

ONE

It was a good tree by the sea-loch, with many cones and much sunshine; it was homely too, with rests among its topmost branches as comfortable as chairs.

For hours the two men had worked in silence there, a hundred feet from the earth, closer, it seemed, to the blue sky round which they had watched the sun slip. Misted in the morning, the loch had gone through many shades of blue and now was mauve, like the low hills on its far side. Seals that had been playing tag in and out of the seaweed under the surface had disappeared round the point, like children gone home for tea. A destroyer had steamed seawards, with a sailor singing cheerfully. More sudden and swifter than hawks, and roaring louder than waterfalls, aeroplanes had shot down from the sky over the wood, whose autumnal colours they seemed to have copied for camouflage. In the silence that had followed gunshots had cracked far off in the wood.

From the tall larch could be glimpsed, across the various-tinted crowns of the trees, the chimneys of the mansion behind its private fence of giant silver firs. Neil, the elder of the brothers, had often paused, his hand stretched out from its ragged sleeve to pluck the sweet resinous cones, and gazed at

the great house with a calm yet bitter intentness and anticipation, as if, having put a spell on it, he was waiting for it to change. He never said what he expected or why he watched; nor did his brother ever ask.

For Calum the tree-top was interest enough; in it he was as indigenous as squirrel or bird. His black curly hair was speckled with orange needles; his torn jacket was stained green, as was his left knee visible through a hole rubbed in his trousers. Chaffinches fluttered round him, ignoring his brother; now and then one would alight on his head or shoulder. He kept chuckling to them, and his sunburnt face was alert and beautiful with trust. Yet he was a much faster gatherer than his brother, and reached far out to where the brittle branches drooped and creaked under his weight. Neil would sometimes glance across to call out: 'Careful.' It was the only word spoken in the past two hours.

The time came when, thrilling as a pipe lament across the water, daylight announced it must go: there was a last blaze of light, an uncanny clarity, a splendour and puissance; and then the abdication began. Single stars appeared, glittering in a sky pale and austere. Dusk like a breathing drifted in among the trees and crept over the loch. Slowly the mottled yellow of the chestnuts, the bronze of beech, the saffron of birches, all the magnificent sombre harmonies of decay, became indistinguishable. Owls hooted. A fox barked.

It was past time to climb down and go home. The path to the earth was unfamiliar; in the dark it might be dangerous. Once safely down, they would have to find their way like ghosts to their hut in the heart of the wood. Yet Neil did not give the word to go down. It was not zeal to fill the bags that

made him linger, for he had given up gathering. He just sat, motionless and silent; and his brother, accustomed to these trances, waited in sympathy: he was sure that even at midnight he could climb down any tree, and help Neil to climb down too. He did not know what Neil was thinking, and never asked; even if told he would not understand. It was enough that they were together.

For about half an hour they sat there, no longer working. The scent of the tree seemed to strengthen with the darkness, until Calum fancied he was resting in the heart of an enormous flower. As he breathed in the fragrance, he stroked the branches, and to his gentle hands they were as soft as petals. More owls cried. Listening, as if he was an owl himself, he saw in imagination the birds huddled on branches far lower than this one on which he sat. He became an owl himself, he rose and fanned his wings, flew close to the ground, and then swooped, to rise again with vole or shrew squeaking in his talons. Part-bird then, part-man, he suffered in the ineluctable predicament of necessary pain and death. The owl could not be blamed; it lived according to its nature; but its victim must be pitied. This was the terrifying mystery, why creatures he loved should kill one another. He had been told that all over the world in the war now being fought men, women, and children were being slaughtered in thousands; cities were being burnt down. He could not understand it, and so he tried, with success, to forget it.

‘Well, we’d better make for down,’ said Neil at last, with a heavy sigh.

‘I could sit up here all night, Neil,’ his brother assured him eagerly.

ROBIN JENKINS

Neil was angry, though he did not raise his voice. 'Are you a monkey to want to spend all your life in a tree?'

'No, Neil.'

'What would you eat up here? The cones?'

Calum laughed. 'I don't think so, Neil. They're not good.'

'Don't tell me you've tried them?'

This time Calum's laughter was a confession.

Neil would not see it as a joke.

'No wonder they come and stare up at you, as if you were a monkey,' he said.

Calum knew he was referring to the boy and girl who lived in the big house. They had only come once, and he had not minded their admiration.

Neil was silent for nearly a minute.

'But why shouldn't we be called monkeys?' he muttered. 'Don't we spend most of our lives in trees? And don't we live in a box fit for monkeys?'

Calum became sad: he liked their tiny hut.

'Yonder's a house with fifty rooms,' went on Neil, 'every one of them three times the size of our hut, and nearly all of them empty.'

'But we couldn't live in the big house, Neil.'

'Why couldn't we? We're human beings just like them. We need space to live and breathe in.'

'We get lots of space in the trees, Neil, and on the hills.'

'Like birds and animals, you mean?'

'We're just simple folk, Neil. I want us just to be simple folk.'

Neil yielded to the appeal in his brother's voice, and also to the uselessness of complaint.

'I ken you do, Calum,' he said. 'And I ken too that, though you're simple, you're better than any of them. Is to be always happy a crime? Is it daft never to be angry or jealous or full of spite? You're better and wiser than any of them.'

Calum smiled, scarcely knowing what the words meant.

'But it wouldn't have hurt them to let us stay in the summer-house,' cried Neil, with another burst of passion, 'for all the time we'll be here. No, we would soil it for them; and as soon as the war's over it's to be knocked down anyway. It just wouldn't do for us to be using what the grand folk once used.'

He paused, and sighed again.

'What's the matter with me these days, Calum?' he asked. 'Is it I'm getting too old? Am I frightened at something? It just comes over me. Sometimes I think it must be the war. There seems to be death in the air.'

Calum shivered: he knew and feared death.

'This wood,' said Neil, 'it's to be cut down in the spring.'

'I ken that,' whimpered Calum.

'There's no sense in being sorry for trees,' said his brother, 'when there are more men than trees being struck down. You can make use of a tree, but what use is a dead man? Trees can be replaced in time. Aren't we ourselves picking the cones for seed? Can you replace dead men?'

He knew that the answer was: yes, the dead men would be replaced. After a war the population of the world increased. But none would be replaced by him. To look after his brother, he had never got married, though once he had come very near it: that memory often revived to turn his heart melancholy.

‘We’d better get down,’ he muttered. ‘You lead the way, Calum, as usual.’

‘Sure, I’ll lead the way, Neil.’

Delighted to be out of this bondage of talk, Calum set his bag of cones firmly round his shoulders, and with consummate confidence and grace began the descent through the inner night of the great tree. Not once, all the long way down, was he at a loss. He seemed to find holds by instinct, and patiently guided his brother’s feet on to them. Alone, Neil would have been in trouble; he was as dependent on his brother as if he was blind; and Calum made no attempt to make his superiority as climber compensate for his inferiority as talker. Every time he caught his brother’s foot and set it on a safe branch it was an act of love. Once, when Neil slid down quicker than he meant and stamped on Calum’s fingers, the latter uttered no complaint but smiled in the dark and sucked the bruise.

It was different as soon as they were on the ground. Neil immediately strode out, and Calum, hurrying to keep close behind, often stumbled. Gone were the balance and sureness he had shown in the tree. If there was a hollow or a stone or a stick, he would trip over it. He never grumbled at such mishaps, but scrambled up at once, anxious only not to be a hindrance to his brother.

When they reached the beginning of the ride that divided a cluster of Norway spruces, Neil threw over his shoulder the usual warning: to leave the snares alone, whether there were rabbits in them half throttled or hungry or frantic; and Calum gave the usual sad guilty promise.

During their very first day in the wood they had got into

trouble with the gamekeeper. Calum had released two rabbits from snares. Neil had been angry and had prophesied trouble. It had come next evening when Duror, the big keeper, had been waiting for them outside their hut. His rage had been quiet but intimidating. Neil had said little in reply, but had faced up to the gun raised once or twice to emphasise threats. Calum, demoralised as always by hatred, had cowered against the hut, hiding his face.

Duror had sworn that he would seize the first chance to hound them out of the wood; they were in it, he said, sore against his wish. Neil therefore had made Calum swear by an oath which he didn't understand but which to Neil was the most sacred on earth: by their dead mother, he had to swear never again to interfere with the snares. He could not remember his mother, who had died soon after he was born.

Now this evening, as he trotted down the ride, he prayed by a bright star above that there would be no rabbits squealing in pain. If there were, he could not help them; he would have to rush past, tears in his eyes, fingers in his ears.

Several rabbits were caught, all dead except one; it pounded on the grass and made choking noises. Neil had passed it without noticing. Calum moaned in dismay at this dilemma of either displeasing his brother or forsaking a hurt creature. He remembered his solemn promise; he remembered too the cold hatred of the gamekeeper; he knew that the penalty for interfering might be expulsion from this wood where he loved to work; but above all he shared the suffering of the rabbit.

When he bent down to rescue it, he had not decided in terms of right and wrong, humanity and cruelty; he had merely

yielded to instinct. Accordingly he was baffled when, with one hand firmly but tenderly gripping its ears, he felt with the other to find where the wire noose held it, and discovered that both front paws were not only caught but were also broken. If he freed it, it would not be able to run; it would have to push itself along on its belly, at the mercy of its many enemies. No creature on earth would help it; other rabbits would attack it because it was crippled.

As he knelt, sobbing in his quandary, the rabbit's squeals brought Neil rushing back.

'Are you daft right enough?' shouted Neil, dragging him to his feet. His voice, with its anger, sounded forlorn amidst the tall dark trees. 'Didn't you promise to leave them alone?'

'It's just one, Neil. Its legs are broken.'

'And what if they are? Are you such a child you're going to cry because a rabbit's legs are broken in a snare? Will you never grow up, Calum? You're a man of thirty-one, not a child of ten.'

'It's in pain, Neil.'

'Haven't I told you, hundreds of times, there's a war? Men and women and children too, at this very minute, are having their legs blown away and their faces burnt off them.'

Calum whimpered.

'I ken you don't like to hear about such things, Calum. Nobody does, but they are happening, and surely they're more to worry about than a rabbit.'

'Put it out of its pain, Neil.'

'Am I to kill it?' In spite of him, his question was a gibe.

Calum had not the subtlety to explain why death, dealt

in pity, was preferable to suffering and loneliness and ultimately death from fox's teeth or keeper's boot.

'Why don't you kill it yourself?' persisted Neil.

'I couldn't, Neil.'

Not only love for his brother silenced Neil then: he knew that what Calum represented, pity so meek as to be paralysed by the suffering that provoked it, ought to be regretted perhaps, but never despised.

Nevertheless he remained thrawn.

'I don't like to do it any more than you do, Calum,' he said. 'It's not my nature to seek to hurt any creature alive.'

'I ken that fine, Neil.'

'We'll just have to leave it for the keeper. He'll kill it soon enough. It's not our business anyway. If he finds we've been interfering again he'll tell the lady on us and she'll have us sent out of the wood. Not that that would worry me much. I don't like it here as much as you seem to. I'd far rather be back at Ardmore, cutting the bracken or clearing the drains.'

'But Mr Tulloch wants us to work here, Neil. He says the cones are needed.'

'The cones!' In anger Neil snatched from his bag a fistful of cones and flung them viciously into the trees. They rattled against the branches and fell to the ground. He hated these cones, which kept them prisoners in this wood just as the snare held the rabbit. Mr Tulloch, the forester at Ardmore, where they worked, had asked them as the men most easily spared to take on this six or seven weeks' spell of gathering larch and pine and spruce cones. The seed was necessary, as the usual imports were cut off by the war. Lady Runcie-Campbell had given permission as a patriotic duty. She

managed the estate in the absence of Sir Colin, who was in the army. If they offended her so that she insisted on their being removed, Mr Tulloch, for all his kindness, might be so annoyed he would sack them altogether, and they would have to set out again in search of work, shelter, and friendliness. For five years they had been happy at Ardmore, planting trees on remote hills, living in their own cosy bothy, and bothering no one.

Defeated by the cones, Neil took another handful and flung them, this time feebly.

'It's not the cones' fault,' he muttered. 'I'm daft to blame them. I don't ken whose fault it is. Come on, we'd better get to the hut.'

Calum clutched him.

'What about the rabbit, Neil?' he wailed.

Neil shook off the beseeching grasp.

'Never mind it,' he cried, as he strode away. 'Leave it. It'll die soon enough. Do you want to ruin us just because of a rabbit? Haven't I told you a thousand times there's a war in the world? Where will the likes of us ever find anybody as good and fair as Mr Tulloch's been? He'll not want to sack us, but there are men above him who'll be furious if they hear we've offended the lady who belongs to this wood.'

While his brother was moving away shouting, Calum was kneeling by the rabbit. He had seen it done before: grip the ears firmly, stretch the neck, and strike with the side of the hand: so simple was death. But as he touched the long ears, and felt them warm and pulsating with a life not his own, he realised he could not do the rabbit this peculiar kindness; he must leave it to the callous hand or boot of the gamekeeper.

He rose and ran stumbling and whimpering after his brother.

Hidden among the spruces at the edge of the ride, near enough to catch the smell of larch off the cones and to be struck by some of those thrown, stood Duror the gamekeeper, in an icy sweat of hatred, with his gun aimed all the time at the feebleminded hunchback grovelling over the rabbit. To pull the trigger, requiring far less force than to break a rabbit's neck, and then to hear simultaneously the clean report of the gun and the last obscene squeal of the killed dwarf would have been for him, he thought, release too, from the noose of disgust and despair drawn, these past few days, so much tighter.

He had waited for over an hour there to see them pass. Every minute had been a purgatory of humiliation: it was as if he was in their service, forced to wait upon them as upon his masters. Yet he hated and despised them far more powerfully than ever he had liked and respected Sir Colin and Lady Runcie-Campbell. While waiting, he had imagined them in the darkness missing their footing in the tall tree and coming crashing down through the sea of branches to lie dead on the ground. So passionate had been his visualising of that scene, he seemed himself to be standing on the floor of a fantastic sea, with an owl and a herd of roe-deer flitting by quiet as fish, while the yellow ferns and bronzen brackens at his feet gleamed like seaweed, and the spruce trees swayed above him like submarine monsters.

He could have named, item by item, leaf and fruit and branch, the overspreading tree of revulsion in him; but he could not tell the force which made it grow, any more than

he could have explained the life in himself, or in the dying rabbit, or in any of the trees about him.

This wood had always been his stronghold and sanctuary; there were many places secret to him where he had been able to fortify his sanity and hope. But now the wood was invaded and defiled; its cleansing and reviving virtues were gone. Into it had crept this hunchback, himself one of nature's freaks, whose abject acceptance of nature, like the whining prostrations of a heathen in front of an idol, had made acceptance no longer possible for Duror himself. He was humpbacked, with one shoulder higher than the other; he had no neck, and on the misshapen lump of his body sat a face so beautiful and guileless as to be a diabolical joke. He was now in the wood, protected, not to be driven out or shot at or trapped or trampled on; and with him was his brother, tall, thin, grey-haired, with an appearance of harsh meditation obviously false in a man who read no books and could only spell through a newspaper word by word. They had been brought into the wood: a greasy shed, hardly bigger than a rabbit-hutch, had been knocked together in a couple of hours, and set up in one of Duror's haunts, a clearing amongst cypresses, where, in early summer, hyacinths had bloomed in thousands. Already, after only a week, the ground round about was filthy with their refuse and ordure. They were to be allowed to pollute every tree in the wood except the silver firs near the big house.

Duror was alone in his obsession. No one else found their presence obnoxious; everybody accepted the forester's description of them as shy, honest, hard-working, respectable men. Lady Runcie-Campbell, without seeing them, judging by what she had been told, had said she was sorry for them, and she

had issued an order to all her employees that they were to be treated with sympathy. Her fourteen-year-old son Roderick looked on them as heroes because they climbed into the very crests of the trees; even Miss Sheila, sophisticated beyond her twelve years, had gone to admire their climbing. It was true that the children of Lendrick, the village five miles away, where the brothers visited every Saturday, shouted names after them in the street; but they did not shout with the whole-hearted cruelty that children could, and their elders, the shopping housewives and the dark-jerseyed fishermen outside the hotel, reproved them instantly and sharply.

Since childhood Duror had been repelled by anything living that had an imperfection or deformity or lack: a cat with three legs had roused pity in others, in him an ungovernable disgust. Other boys had stripped the wings off flies, he had been compelled to squash the desecrated remnants: often he had been struck for what was considered interference or conceited pity. Nobody had guessed he had been under a compulsion inexplicable then, and now in manhood, after the silent tribulation of the past twenty years, an accumulated horror, which the arrival of these cone-gatherers seemed at last about to let loose.

When he was sure they were too far in front to hear him he came out from the pines. For a minute or two he stood beside the rabbit, pitying it not for its terror or pain or nearness to death, but for having so recently been the victim of the hunchback's drivelling sorrow. Anyone seeing him there, so silent and intent, might have thought he was praying, or at any rate making some kind of preparation in his mind for the taking of life. When he did kneel, on one knee, to break

the rabbit's neck with one blow, it was like an act of sacrifice, so swift, so efficient, and somehow so purposeful. When he arose his fist was clenched, and in the darkness he opened it and held it open, empty, for a few seconds.

He went along the ride, climbed the fence, and followed the path that led by the side of a stream to the hut. Weeping ashes there gleamed paler than the rushing water. Beside the great cedar of Lebanon, the vastest tree in the wood, he paused for a minute or two, listening to what ought to have been the silence of the night accentuated rather than blemished by such noises as water's gurgle, trees' rustle, and a far-off seagull's screaming. But at that high point on the path, beside this gigantic tree whose branches reached as high as the stars, and beyond into the darker haunted night of the Bible remembered from childhood, the light from the cone-gatherers' hut could be seen. Therefore what Duror heard was a roaring within him, as if that tree of hatred and revulsion was being tossed by a gale. He was shaken physically by that onslaught and had to rest against the cedar, with his gaze upon that small gleam in the clearing below on the other side of the burn. He knew it would be more sensible and more worthy of himself to turn and go home: here there could be only further degradation and shame, with possible disaster; but in him was a force more powerful than common sense or pride. He could not name it, but it dragged him irresistibly down towards that hut.

Amidst the bottommost branches of a cypress, curving out like hard green tusks, he stood and once again abandoned himself to that meaningless vigil.

The hut was lit by oil-lamp. He smelled paraffin as well as woodsmoke. He knew they picked up old cones to kindle

the fire, and on Sunday they had worked for hours sawing up blown timber for firewood: they had been given permission to do so. The only window was not in the wall facing him, so that he could not see inside; but he had been in their hut so often, they were in his imagination so vividly, and he was so close every sound they made could be interpreted; therefore it was easy for him to picture them as they went about making their meal. They peeled their potatoes the night before, and left them in a pot of cold water. They did not wash before they started to cook or eat. They did not change their clothes. They had no table; an upturned box did instead, with a newspaper for a cloth; and each sat on his own bed. They seldom spoke. All evening they would be dumb, the taller brooding over a days-old paper, the dwarf carving some animal out of wood: at present he was making a squirrel. Seeing it half finished that afternoon, holding it shudderingly in his hands, Duror had against his will, against indeed the whole frenzied thrust of his being, sensed the kinship between the carver and the creature whose likeness he was carving. When complete, the squirrel would be not only recognisable, it would be almost alive. To Duror it had been the final defeat that such ability should be in a half-man, a freak, an imbecile. He had read that the Germans were putting idiots and cripples to death in gas chambers. Outwardly, as everybody expected, he condemned such barbarity; inwardly, thinking of idiocy and crippledness not as abstractions but as embodied in the crouch-backed cone-gatherer, he had profoundly approved.

At last he roused himself and moved away. Yet, though he was going home, he felt he was leaving behind him in that

hut something unresolved, which would never cease to torment him. It was almost as if there were not two brothers, but three; he himself was the third. Once he halted and looked back. His fists tightened on his gun. He saw himself returning, kicking open the door, shouting at them his disgust, and then blasting them both to everlasting perdition. He felt an icy hand on his brow as he imagined that hideous but liberating fratricide. Surely they would lie there unheeded under the cypresses. Surely they were of no more consequence than the frogs which in mating time, with the smaller male on his mate's back, crossed the public road and were crushed in their thousands under the wheels of the army trucks. Surely their deaths like the frogs' could not be called murder.

As he went on his way again to reach the road, he thought how incomprehensible and unjust it was that in Europe, in Africa, and in China, many tall, strong, healthy, brave, intelligent men were killing one another, while in that dirty little hut those two sub-humans lived in peace, as if under God's protection. He could not understand that, and he was sure nobody could.