

THE COOL OF THE DAY - 011

The time Dorian brought Coral the drink the colour of russet, Coral said, before drinking, that the tinkling of the ice on the glass as he walked made her think of a belled, distant sheep astray on the hillside. When she had drunk half she inhaled her spent breath in a sigh of contentment, and resting the glass in a cup of the tree's roots, said, while she crunched a trapped fragment of ice beneath her white teeth, that the day was such that, Adam would have offered God a fan. At that Dorian laughed, and wondered if the Garden were by the seaside, for, as he said, it would be pretty nigh unbearable anywhere else upon such a hot day.

Down in the sunlight bathing the sea's fringe, beyond the haven of the sheltering trees, a couple's antics captured Coral's and Dorian's eyes. The two were foraging the shore for the little, red-back crabs, and holding their captives between wary fingers, chased each other with these tiny, living weapons, while their screams of laughter filled the sunny bay. Dorian said he would bet his week's wage they were lovers, but Coral said no, she didn't think so, they were so young. And anyway, Coral said, they were happier if they were not, for then they were free, and their laughter would remain as it was, good to hear, for a longer while.

The day's white passion was dying the time Coral left the shade of the trees that guarded the tombstones, and made her way slowly over the honeycombed sand which yielded to her toes beneath its green carpet

of the wild sea-grape vines. Dorian marshalled his length from where he had lain along the concrete ridge of a grave built up like a gable, and following her up to the high ground where the range was, threw himself down at her feet on the mound of the built-up ramp, with the numbers scarred and battered above them from the shots of the soldiers. Coral watched the sun stalk naked to his pyre, with the speech of a bird back in the graveyard filling the bay like a conqueror's bombast, and the round somnolence of the waves, while Dorian traced the shape of her crooked leg almost up to her thigh in the sand with his finger.

Coral's cry came as the birds swept in from the gilt west, and she knew that she cared nothing for Dorian, because he could not share her joy. Dorian lifted his eyes to her pointing finger with pulses fast beating at sight of the dark wells of her armpits, then after a moment let them return to where the deep colouring of her skin was like tarnished bronze. Coral followed the birds till they went to rest in the trees in the graveyard, where the strident voice of the native was drowned in their chorus.

Dorian said that the birds had made an early job of it, and Coral wondered where and how far they had come from, and said they were thankful for rest like pilgrims at the end of a Journey. Coral said that the birds had yellow breasts and would make about two of our blackbirds,

and Dorian thought that her breasts were like two of them caught tightly in the fabric of her suit.

To the side of the bay where the casuarinas stood arrayed like a phalanx of soldiers, Coral watched, through their tops, the dusk filling the east with a colour like watered milk. Coral said that the trunks of the mile-tress were like lean shanks, and that their tops were shapely and even like ice-cream cones. Dorian put an arm to her waist and said they had better take a last dip and wash the sand off before the sun went altogether and the sea turned chilly, as he got to his feet and urged her to hers also. Coral allowed him to half-lift her, then, half-turning out of his encircling arm, went by his side slowly down to the water.

Coral broke into a run at the last few yards, and throwing her arms up, plunged into the surge like a naiad, while Dorian came plashing after. As Dorian cleared his nose of the water he felt in his face the lick of her clean strokes, as they swam for the distance of a boy's throw, before Coral turned over and floated with her eyes where the fishing fleet wallowed. Coral said that the boats were like herded, wallowing swine, and that she would like going for a trip on the trim white yacht anchored off the bridge of the Yacht Club. Dorian said yes, that that would be fine, me and you, alone and that they wouldn't worry about where they were going, but just let the wind and the sea take them to

the end of the world. Coral turned her face shorewards and struck out until she found her feet, then she wiped her streaming face and waded, while Dorian swam in until he was grounded.

When Coral and Dorian came out dressed for the street from the shed for the bathers, the tropic twilight had fallen like a pure opal. And as Coral lingered on the asphalt road, with face uplifted to the evening, her eyes a poem to its beauty, like a skilful sleight the warm night came down. When Coral turned and cast her eyes back over the bay the lighthouse was burning, and night's blackest strongholds were where the mile-trees were quartered and the trees where the soldiers were buried. But out in the open, Coral said, the night was like a black, sleeping virgin, with the even breath of the waves for her breathing, and the quiet sighs of the mile-trees for her sighing as she dreamed, maybe, Coral said, of her lover. Dorian manoeuvred behind her, and putting his nose down to her hair savoured of its flavour, peculiar and native and disturbing as the sea's tang. Dorian counted the seconds until the red light of the lighthouse recovered, to see if the longing which scourged him would ebb, but when the light burned again his passion was like its red glow, and although he knew it would cost him the moment, with her in the intimate closeness of the rich night, his hot hands came up to cup the elbows of her folded arms. At his touch she stiffened, like a colt preparing to shy before she spurned him and

turning, walked rapidly away as though she had forgotten, so that he had to make a series of strides to reclaim her.

When they reached the major road Coral's shoe caught in one of the brads at the corner, and Dorian had to spring and clutch her arm to prevent her from falling. Coral thought: Just so; if I like he'll be always there to prevent me coming a cropper, with his strong arms and flanks lean as a leopard's and his hungry eyes. But maybe his eyes wouldn't remain so for a fortnight, and anyway I knew that I couldn't after the birds came.

Often, as they walked, Dorian's hand brushed the strong, contoured pillar of her thigh, and he thought, my God, perhaps if I touch her the fire that's in me will consume me, and she will shake my flaming carcass from her in a lambent heap and turn contemptuously away, my smoke distasteful to her nostrils, like a spurned sacrifice. And yet I know that I should have asked her, today when the birds came sweeping in out of the red sun, when the beat of the waves and the dirge of the mile-trees was around us like a mournful song.