unthinkably near and soft. He drew very near to her.

“Say yes.”

“Oh, I can’t,” she wailed helplessly, half articulate, as if semi-conscious, and as if in pain, like one who dies. “How can I?”

“You can,” he said softly, laying his head gently on her shoulder as she stood with her head averted and dropped, dazed. “You can. Yes, you can. What makes you say you can’t? You can. You can.” And with awful softness he bent forwards and just touched her neck with his mouth and his chin.

“Don’t!” she cried, with a faint mad cry like hysteria, starting away and facing round on him. “What do you mean?” But she had no breath to speak with. It was as if she was killed.