

THE WHITE GATE

In the late afternoon the country-side was swimming in a rich yellow light, the colour of straw: it was as though a yellow dust had settled on hills and paddocks. Like purple-black lava, a cloud shadow crawled slowly down the side of the long gentle slope behind the farm house. A twist of smoke climbed out of its chimney and swayed in the liquid air; a rust-bleached red and white calf nudged at the grass; fowls, settling for the night on an old ladder leaning against a barn, beat the air clumsily with their wings; from time to time a white dog ran out from under an empty cart.

Swallows danced like motes, sweeping down every now and then to flick the golden veneer of the creek with the sickle tips of their wings. A wind scuttled through the maize plot, a dry rustling, and the surface swayed like a wind-ruffled sea.

Two men who had been hoeing all day in the paddock beyond the bracken-red maize came out on to the road and began walking towards the house. They walked with the slowness of fatigue, the taller and thinner man five yards in the lead. Both wore grey flannel shirts and black twist trousers and carried their hoes in the crook of their right shoulders. The blades of the gapped hoes were burnished by use and the sun's yellow light flamed whenever it hit them.

The taller man was blue-eyed and fair skinned, and his long nose and neck were angrily red from sun-burn. The other was dark and his face had been tanned to an even deeper brown than that of the corn paddock through which they had come. He had very thick black eye-brows — as wide as a man's fore-finger — and brown eyes. He kept looking at the man and, once, when a wingburst of swallows went overhead, he opened his mouth as if to say something and then closed it abruptly. The dust at the side of the road muffled the sound of their heavy fat-soaked boots. The dark man in the rear constantly twisted the handle of his hoe and the bright head flickered

like a heliograph. Occasionally, he took off his felt hat and carried it by the brim; its inside band was greasy with sweat and unpleasant to his touch. The day had been hot and sweat had plastered his hair, his flannel shirt was damp, and when the wind changed at times, he smelled its sour-sweet rankness.

The fair man continued to lead. Little wisps of dust curled from under his boots and settled on his sockless ankles. At times, the dust went down the sides of his boots – dry and brittle and as harsh as powdered glass.

The sun was almost down. Its yellow light grew even more mellow; it was flaring up much like a giant dying candle through the thin curtain of black and grey clouds. The sun had a strange luminosity; it had swollen and the men could brave it with their naked eyes. It washed the west side of the farm house with a trembling yellow light so it seemed to be hung with golden shields where the light fell on the window panes.

The fair-skinned man turned off the road towards a brilliant white gate; it was a wide, five barred gate freshly painted. He unfastened the chain and opened the gate, pushing it ahead of him. The rusting hinges creaked noisily.

A form of rough courtesy with the men was that, when one opened the gate, he should hold it open until the other had passed through. This time the tall man did not wait; instead, he held the gate until he had judged the other was only a pace behind him and then he let the gate swing back gently. While the dark man fastened the gate, the other strode on quickly towards the house. He was soon twenty yards ahead; reaching the house, he turned into the laundry and began to wash. The dark man followed.

While he rubbed at his hands with the yellow brick of soap, the tall, fair-skinned man kept glancing up from the tin basin towards the kitchen door. He was scooping the water towards his face with his hands when the girl came out from the kitchen. She was the hired maid and cooked for the owner and his wife and the two men. She was a big full-limbed girl and always very bright. The two men watched her as she came along the verandah. She walked slowly, thrusting out her thighs with every step. The two men wavered and called out to

her.

"Hullo!" she said, "Hope you wash behind your ears."

"Go on!" said the dark man. "Do you?"

She laughed. Her voice was thin but her laughter was deeper.

"Tea's ready."

"You're coming on!" the dark man teased.

"'Nough of you!"

The dark man threw the towel into the corner and moved past the girl, contriving to bump her playfully as he did so.

"Here! Look out!"

The man winked. The fair man fell to drying himself vigorously with the towel.

"Tea's ready!" the girl said, again.

The dark man pinched the girl's arm playfully.

"Good condition!" he remarked, winking and bringing down the thick mat of black eyebrow.

The girl pretended to resent the familiarity. She brought her elbow smartly into his ribs.

"Ho! Ho!" he gasped, laughingly, "Cripple a man – would you?"

He held one hand over his ribs his face showing mock agony, and walked into the kitchen. The tall fair man looked at the girl intently, his eyes taking their fill of the swelling of her hips, of the full bosom, of the round arms. When she turned towards the kitchen he almost called out to her.

The dark man was already seated at the table when the tall man walked in. A smoky haze hung in the kitchen; steak was frying on the wood stove and bright spots of fat leapt continually out of the pan. Soon the two men began to eat. The men faced each other but spoke only to the girl who sat on one side. All three ate slowly. The clean white cloth gleamed under the lamp and was stiff against their knees.

Once when the girl bent over the table, the tall man was suddenly aware of the dark shadow in the furrow between her breasts. Below the red edge of sunburn on her neck, her skin gleamed whitely, white and as soft as a mushroom's.

The dark man joked with the girl throughout the meal. The other spoke little, but he often looked up from his plate at the

girl. Once he turned and looked sharply at the dark man.

When they had finished, the girl gathered up the dirty plates. When she bent over his side of the table, the dark man grabbed the back of her thigh with the palm of his hand. He did it with a purposely braggart air, looking boldly at the girl. She returned his glance in like and he looked impudently at the thin man.

The thin man started to say something but stopped. He pushed back his chair, its legs fretting noisily against weather-board floor, stood up hastily and left the room.

“The bastard!” muttered the dark man.

The girl laughed.

“Why worry about him?” she said, looking straight at him.

During the night the wind got up and its gusty talons raked the hills and flats. When the two men rose just after first light, the sun’s huge red disc trembled in a leaden-grey sky and a sullen red-yellow light suffused everything.

In the morning after breakfast, the two men picked up their hoes and left the house. The sun poised just above the hills like a great bronze cymbal and its light brushed everything. White mists unwound from the still of the creek. Beads of dew were trapped in the spiders’ webs in the gum and peppercorn trees around the house.

Once more the thin fair man led the way. His coat brushed the dew off the white gate when he unfastened the wet chain. He pushed the gate ahead of him but this time he did not wait for the other — instead, he let the gate swing back swiftly and the dark man had to jump aside hastily. The dark man’s face reddened. He muttered while he fastened the white gate; with clenched fists he walked quickly after the thin man, gaining on him rapidly.



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