

fair balance. It can not last; many are half-drunk with freedom; a greed for taxes at Rome will raise up envy, a cultivated court will disappear in the ensuing reaction. We are fortunate to live in the wink, the eye of mankind is open; for an instant, hardly more than an instant. Men are prized for being unique. I do not mean merely fantastic. That is to say there are a few of us who can prize a man for thinking, in himself, rather than for a passion to make others think with him.

Perhaps you are right about style; an established style could be as much a nuisance as any other establishment. Yet there must be a reputable normal. Tacitus is too crabbed. The rhetoricians ruined the empire. Let us go on to our baths.

Finis

Three Nightpieces

John Rodker

TOWARD eight o'clock I begin to feel my pulses accelerating quietly. A little after, my heart begins to thump against its walls. I tremble all over, and leaving the room rapidly go out on the terrace of the house and look over the weald.

There is a shadowiness of outline and the air is crisp. The sky in one corner is a pale nostalgic rose. The trees look like weeds and a bird flies up through them like a fish lazily rising. The hills really look like breasts: and each moment I look for the head of the Titan negress to rise with the moon in the lobe of her ear.

I think of my youth and the intolerable legacy it left me.

I think of the crazy scaffolding of my youth and wonder why I should be surprised that the superstructure should be crazy too, wavering to every breeze and threatening ever to come down about my ears. I think too of wrongs done to this one and that one, and "Oh, my God," I cry, "I did not know, I did not know," and my heart thumps louder in my breast and my pulses throb like a tide thundering and sucking at some crumbling jetty.

I gulp deep breaths of air to steady myself, but it is of no good. I think of her whom I love and futility overwhelms me: for this too will have its common end, and our orbits grow ever remoter.

And putting my head on my breast, faint and reminiscent—the smell from my armpits rises to my brain, and she stands before me vividly and the same smell comes from her; but it is more heady and more musky and she looks at me with intolerable humility.

And a minute after there is only the dark; a hoot-owl's terrifying call and the queer yap that comes in reply; the frogs that thud through the grass like uncertain feet; the trees that talk to each other.

And I would willingly let my life out gurgling and sticky, and sink without a bubble into its metallic opacity.

II

I HAD gone to bed quietly at my wife's side, kissing her casually as was my custom. I awoke about two in the morning with a start so sudden that it seemed I had been shot by a cannon out of the obscurity of sleep into the light of waking; at one moment I had been, as it were, gagged and bound by sleep; and the next I was wide awake and could distinctly sense the demarking line between sleep and waking. And this demarking line was like a rope made of human hair such as one sees in exhibitions of indigenous Japanese products.

In my ears still rang the after-waves of the shriek which had awakened me. The nerves governing my skin were still out of control as a result of the sudden fright, and portions of it continued twitching for a long time after; my scalp grew cold in patches and my hair stood on end. . . . In the dark I found myself trembling all over and bathed in a cold sweat. . . . And it was impossible to collect myself. My wife, I felt, was sitting up in bed and a minute afterward she began to weep quietly.

I was still trembling and her quiet weeping made me more afraid. I was angry with her too, but could not talk to her, I was so afraid. My voice, I knew, would have issued thin and quavering, and I was afraid of its hollow reverberations losing themselves uncertainly in the darkness. By the little light I saw her put her hands up to her head in despair. . . . as though still half asleep; and before I could stop her again the same piercing, incredibly terrifying shriek burst from her. Again I trembled all over, involuntarily gnashing my teeth and feeling my skin ripple like loathsome worms.

"Stop," I cried, seizing her by the arms, "Stop," afraid to wake her, yet more afraid to hear again that appalling shriek—and in a moment she was awake...looking wildly round her, and the quiet weeping gave way to a wild and tempestuous sobbing.

I was afraid of her, afraid to go on sleeping with her, lest she should again shriek in that wild and unearthly fashion; afraid to fall asleep again lest I should be awakened by that appalling shriek dinning in my ears and my body quivering vilely under the impossible sound. I clung to her: "What is it, tell me at least what it is," I said.

For a time she would not tell me. Trembling all over with anguish and fear of I knew not what, I insisted. When at last she did tell me it was as though the world had suddenly been cut away from under my feet. Helplessly and weeping I clung to her, with cold at my heart. That any human being could accuse another of devilry so sinister, so cold, so incredible even in dream, I had not conceived of. Loathing her, I clung the closer in my anguish and despair.

III

ONE night at supper I had eaten cucumber. Soon after I went to bed and on the first strokes of ten fell asleep.

After sleeping for a long time I awoke into a dimly lit room. I still lay on the bed and after a moment a figure entered, and after a few moments more, another, until in this fashion there were half a dozen people in the room. I could not distinguish who they were, and quietly and obscurely they moved round my bed. Now and then there was a hiss out of the corners of the room, or a chuckle in reply to some unheard obscenity.

A heavy weight oppressed me as though I knew they menaced me in some obscure and dreadful way. I could not move.

I could not move, and always the same obscure and dreadful procession encircled me and shadowy bodies pressed a little closer, then drew back again to join the sinister group.

And though I saw nothing save their shadowy forms, I knew their eyes gleamed down at me: their faces were lecherous: their hands clawed; and forever and through long ages they went round me in sinister procession.

Suddenly...and how I do not know, I had broken the bonds of of sleep and lay trembling in a cold sweat. Through my protecting blankets the last strokes of ten were fading.