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THE NOONDAY POOL

Peg could hear a train coming. The night express. She pushed hair from her eyes and sank down on her knees to the earth. She was in the place between the reeds and nettles, where steel tracks and the wandering river were drawn together by the hills. She could hear the dark beat emerging from the shimmering night, the stuttering engine breath. She waited. There were stars on the river, starlight on the rails.

The train was fast. The sound became a wall, blocking the hills. A long scarf of smoke diamonded with sparks trailed the sky. Carriage lights pearly the river. Peg reached down, pushing her fingers through a wet thatch of grass, curling them back around the mud.

The tracks wheezed and creaked. The train was upon her. Lights and wheels blasted by with the city reek of oil and coal. She fixed her moment, crouching on the trembling soil. She balled the mud tight until it began to worm through her fist. She held what was left and hitched back her arm. Biting her lip, she hurled it at the streaming carriage lights. * * *

These were painful moments for Sir Edward. Just hours before, he'd been basking in waves of applause. Who, after all, who would dare to criticize his own interpretation of his symphonies? -- even if he had known in his heart that the orchestra had played the over-familiar work by rote, and that the second French horn had been disgracefully off key in those vital, yearning opening bars of the slow movement.

Afterward, there had been hands to shake, and then the Trustees of the orchestra and some other worthies had taken him to Armando's, his favorite London restaurant where the maitre d' of twenty years standing knew all his foibles. Apart from the predictably excellent food, dinner had been a bore. The worthies had laughed dutifully at his jokes and nodded seriously at his creakingly ancient stories of meeting Brahms and Joachim, even though he was sure that they must have heard them almost as many times as he had himself.

He left in time to catch the late express back to the Midlands. Even before the recent trouble with his lower back that Dr. Walters in Harley Street still insisted was probably nothing more than sciatica, the great man had come to dislike sleeping away from home. And the guard -- whom he'd known for almost as long as Armando's maitre d' -- had kept a first class compartment locked specifically for his use. The great man had sunk back into the plush seats, relishing the absence of company and gentle pull of the train as it drew into darkness from the lighted cavern of the station.

But after an hour or so, his bladder, filled with the remains of several glasses of wine -- and, he now remembered, at least three helpings of Armando's excellent coffee -- began to feel like a distended balloon. And the guard, ever conscious of the great man's desire for solitude, had thoughtfully locked the linking compartment doors, sealing him off from the toilets at both ends. Beyond

pulling the communication cord, there was no way he could even talk with anyone else on the train.

So Sir Edward shifted in his seat and clenched his fists, the train rumbled through the night, and the sensation in his bladder became a fiery ball of need. And his discomfort was worsened by the thought that it was he, he who had lunched at Balmoral and whose name had been mentioned in the same breath as the Germanic greats, should be dragged down to the level of an anxious, wriggling schoolchild. He checked his half hunter fob watch, heavy on the gold chain that Richter had given him: only twenty more minutes of this agony to go. But the thought brought little comfort. Nothing brought any comfort. He drummed his fingers on the cold glass. Faintly, beyond the spinning rails, he could see the gray gleam of the river in the carriage lights, that river whose moods and seasons he had portrayed in numerous songs, two quartets and his one great tone poem. The river . . . the water . . . the . . . no . . . Something lifeless and gray, tumbling end over ragged end out of the darkness toward him. In fear, he jerked his eyes away. A moment later, it struck the glass.

Brown tentacles crawled back and down. Only mud and yet still the shock was almost too much. His bladder nearly gave way, and for a moment the pleasure of doing so almost overbalanced the terrible shame. But he held himself in, and crossed his legs tight as the mud spread into a lopsided star across the glass.

The minutes clawed by. The train began to slow: just for him, an unscheduled stop at the local station, for the great man alone. He hitched himself upright as the train halted, and moved with slow, painful steps toward the carriage door. The guard, who had run along the side of the train, opened the door for him and stepped to one side with an almost military salute. The great man eased himself down to the platform. The station, he saw, was closed. The first class waiting room was locked, and with it the toilets. As was (he was in no mood to be fussy) the second class waiting room: the last scheduled train would have departed several hours before. In the warm lights of the carriages, faces were pressed to the glass, straining for a glimpse. They would see him walking at: an awkward shuffle, bent half double, and would remark how much older the great man had suddenly become, how the recent photographs in the newspapers couldn't be quite so recent after all.

Sir Edward's chauffeur was waiting at the far end of the platform. Home, he told himself as the train pulled off through billows of steams, wasn't far off along these deep country lanes he knew so well. Somehow, clenching every muscle in his body, he climbed down the steps from the station and into the Bentley's leather interior. The pain was no longer localized in his bladder, but drove itching needles through his entire body, and burned like a brand over the ache in his lower back.

The Bentley started up. Headlights swung across hedgerows and trees before centering on the narrowed, rutted road. The chauffeur, with whom Sir Edward normally enjoyed a good repartee, slid back the communicating glass to ask how the concert had gone, but found his employer to be terse and uncommunicative. Used to these varying moods, the chauffeur drove on in silence. The great man, however, was swimming through agony. Unlike the train, the Bentley rumbled unpredictably along the uneven roads, the soft swings bouncing this way and that.

About a mile from home, he knew he could last no longer. He growled instructions to stop through clenched teeth and managed to mutter something about walking the rest of the way as he levered his shrieking body out of the car into the night air. Shifting from one foot to the other, clenching and unclenching his fists, he watched the Bentley pull slowly away before staggering like a drunk toward the dark hedgerow. The whole night seemed to be singing and swaying with his need.

The final actions were delicate. But somehow he managed without spillage or mishap. . . . And gave way to blissful relief. Sparks fluttered before his eyes. A huge and airy rush of well-being invaded his body.

And then, when it was far too late to stop, he heard someone approaching on light, unhurried feet.

Peg could feel that this night lay at the heart of summer. On all sides, almost forever, there was nothing but endless blue avenues of leaf-shimmered sky, cuckoo cries and dove coos far into the green twilight; a circlet of warm days and nights like the stars that encircled the heavens.

The woodland curved and shimmered around her in the slide of a rising, fattening moon. The air was palpable, dense. Scented moss and drooping white lanterns of nightshade made a pathway. And now, there were braids of dry undergrowth, and the smell of human spoor and litter. She saw the watery glint of broken glass, and the flattened patch of grass beneath the boughs of the old white willow where she had watched a boy and a girl tumble and laugh. Bracken crackled beneath her feet. She could have moved silently if she wished, but she liked the snap and echo of her footsteps as she moved through the bowing, summer-heavy dark. . . .

Then there was another sound. She cocked her head, and smiled. The sound was one she recognized easily, although it differed slightly from the one she made herself. She picked her way around a dry snaggle of holly, toward the sound, and the shimmer of the roadway.

Sir Edward stood there stupidly, unable to stop -- disguise, even--what he was doing. The nettles and brambles hissed and clattered in the dribbles of a low parabola, as (his bladder no longer furnishing the torrents of youth) he waited for nature to take its protracted course. He was glad at least that the darkness shrouded him with some little modesty; especially when the few details he could make out of the figure suggested that it was young and female. But for many long seconds, the sensation of release was too sharply bright for him to devote any real attention to his audience. It was only as the flow finally thinned that the proportions of the incident began to play alarming discords in his mind. What if she were one of the ghastly daughters of the local gentry whose abilities on the piano he was occasionally forced to admire? What if -- worse still -- she were just a maid at one of their houses. Girls of breeding (unless, dear God, they went straight to the Police) could generally be expected to remain silent about incidents such as this, but the giggly females belowstairs. . . . With their involvement, word would quickly spread across the entire neighborhood.

"I, er, don't suppose you know who I am?" he asked hopefully, buttoning himself

up.

To his pleasant surprise, the dim figure shook her head. Then spoiled the effect by saying, "But I've seen you about."

Still bathing, despite his embarrassment, in the absurdly rosy glow (how crisply wonderful the trees looked against the stars, the shimmer of the road like gray velvet!), Sir Edward straightened his shoulders and set off at what he hoped was a brisk and purposeful pace. The pace of one who, above all, wished no other company than his own.

In a moment, he was past the girl. The dusky open road beckoned. In another moment, she had fallen into step beside him.

"I know where you live," she said. "That big house beyond the greenwood with the copper beeches. When I sit on the hill above near the place where the fox brings her cubs in spring, I can see right into a room where you sit and stare at those blank pieces of paper. . . ."

So much for anonymity. The girl was obviously ill-educated, but she knew more than enough about him to spread the word about tonight. Sir Edward's left hand went up to pull at the corner of his large mustache --a nervous habit he'd never quite been able to conquer. He forced it down to his side again and into a marching swing as he concentrated on setting a brisk, military pace. Pom pom, diddily-pom, and trying not to wince. Now his bladder was empty, that confounded pain in his back was worse than ever.

"And where," he asked, "do you live?"

"Oh, I don't live anywhere."

He glanced at her. He doubted if she meant it literally, but it was obvious that she was some kind of waif or stray. In vague starlight through the overreaching trees, what little he could make out of her suggested greasily stringy hair, a face patched with grime, ragged clothes of uncertain gray. Someone who looked to be in need of a wash. No, he corrected himself as he caught a salty whiff of her skin, someone who was in need of a wash.

"What's your name?"

"Peg."

"Is it your custom to wander alone this late at night?"

"I don't know anything about custom."

"Where do you, ah, sleep?"

"Last night, it was under the big thorn bush near the river. Across the steel rails. I don't like sleeping too close to the Noonday Pool in case. . . ." She gave a noisy shudder.

He nodded. Peg was obviously homeless and mad. That, at least, was a relief. No

one would ever believe her story of seeing him relieving himself against a bush, even if she attempted to tell it.

They walked on in silence. Peg kept easily in step beside him, moving with a lightness that contrasted with the heavy rasp of his brogues. They seemed to be heading in the same direction, which -- now that they had passed the darkened farmhouse some way back along the road -- the great man realized led only to his own dwelling.

They crested a hill, and the parlor lights glowed -- a single ember in the deep bowl of the valley below. Mrs. France, his housekeeper, would still be up, knitting and dozing waiting for his return so she could lock up the house. Mrs. France was a great one for waifs and strays. Cats and dogs, even squirrels -- she was always taking them in . . .

Waifs and strays. Sir Edward gave one of his notoriously rare smiles, secure in the knowledge that it wouldn't be seen in the darkness. He turned to Peg.

"If you have nowhere to sleep," he said, "I'm sure my housekeeper could find somewhere for you. Provided," he raised a stem finger, "that your honesty and propriety are beyond reproach."

"What's propriety?" Peg asked. He chuckled. Together, they headed on toward the glowing beacon of the house.

Next morning, as he had done all his life, Sir Edward awoke early. He lay still for a moment, gazing at the play of dawn light on his curtains, listening to the liquid song of a blackbird in the garden. It was the same blackbird that he heard on every fair morning, and it sang another version of its usual song--although, as always, the exact particulars of the tune were slightly different. Those four ascending notes that lay somewhere close to A-B-C-A and followed by a scattering trill were still there, but the creature was ornamenting it now with a kind of backward coda -- still A-B-C-A, yet almost in the minor. Of course, the sound was nothing more than a dumb animal proclaiming its territory, and as artless as a child in a garden piping on a whistle. But it was clear, pure, filled with variety, invention. Life.

He swung his legs over the side of his bed, and sat rubbing his lower back. Then, as the pain lessened to a dull murmur and he slid his bare feet into his slippers, the events of the previous evening returned to him. The girl Peg would be somewhere in the house at this very moment --doubtless still asleep. At this moment, the whole house was asleep. Even the undermaids didn't start work on the fires until well past five. The great man dressed and performed his ablutions, relishing as he always did the chill of the water on his hands and face, the pull of the razor, the coolness of a clean white vest, the ticking silence of the house that surrounded him. He could, of course, have arranged things so that there was bustle and warmth, banging of grates and the smell of breakfast, even at this early hour -- he was, after all, the master --but, an habitual early riser, he had always enjoyed the sensation of being the first to be up and about.

He set out along the corridor and down the wide carpeted stairs toward the kitchen, where his dog Mina leapt up from the rug to greet him. He scratched the

spaniel's ears and, knowing that he was unobserved, briefly kissed her wet nose. The fire in the range was low, but still warm, and the kettle was filled and ready. Humming A-B-C-A ascending, he placed it on the hob, cut himself a thick slice of bread and spread it with dripping, then sat down before the glow on a three-legged stool. He treasured these early moments in the kitchen, surrounded by the dull gleam of copper and the scents of soot, laundry starch and yesterday's cooking as, watched by Mina's adoring eyes, he listened for the kettle's soft rattle as it prepared to steam and whistle. It reminded him of his parents' little house in Worcester -- long-since bulldozed for some ghastly development -- and of the long years of his marriage when, once the watched kettle had finally boiled, he would warm and fill the teapot, place it on a tray with the daisy-yellow cup and saucer, and carry it upstairs through the dim and peaceful house. Not, he sometimes thought, that Caroline had always welcomed being woken, but the early mornings were indeed beautiful, and it had become part of the ritual of their life together.

The kettle started to boil. Little gobbets of water jumped from the spout, leaping about on the hob like dervishes before disappearing in wafts of gray. Then the whistle screeched, and the great man snatched a dishcloth to hold the braided iron handle, warmed the pot, and spooned in the tea. Just enough for himself now, of course. It had been that way for many years.

With Mina trotting in his wake, Sir Edward walked along the tiled hall, up the narrow side-stairs and through the door that led to the upper study. Placing the teacup on his desk, he pulled the tassels that opened the velvet curtains, and long beams of early summer sunlight flooded in.

There, outside. The moist shadowed garden, the soft woodland and hills beyond still half-unreal with dawn. In a sense, it was his life's work -- all that he had ever sought to portray. The great man turned back toward the study, whose walls were covered with his framed awards, decorations, honors: those polished squares of glass of which, such was the angle of the dawn sun, were now filled only with the reflected images of blue dawn and mullioned windows.

He sat down at his desk. It was already nearing five o'clock, and, as always, it was time for him to commence work. The routine went back fifty years to when he'd first been married and the money had been damnably short. In those days, he'd have maybe an hour to spare on composition before putting on his coat and setting out on a day of teaching a series of rich, dumb, and uninterested children the rudiments of harmony. His last appointments, where he was expected to enlighten the leisure of tone-deaf lawyers and malodorous bank managers, often went on until nine or ten at night. He'd come back home to Caroline with the muscles on his face tense from smiling, his hands trembling his ears still ringing with the screech of badly made music -- but glad at least that that precious time in the early morning had been his own. Now, for many years now, the great man had until lunchtime -- all day if he wished -- to entice the muse. But he was a morning worker. Even in the darkest days of winter, there was still that promise in the air.

Sir Edward unlocked and opened a drawer at the side of the desk, and lifted out one of the dozen small card-covered notebooks that lay there. On the front there was a year and a date, written in his own hand. The book was -- what? -- fifty years old now. He fanned the yellowed pages, breathing the musty aroma. His

handwriting had been neater then, clearer. Like everything else -- like his ability to urinate -- it had become crabbed and constricted over the years. But there; that was what he was looking for. He pressed the page flat, and reached for a fresh white sheet of staved paper from the pile he kept ready on the corner of his desk.

There, in the notebook, was the motif he'd been after. He could even remember writing it. It had been soon after the first decent performance of one of his oratorios at the cathedral festival, when the reviews had been ecstatic, and his confidence was high. He'd been in love, too, and the money was starting to come. A wet morning in a steamy Worcester coffee house with the pretty yellow-haired waitress fluttering around him and a view through the window of the bright swollen river. It had come to him just like that, in the moment between one sip of coffee and the next. Flashing by too quickly to be truly heard, yet there, undoubtedly there, ready to be snatched into this world from whatever place it had come, to be captured in this notebook before the rents of time closed around it again. He looked at it now. That long loping melody. Rising and falling, meandering yet always sure. True to itself. Like the brown river he had seen through the condensation of that coffee house window. Flowing onward, never lost. Dah, dah, dee . . .

He unscrewed the top of his fountain pen. Yes, it was truly as good and vivid as he remembered. Exactly right for the developmental theme in the second movement of his long-awaited third symphony. Dah, dah, dee . . . Start with the violincellos to give it some depth. Keep it simple, yet overlay triads from the second strings. But his pen still hovered over the paper. He snapped at himself to get on with it, and quickly drew the clef, and sketched down abbreviations for the main instruments. There, the page was ready now. Nothing fancy, no need for detail. The orchestra. Poised. Waiting. Dab, dah, dee . . .

Sir Edward looked up for a moment. Again, he could hear the song of the blackbird in the garden. A-B-C-A. That simple rising quadruplet, robust yet innocent, followed by a trill. And the rising sun was stretching shadows across the lawn, kindling a white fire in the beads of dew that had formed in the heavy throats of the flowers. And the blackbird was singing. Laughing.

He shook his head, trying to regain concentration. But somehow, he knew that the theme from the notebook wasn't yet right. He was sure the tune was a good one -- after all, hadn't the pages of this particular notebook furnished the material he'd used for the slow movement of his cello concerto, the Judas theme for his last (but unfinished) great oratorio? -- yet he wasn't sure that it would blend with the other theme that he was intending to employ in the second movement. For a start, the two tunes came from different notebooks, different years. Not that that should matter. But it did. He'd grown increasingly superstitious about these notebooks.

Dah dee dee . . . But, yes, the problem of combining the themes lay in that lift toward the tonic. It came too early in the melody, drew the listener one way, then pulled him another. It would surely be a simple task to put that right. To re-draw the phrase . . .

Finally, his lips pursed, the great man put pen to paper. Dah, dee, dee . . .

Peg knew from the sound of birdsong in the trees coming in through the open window that she was up near the roof of the house. It was already long past dawn -- already late morning by her standards -- and her body felt stiff and odd, encased in all this white linen. And they'd insisted last night that she wash, too. Still, it was nice to be here in this room with the human smells of dust, dead wood, old cobwebs and some odd kind of lavender, pressed up close to the roof and the sky.

She got up, and wriggled and pulled at the cloth of her nightgown until something gave. Then, stepping out of it, she gazed down at her reflection in the bowl of water on the table by the window. A clean white face and shoulders, clean red-yellow hair. She bent down until her lips touched those of her reflection, and lapped at the water. Then, wiping her nose and mouth on the back of her hand, she opened the bedroom door, and skipped down the crooked stairs.

And there was Mrs. France again in the hall below. All red face and bluster under a comical white bonnet, trying to shoo her back up the stairs. Whatever your name is, Young Lady, Mrs. France hissed, I can tell you're not so daft as to go around like Eve . . .

Of course, Peg knew about clothes -- you wore them to look pretty, or to keep out the chill -- and she even acquiesced when Mrs. France summoned a young girl called Maid to help her dress. You're about my size, Maid said, which was true enough, although she looked at Peg as though she'd never seen a pink whole body before in her entire life. Once she was dressed, Maid took Peg down the hall to a mirror, and she saw a young human woman like those she had often watched climbing out of carriages and cars. Dressed in blue and white, her legs and her arms entirely hidden. She had to laugh.

The door of the upper study opened, and Mrs. France carried in a tray containing Sir Edward's breakfast of bacon, coffee, marmalade and toast. He wouldn't eat that much of it -- he never did -- but the fact that he filched a meal of bread and dripping from the kitchen every morning was a shared but unacknowledged secret between them.

Mrs. France remained standing there after she had placed the tray on the desk beside him and removed his tea cup. She cleared her throat.

Fighting back the premonition that something odd or bad was about to happen, the great man looked up from the blank staved sheet he'd been staring at.

"What is it, Mrs. France? Has the post been?"

"Yes. But nothing from Dr. Walters."

He nodded, unsure whether he felt disappointed or relieved. Letters of any kind were a distraction when he was working, but he'd given orders that anything from Harley Street was to be carried straight to him.

"That, ah, young lady you, ah . . ." Mrs. France blinked, her face even redder than usual. ". . . brought in with you last night."

"Oh, you mean Peg." So that was all. "And I suppose you want to know what to do

with her?"

"Sir, I'm not sure that she's quite right in the head. She seems very -well, wild's the word I'd use. I don't think there's any harm in her, but her ways are like a young animal's. She hasn't been brought up at all."

He slowly nodded. A young animal. He had half a mind to ask Mrs. France for details but, thinking of the things that young animals did -- and sparing her blushes -- he decided against it.

"Does she say she has a home?"

Mrs. France gave the great man one of her famous looks. Over the many years that she had worked for him, he'd become an expert in the subtle and often alarming intricacies of Mrs. France's facial language. This particular look, he interpreted to mean: You're the one who brought the creature here -- and you're the one who should be answering any questions.

"She says not, sir," Mrs. France said eventually. "She says she lives in the woods, and I'm inclined to believe her, although we've never seen her hereabouts before."

"You've fed her?"

"And washed her. I can tell you that she's causing a fair commotion and delay in the kitchen. And I can't just let her wander around the premises, now can I? We all of us have things to do."

"All right." The great man steepled his fingers and nodded. "I can see that you--" Mrs. France glared -- "I mean, we have a problem. But I would like to speak to this girl. The trouble of it is . . ." He glanced over Mrs. France's shoulder at the ormolu clock above the bookshelves. Quarter to six already. ". . . I can't do so until noon at the earliest. I must stick to my routine."

"Of course."

Then he had an idea. "Why not put her out in the garden until then? She can't do much damage there, now can she? Give her a coat or whatever. Something more to eat. I'll see her there as soon as I've finished work."

"The garden." Mrs. France gave him another of her looks. "And I suppose you'll want me to speak to Mr. Groves and tell him she'll be wandering at will amongst his plantings?"

"If you would, Mrs. France." To avoid another glare, he returned his eyes to the blank paper before him. "If you would."

Mrs. France stood there above him for a moment longer. Then, in eloquent silence, she turned and left the room.

Stepping out into the sunlit garden, Peg pulled off the boots and stockings she'd been given, leaving them side by side on the doorstep as she had seen shoes left outside other human dwellings. Beyond the shadows thrown by the

house, the wide expanse of stone paving was already dry and warm beneath her bare feet, and the high red brick wall that reached toward the greenhouses glowed in patches of fire between the quivering strands of honeysuckle, sweet pea and climbing ivy.

The air was in chaos with birdsong. Up along the path, hidden in the green heavy boughs of an oak tree, a blackbird was shouting out his territory. Dum dee dee . . . And there, the quicker, lighter song of a thrush. She turned this way and that. Dizzy, marveling. It truly was another wonderful summer morning.

Skipping from the pavement to the lawn, crouching down, she ran her hands through the wet grass and raised her fingers to her lips, licking the jewels of dew that dangled there. They tasted dark and green and earthy, still tangled up with the star-bound secrets of night. Even after all the jam and butter that Maid and Mrs. France had given her, it made her feel hungry.

More than five hours after he had started work, Sir Edward finally put down his pen. On one side of his desk, the pile of blank staved paper had gone down a little. On the other, the waste bin was full. And between, on the leather-cornered blotter, lay the sheet that he'd just finished working on.

He gazed at the changed melody. It limped up and down the clef, shifted direction, tone, three or four times in the space of a few bars. And the original, that long, loping, pristine tune that he'd extracted from his notebook. . . . Looking at it now, he was no longer sure. The wrong tune? Perhaps that had always been the problem.

It was all gone now, anyway -- another morning was finished, wasted. And, although this room was still cool, outside in the garden even the birds had been silenced by the noonday heat. And his third symphony still awaited. Unstarted. Unsung. He glanced up at the wall where, in the late morning sunlight, the frames no longer mirrored the scene beyond the window. There. The certificate of his knighthood. There. A programme that consisted entirely of his work, in the presence of her late Majesty, the Queen. There. An honorary degree (one of many) from Oxford. There. He was shaking hands for the camera with his one-time friend and admirer Richard Strauss (who was now squandering his gifts on pompous, grubby music for that pompous and grubby new German Chancellor). There. An impressive-looking gold medal from the Royal Philharmonic Society (although for what, he could no longer remember). There. The first review in the Times of what they were describing as his first great masterpiece (and now often enough said was his only one) and even then they were puzzling over the enigma, the origin of the theme. There. There. That. He'd have swapped them all for one good, new tune. Another enigma. For a moment like that moment on that long-ago rainy morning in that Worcester coffee house.

He turned the pages of the notebook. Months and years flew by. Here was something he'd written in Venice, the slow, stately march that formed the basis of his first symphony. He remembered the play of sunlight on ancient water as he sat on his hotel balcony at the Danieli. He remembered the campanile bells that carved the watery golden air. And here, over the page in just two bars of faded ink, he saw scotch pines on a Scottish hilltop, bowing in the warm breath of a summer wind. And here, the scented candle-darkness of Worcester Cathedral. The tunes and the themes were all hurried, sketched with not a semiquaver more than

necessary, the page balanced by a hand or a knee, yet the music was always captured with ease and precision. It had all been there, whole years of music simply waiting to be expanded and unraveled. He turned the page again and saw a dark winter's twilight. The frozen river. And that, too, had been used. The cello concerto -- the last real and decent thing he'd finished. Every decent fragment and moment in the notebook. It had all been used.

He closed the notebook, and looked out of the window. He saw that the girl Peg was out on the lawn. The foundling. Twirling in a blue dress. Her red-yellow hair fanning out in the sunlight. Her face uplifted.

Mrs. France, having finished her noontime tour of the house to check that the maids had performed their duties before His Grouch finally emerged from his study, took the back stairs on the way out to see to her foundlings. Emerging into the stable yard, she paused for a moment, struck by the heat that came in waves off the cobbles, and by a return of her anger at His Grouch's nerve in bringing that creature Peg to the house.

She's just like your foundlings, Mrs. France, he'd wheedled last night in the hall as that dog of his barked and growled and the Peg-creature stood right there beside him, grinning as-you-please and stinking the place out. As though that young lady could in any way shape or form be compared to the poor motherless hedgehogs, broken-winged birds, and injured rabbits she tended in the hutches beside the walled garden. . . .

Puffing her cheeks, Mrs. France strode across the stable yard, turning swiftly right under the archway that led past the cloches and the potato store. Well, at least the brazen little hussy was somewhere out in the garden now, where she could do little harm. She could only hope that His Grouch would see sense by this evening, and send her smartly off the premises. After all, it wasn't like him to show much interest in anyone or anything these days -- apart, of course, from that dog -- and surely he wasn't so daft as to have his head turned by the pretty face and figure of some cheap little village runaway? No, Mrs. France decided, that was most unlikely. He was far too much of a snob for that. But, whatever happened, she most certainly wasn't prepared to put up with another scene like that in the kitchen at breakfast. Scooping up bits of butter and jam with her fingers, and then spitting out fried kidneys like a two-year-old, complaining that they were cooked, would you believe?

As Mrs. France walked along the gravel path that ran by the main garden, His Grouch's dog ran up to her. She crouched down and briefly rubbed behind the creature's ears, mimicking affection as she usually did because the presence of the dog generally meant that Him himself wasn't far behind. But, looking back along the path toward the house, then across the shimmering lawn, she decided that there was no sign of anyone, and pushed the whining, slobbering animal away.

It ran off toward the house with its tail stuck between its legs, and Mrs. France straightened herself up. Just as she was about to walk on, she saw two figures beyond the line of copper beeches at the far end of the garden. They wavered like ghosts in the heat, but there was no mistaking His Grouch with his hat and walking stick -- and that girl Peg. Walking together. As Mrs. France watched, they passed through the picket gate that led into the woods and

disappeared from sight. Entirely into shadow.

Sighing shaking her head, Mrs. France headed on along the hot gravel path. What did it matter what His Grouch got up to? He'd be in a foul enough mood this evening anyway when he read the review of last night's performance in the copy of the Times she'd just ironed for him. Labored. Confused. Dated. Not that she knew anything about his music -- most of it went on far too long -- but she'd always liked that marching tune, and a few bits of what he called his coffee-house music. Some of it, you could almost sing along to.

But this time of the day was her own, and Mrs. France resolved to think no more about His Grouch, or things to do with the house. Beyond the yew hedges lay the walled garden, and there, in a sheltered comer beside the thyme and the mint, were the hutches for her foundlings that kind Mr. Groves had made for her.

Turning into the walled garden, she knew instantly that something was wrong. The hutch doors hung open, and, along with the mint and the thyme, a familiar salt-sour smell hung in the warm air -- the same aroma that pervaded the kitchen on days when she'd been busy gutting and hanging. As she crouched down over ragged lumps that lay in the loose grass before the hutches, the air was filled with the drone of disturbed flies.

Her foundlings were roughly gutted and skinned. Half eaten. Dead.

Sir Edward closed the latch on the gate, and followed Peg into the dappled woodland.

"You're very famous, aren't you?" she said.

He shrugged and smiled. "Some people might say that." Which was true. Some still did.

"And rich?"

"That too. By many standards."

"How many rooms have you got in that house of yours?"

"I don't know. I doubt if I've even been in all of them."

"If I had a big house," Peg said, "I'd be going into them all the time, just to make sure they were still there."

The great man chuckled, swinging his silver-top cane, looking up through the canopy at the flashing sun. He'd come this way often enough with Mina--who today, unaccountably, had run off -- but walking with this girl Peg made it all seem a little different, a mite more real. He glanced over at her. Her eyes were startling blue, her lips incredibly red. Yet she wore no powder or paint, employed no artifice. And her long hair was neither blonde nor auburn nor red, but threaded with the russet of the shadows, the blaze of the sun . . .

The great man pulled at the tip of his mustache, and gazed along the soft green pathway. No fool, he reminded himself, like an old fool. And this girl Peg was

just another well-made face and body, briefly blessed with health and youth. After all, and to his wife Caroline's occasional chagrin, he'd been a connoisseur of such things all his life -- an appreciator of beauty. Beauty in music. Beauty in nature. Beauty in woman. It had always been so; even, as he now recalled, long ago in that steamy Worcester coffee house as he sat with a newspaper and a cup of coffee. Yes, he'd been watching the pretty yellow-haired waitress in the moment before the long, soft, lovely melody had passed by. Yes. She'd turned and smiled at him with her eyes through the bustle of the tables, and the tune had been there at that very instant. Had touched him with fingers both warm and chili.

"What are you famous for?" Peg asked.

"Music," he said, stepping over a tree root, rubbing at his back, trying to recall the last time he'd actually had to introduce or explain himself to someone in this way. "I compose tunes."

"Can you sing one for me?"

It wasn't quite impossible -- he almost wanted to risk using his parched and cracked voice -- but the only snippet that lodged in his head at that moment was rest: Maria, I am close to death -- a difficult, neglected piece at the best of times, and, here in the noonday heart of this greenwood summer, hardly appropriate.

"Perhaps when we get back to the house, I'll play you something on the piano -- you do know about the piano?"

"It's a big harp."

Again he was laughing, nodding. Everything this girl said was so intrinsically right -- yet totally unexpected. A big harp! Perhaps if he started thinking of the instrument in that way, he might even be able to compose for the clumsy clanking thing as his publishers at Booseys had always advised him to. But the idea just hung before him, out of reach in the shadowed heat. Decades too late.

The great man looked around him. The path had branched at some point without his noticing. There was no birdsong. The air was hot, still, but the light shifted and danced on leaf-patterned ground in whatever breeze ruffled the treetops. Along the avenue ahead, everything seemed to dissolve and lose substance. It was like, he decided, looking into the heart of a green fire.

"Does this lead to where you live?" he asked.

"I told you. This wood's where I live."

"In this wood? Isn't it, ah . . . private property? I mean, I know Lord Shrewsbury--he's a friend, you know--permits me to wander on his at will. But still, that's rather different from living here, isn't it?" And why hadn't he ever seen her here before? But that was too many questions at once. She probably meant woodlands or out of doors in general.

Peg simply shrugged. "I've never seen this Lord you mention."

"No. I suppose not."

"But I'll show you my favorite place."

"I'd like that."

"But it doesn't belong to me," Peg added -- unnecessarily.

"Of course."

"It's The Noonday Pool, and it belongs to nobody."

"As you wish." Sir Edward chuckled, twiddled the left tip of his mustache. "I'll tell Lord Shrewsbury next time I see him."

They walked on. Beneath boughs and branches, the claws of hawthorn were fluffed in white, and deep green patches of fern were ornate as ironwork. But, after all his years of wandering, this particular route was unfamiliar to him. He found the discovery to be pleasing rather than alarming. It was always the way with woodland -- you never quite got to know it the way you did open land. But this plot was still only a few acres: all they'd have to do was walk in any direction, and they'd soon come to a fence.

This way. He followed Peg where the ground sloped down, and the trees made a stairway of sorts. The roots were thick and gnarled, overlapping into moss-filled hollows, and the trees themselves, he now saw as he paused to catch his breath where the slope deepened and narrowed into some kind of glen, were very ancient, knobbed and veined with parasitic growths. There were no newcomers like sycamore, walnut, sweet chestnut. Only oak. Bowed with age.

"Come on!"

Peg was some way below him already. Calling, waving to him from out of the green fire. Her white hands, her white face, the shimmering gold of her hair. Levering his stick into the crotch of a tree. for balance, feeling another surge of pain in his lower back, the great man pushed on, down.

When he finally caught up with Peg, she was standing on the lip of a kind of pool, although for some time his senses were too fogged for him to fully absorb the scene. He sat down on a convenient rock, and fished for a handkerchief to wipe his brow. Down here in this greenwood bowl the silence was intense, and it was even stiller, hotter. Yes, he must take off his jacket. He gathered his will for the exertion, undid the buttons and pulled the rapidly dampening cloth away from his chest and arms. Ah. Better. . . .

"You're not used to this, are you?"

"No. Not for many years. When I was a lad, I'd go for miles. But . . ."

Fringed with foxglove, meadowsweet, bright yellow iris, the massive branches of oaks leaned over the pool in the center of the clearing. Leaving his coat, his cane, Sir Edward pushed himself up from his rock and waddled across a carpet of

moss to stand on the stone lip, and peer in. The pool was as still as the day itself. Not a murmur, not a ripple. The water had an intense clarity. Beyond the reflections of his own face and the outstretched boughs that strained to touch and enclose the sky, he could see right through the surface. Down and down. Where translucent green gave to blue gave to silver-gray, and finally to darkness. There was no sign of a stream or source or spring. Wherever it came from must be somewhere deep, far out of sight.

He sat down again. This time, on the moss. It was soft enough, and not at all damp. In fact, surprisingly comfortable. Peg sat down beside him.

"I'm glad you took me here," he said. "You know, I'd never have guessed there was such a place."

He looked around again, took a breath of the deep summer air. The peppery scent of water elder. Cool still water. Mint forest darkness. Tansy and bindweed. And something fetal, unidentifiable.

"This site could quite possibly repay serious academic investigation," he heard himself saying. "Now the Druids, the Romans, the Celts, would all have sought out a place such as this. I must write to Lord Shrewsbury and tell him of the possibilities. Of course, there's Malvern Camp, and the springs that are there, as mentioned in the writings of Julius Caesar. There could well be a link. I'm sure that if a dredging could be arranged there would be a strong likelihood of finding . . ."

Peg was watching him, cross-legged like an Indian, her bare feet tucked under, her sleeves rolled up.

". . . of finding . . ."

The rusty golden fall of her hair. Eyes the color of the sky in that pool, blue with the shimmer of some far darkness.

". . . ah, discovering . . ."

The vein inside the crook of her arm. The ripe-apple curve of her bare knees.

"Look," she said, reaching close by him. Again, he caught the feral scent as she plucked something from the tangles of undergrowth. He saw it was red in her hand, and that there were other drops of red amid the green, bright as scattered rabies. He saw her put it to her mouth, he saw scarlet juice break on her lips and teeth, and the movement of her throat as she swallowed.

"Wild strawberries?"

She nodded and wiped her lips. A smear of the juice was on her hand as she stretched out again. There were red crescents under her nails.

"Are they sweet?"

"Try."

He held out his hand, but she reached past it, toward his mouth. He felt heavy, warm, and numb. Like the air. He parted his lips, and felt her fingers brash against his mustache, then move on to touch his teeth, his tongue. He took the small fruit, and the taste of it was there in his mouth, and with it was the scent of her fingers, the fur and the salt and the hay and the linen. He closed his mouth and his eyes. The strawberry was tart and sweet. A drop of summer's blood.

"Is it good?"

He nodded, and felt himself blushing heavily; embarrassed by the intimacy of the moment, yet also somehow close to tears. Peg picked and ate another strawberry, then passed one to him. The juice, the scent on her fingers, the silent dell . .

It was, for all its strangeness, a magical moment, and the great man could already feel part of his mind madly scurrying, searching. Hard at work. Another string serenade, perhaps? Wild Strawberries? The Dell? He might even risk dedicating it to this girl, as long as it wasn't made too obvious. Something cryptic that would get the critics wondering. And he could see them already, sitting in the Albert Hall, amazed at the hot, young flood of this piece.

Peg lay back, her hair fanning out over the moss. The great man gazed down at her. Where the skirt had fallen away from her right leg he could see the lovely curve of her bare thigh. He tried to think of it in terms of marble perfection, classical beauty -- the kind of thing an artist might express -- although he knew that it was more.

"Sometimes, you can see the stars like this at midday," she said. "Up through the trees. But you have to lie still. You have to be silent . . ."

He nodded. He could feel the weight of the day pressing on his chest and shoulders. Carefully, crooking his elbows, he laid his head down beside Peg on the soft moss and looked up through the ancient branches, trying to see the midday stars. What she'd said was, he thought, just possible. An optical effect created by this shadowed dell. Writers since classical times, his mind, unasked, gambolled ahead to tell him, had recorded a similar effect when the sky was seen on a clear day from the bottom of a mine or well shaft . . .

Giving up, seeing only branches and midday blue, hearing nothing but the useless babble of facts in his head, and feeling only the dull burning pain in his back, the great man dosed his eyes. And, oh, how he longed to create, to cut through whatever was inside him. Sometimes, for days and even weeks, there would be the illusion of progress. In the drawer below the one where he kept his notebooks, he had sketches and outlines galore. He'd even fully orchestrated one or two passages, although he'd known even at the time he was doing them that he was simply playing at composition, producing something he could show visitors and extemporize around on the piano.

Not that the music had ever been easy -- but it had always been there. Even in these many years that he'd had to rely on the sketches in those notepads, there had been always something beyond the silence on which he could draw. And now, in his late years, in the time when he'd always imagined there'd be some kind of

peace and fulfillment, the need to create burned more fiercely than ever. Hot and bright as this noonday sun, an all-consuming fire in his bones. Often, he'd just sit motionless at his desk for hour, tense with fear and anger and envy as he remembered days in the past when the music had poured past him, free and lucid as the flood of his beloved river. And he had taken it, trapped it, his pen had danced over the paper. It had spilled over, sang in his head as he sat waiting for trains, danced with moth wings as he talked with friends and strangers, played through the breeze as he walked with his Caroline, had flowed from the waitress's eyes as he sat with a newspaper in the warm steam of a Worcester coffee house.

His whole life, since an age too young to be clearly remembered, had been governed by this need to create, compose. Everything, every sound, every sight, every emotion, had been perceived through the filter of that desire. Even at his wedding, he'd conquered his nervousness by listening for off-pitch middle C in the church organ to sound again. And, later, his time with the children had been governed by the disciplines of work. There was always the early risings, the mornings, the work that must be done before noon, and the letters and the books that had to be studied after. Every sensation, every blink and breath and heartbeat, had been absorbed and churned in the cogs of this great musical engine. He'd once thought that God was kind, to provide both the gift to create and the need to do so in roughly equal proportions. But now the engine still churned, and the third symphony waited, and the motion of it racked him, tore at him. And God, if there was a God, was laughing, cackling.

The great man reopened his eyes to the sun and the sky and the bowing, ancient trees and the golden-haired girl that lay beside him, trying to remember the days when the audiences had actually listened before they applauded, when the reviews had been good, and the concert halls had been more than half-full. But, even at the time, there had been a sense of unreality, disbelief -- above all, there had been the knowledge that it wouldn't last. What was it about his nature? the great man wondered. Why was it that when he reached something, he always felt as though he was already looking back?

The question hung, unanswered, in the hot noonday air. In the sky beyond the trees, and in the stars that for a flickering moment he thought he saw there. But then he blinked, and the stars became motes in his eyes, and there was no longer silence in the dell, but the patter of Peg's feet, followed by a hissing trickle. * * *

Crouching to relieve herself on the stone lip beside the Noonday Pool, Peg watched the old man as he awoke from his brief slumber. She liked his big mustache, and his eyes, and his great hook of a nose. He reminded her of some uncreated heraldic animal. But he was sad, she could see that as well, and she guessed that that was part of the reason why she'd been drawn to him, although she still had no idea of exactly why.

There he was now, levering himself up on those rickety bones, looking toward her, seeing what she was doing, looking away. This was the thing about humans that puzzled her more than anything, their constant desire to be somewhere other than where they were. And, even for her, even when she'd flown on the gossamer wings the fireside tales of this old man's forefathers had once allowed her, such a thing was quite impossible. Your body was changeable, disposable, but

your spirit, ah! -- that could only ever be in one place.

Now the greenwood was shrinking -- dying -- and Peg knew that soon, it would all be fields, and then, not long after a green expanse in which humans with sticks would chase a small white ball. And after that, the green would turn to brown, and things would happen that even her own prescience forbade her to witness. But she regarded the prospect without sadness. The stillness of the Noonday Pool would always be there, inside her, and there were bound to be other creatures that she could shape herself into, other myths to absorb. . . .

Surprised and embarrassed by what he saw, the great man heaved himself up from his bed of moss, and turned away. The pain clawed at his spine. His vision was prickled by odd blotches and patches of light. The boughs of the trees seemed to shimmer and sway with the heat.

"There." He heard Peg's voice, and her bare feet behind him. Stiffly, he turned.

"How long have I been asleep?"

She shrugged. "What does it matter?" Her eyes shimmered like the greenwood, were filled with darkness and light.

He looked around for his coat, his cane. Pressing past the girl, he noticed the rivulet that curled over the stone lip toward the pool, and the faint yellow cloud that hung in the water. Otherwise, the Noonday Pool was even darker now, clearer. Yet there was something else. . . .

He leaned across to look into the depths. Far below, something gray and lifeless stirred, elongated, tumbled end over ragged end upon itself, prepared to rise. He shuddered and stepped back.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Peg chuckled and skipped over to him. "You're lying."

There were threads of moss in her hair now. He felt her arm entwine and tighten around his, and heard the soft vulpine rustle of her breath. He was too tired to resist.

"Lean over again," she said, drawing him forward toward the lip of the Noonday Pool. He tottered. Almost lost balance. "Look into the water. Tell me what you see."

The great man hung there, teetering like a swimmer in the instant before the dive. He saw the mirrored sky, the boughs and branches of the trees. He saw an old, lonely man. Then he felt a wind pass through him and ripple the water, and the images quivered, multiplied and dissolved.

"What can you see?"

Peg's voice was still beside him, but he was no longer sure whether she was

pushing him on or holding him back.

"What do you see?"

The wind was still blowing through him, rippling the Noonday Pool. And the scent of it was familiar -- not feral, or even the green darkness of ancient woodland, but dust, dry ink and cheap paper. The pages of his notebooks, turning.

"What do you see?"

He strained his eyes. The pool was still shimmering, darkening. The eyes of the waitress in that Worcester coffee house? No . . .

"What do you see?"

The question came from the darkness below him.

"What do you see?"

Not some serpent or sea-monster. No, not some creature from the depths. It was worse than that. The thing he feared most of all . . .

"What do you see?"

He shook his head, pushed back and away.

Nothing. He saw nothing. * * *

Recovering her composure in the servant's parlor, watched by Mr. Grove's kind eyes as she sipped at her second cup of sweet tea, Mrs. France tried once again to explain to him the swirl of feelings that were in her head. On the one hand, she was certain that the gift Peg had something to do with the destruction of her foundlings. Yet on the other, she couldn't imagine that it was anything other than a fox . . .

"Perhaps you should ring the police," Mr. Groves suggested.

Mrs. France shook her head. "You know what that daft bunch in the village are like."

"But you say he's with the girl now?"

"The little strumpet. I caught her coming down the stairs this morning, naked as a plucked chicken. And I'm sure she'd have gone straight in to see His Grouch . . ."

Mrs. France shuddered at the recollection, and sipped her tea. But Mr. Groves, she saw, was smiling -- or rather, was trying not to -- trying to keep that stupid glint out of his eyes. He was just another man, after all. And men were all fools when it came to anything pretty and young.

"Tell you what," he said. "When I finish this cup, I'll go --" He stopped in mid-sentence as one of the service bells above the door began to ring.

"That'll be the front door," Mrs. France said without looking. She knew the sound of every service bell all by heart. His Grouch might have his music, but she knew about noises that really mattered.

"Sally'll get it."

"No," Mrs. France said, standing up. "I will."

Even when Lady Caroline had been alive, Mrs. France had always made a point of answering the front door so she could keep her finger on the pulse of the house. She passed from the servant's lobby into the main hall, fragrant with the warm scent of beeswax polish and from a fresh display of white lilies. She opened the front door just as the bell rang again, and was presented with the spectacle of the local postman, breathless and hot from the long cycle ride up from the village. He had an envelope in his hand. She snatched it from him, wrinkling her nose at its clumped state. No, not simply an envelope. A telegram.

"Will you sign for this?"

The postman offered her a pen. Disgustingly warm and slippery, but she took it and signed. P.P, as always, His Grouch.

"This is thirsty work," he continued, "on a--"

"Thank you," Mrs. France said, swiftly closing the door.

She walked over to the southwest side window beside the bowl of lilies where the early afternoon sun now poured in. Squinting with a practiced eye, she held the telegram up to the light. No need to get the steam to this one. The message was visible, typed in block capitals -- and short. It was from that posh quack in Harley Street that His Grouch was seeing. About TEST RESULTS, and CONCERN, and NEED FOR EARLY APPOINTMENT.

Meditatively, Mrs. France smoothed out the crumpled envelope on the table, then slipped it into her apron pocket. In her experience, they never did tell you straight if it was bad -- not even a knighthood made any difference to that. All you ever got were sidelong smiles, requests like this one for early appointments and rubbish about not building up hopes. It had certainly been that way with her Arthur-- and even with Her Grouch, for that matter, poor Lady Caroline.

It was all very sad, but then life had to go on. Pausing only to pat at her hair in the mirror, she headed back toward the servant's doorway, where that kind Mr. Groves and her unfinished second cup of sweet tea awaited.

When the great man opened his eyes, he was alone. The trees of the dell still reached above him, but they no longer framed Peg's lovely face.

"I dreamed . . ." he croaked, to no one. He stared up at the deepening sky. Then: "What time is it?"

He levered himself up from the mossy ground. The dell was no longer silent. The trees were stirring and the sun was falling into a cluster of evening clouds. He

smelled still water and ancient, dying wood. There was a faint chill in the air. Everywhere, the shadows were thickening stirring growing. The gift, gone. Another day, already passing. And the music. The music . . .

"Why did you take me here? What was the point?" he shouted. "To give me nothing . . . ?"

He turned around. For a moment it seemed as though Peg had returned --then he saw the flash of red-golden hair was really only the last glimmer of the greenwood's noonday fire, now entangled with vines of shadow. Or even the padding dark-eyed shift of some stealthy animal . . .

Sir Edward shivered. Glancing back at the Noonday Pool, which was now veined with the swirling ink-black reflections of the trees, he began to clamber up from the dell. Over the roots and fallen branches, through the leaf-drifts of dead summers, his hands and feet skidding on a slime of wet moss and lichen. A leaf stuck to his chin. The claws of a dead bush snagged at his jacket, ripped, tried to detain him.

When the ground finally began to level, the great man looked back and saw that the dell had already disappeared from sight. He felt a faint sadness, the loss of something already long lost. Galleries of trees receded into shade, brightened only by gaudy shelves of faintly luminous fungi and the glitter of cartridge cases left from Lord Shrewsbury's autumn shoot of the year before.

He trudged on through the wood, finding a path he recognized, a way off this land. And there was the fence, the gate. The lawns of his own house. Staid red brick walls and yew hedges transformed by the deepening light. And in the pool of shade beneath a copper birch lay the white wooden bench where he often rested his legs on returning from his afternoon walks. Sir Edward hobbled across the lawn toward it. He slumped down.

Now that her duties for the day had ended, Mrs. France set out toward the walled garden again where Mr. Groves had now kindly cleared out the hutches for her. She knew it was important that she revisit the scene of the carnage now -- on the same day. Otherwise, the sad image would inevitably stay with her.

But still, it was a pleasant evening. The air had grown lustrous, the birds were still wildly in song. She walked past the yew hedges, along the glimmering white gravel path, pausing only a moment to take a deep breath before turning under the arch into the walled garden. She saw that Mr. Groves had sensibly left the hutch doors open so that they might air, and swept and cleaned the bare earth before them so that there was no trace of what had happened.

She crouched down before the hutches and breathed the faint animal smell that somehow still lingered. Then, something seemed to move inside. She leaned forward, too surprised to be shocked. Was it possible that, unnoticed by herself and Mr. Groves, one of her foundlings had survived the onslaught? Hardly possible, it seemed. Yet undoubtedly, at the back of the hutch, there was the shuffle of claws, the glint of an eye. Something there. Something alive . . .

After barely a moment's hesitation, she reached inside. Feeling warm fur, her hands closed, and she lifted the creature out, holding it up toward the light of

the gloriously dimming sky. A fox cub. A poor abandoned fox cub. She stroked its silvered head, marveling as she always marveled at the perfection of nature, and at the rightness of the fact that -- on this evening of all evenings -- the creature should seek shelter in one of her empty hutches. For a moment, the thought crossed her mind that she might be holding a culprit rather than a victim, but, breathing the rich feral scent, gazing into those dark, almost bluish eyes, she knew that that was impossible.

Holding the creature up, she kissed it softly on the nose, and was about to start preparing its bed for the night when she felt the crackle of the telegram in her apron. Kissing the creature again, setting it down, closing the door of the hutch, she peered out through the archway of the walled garden across the dim lawns, and saw that His Grouch had returned.

The birds were still singing in the branches, quarreling and clattering their wings as the greenwood softened and dissolved. Here was the same blackbird he'd heard this morning, still singing A-B-C-A ascending. Those notes had been at the edge of his mind all day. He could even hear the trickling racing play of the strings that followed the short opening phrase. A-B-C-A, then a fast interplay of invention. The waters of twilight entering the pools of night. Not his own music. The music was Mendelssohn's -- the opening of A Midsummer Night's Dream. And, of course, this blackbird's.

He felt the touch of something on his hand. Looking down, smiling, half-imagining that Peg's fingers were entwined once more around his own, he saw that a small spider had dropped down from one of the branches. It crawled away from his mottled flesh, spinning a faintly gleaming thread, and the blackbird ceased singing.

And there was silence.

The great man gazed out through the dusk where, in the final moment between light and darkness, faint living shapes seemed to leap and play. This bench was still comparatively warm, but the damnable ache in his back was starting to grow worse; he couldn't stay out here forever . . .

He glanced back toward the house, where the lights in the windows were now showing. As he watched, he saw that, such was the thickness of the night air and the residual summer heat, that a lifeless gray shape seemed to be forming across the lawns. And, yes, it truly seemed to writhe and dissolve, to tumble end over ragged end out of the darkness toward him. Sir Edward remembered the Noonday Pool, and felt a chill pass over him. But then the figure coalesced, and he saw that it was nothing more than Mrs. France in her navy-blue apron, walking swiftly across the lawn, waving something in her hand.

Next morning, Mrs. France woke earlier than her accustomed time, and well before her alarm. But still, the trees were whispering, the birds were in song, the sun was already up and out. Far better, at least, than the cold damp darkness of mornings in December and January. She gazed up at the wood-paneled ceiling, recollecting all that had happened the previous day. The girl Peg (now gone, and good riddance), the telegram that His Grouch had so long been dreading, the senseless destruction of her foundlings. And, of course, the fox cub. The new fox cub . . .

In a pleasant lethargy, Mrs. France stretched out on smooth white sheets she herself had ironed. A lace of leaf shadows played over the pale yellow curtains. And could that be a cuckoo she heard? Normally, and her not being a natural early riser, the clanging bell of the alarm clock set her bolt upright and tumbling out of bed, in a rush to get dressed and be down and cleared and well-organized in the kitchen before any of the maids appeared. But today . . .

Slowly, she climbed out of bed. Warmed by a patch of golden sunlight, the bare wooden floor was pleasant beneath her bare feet. She twiddled her toes, yawned, pulled the big blue-handled chamber pot out from beneath her bed, and stooped down. Then she rinsed her hands and face. Then she dressed. She was still a little premature, but on a day like this, you could almost understand why His Grouch always got up so early. Remembering to turn off her alarm, she descended the narrow stairway to the kitchen.

Ah. The usual smell of Brasso and soot. The usual mess of dripping and bread left by His Grouch on the table. A half-eaten lump on the floor that that pampered dog of His was too well-stuffed to even bother with eating. A waste. She picked it up, tidied, brushed up the clinker and coal dust from the grate, hung the kettle back where it belonged, cleared and restoked the rapidly failing fire. You'd think, after yesterday, after the telegram, that He would give it a rest. But no, he'd arisen as early as ever, and would be up there in his study right now. Grinding away. Getting nowhere.

Oh, well. Now that she was down here herself, and feeling slightly at a loss, she decided to set about preparing his proper breakfast-- he could have it a bit early for a change. The poor man, really. And perhaps she should say something after yesterday evening. Touch that stooped and stiffened shoulder as she'd been unable to do as she stood beside him in the twilit lawn, spelling out the words of the telegram that his weakening eyes had been unable to read.

Mrs. France whisked the toast out from the hotplate before it burned, flipped over the bacon, and finished laying out His Grouch's tray. He'd taken it oddly, really. Oddly for him. With uncharacteristic resignation -- almost a kind of humility. But he'd probably be back in one of his usual moods this morning blaming God and all the world. Worse, if anything. He was, after all, in some pain. Poor man, really. She backed out of the kitchen door, and ascended the stairs. Leaning on the handle, pushing with a practiced hand, she managed her usual feat of opening the baize-lined door to the upper study without putting down the tray.

Inside, the curtains were open, the sun was streaming. But as for His Grouch . . . there was no sign. Mrs. France checked around the bookcases. The little alcove. But, no. No. She put down the tray. Pens and paper lay out on His Grouch's desk but, although it was obvious that he'd been at work this morning, the look of it seemed different, oddly tidy.

He'd left the drawer that contained those old notebooks of his unopened for a start, and there were none of the usual scraps and squiggings and doodlings and crossings-out. Peering more closely, briefly even forgetting the tantrmic consequences of Him catching her even glancing at his work, she saw that, framed by a square of sunlight, a neat pile of staved sheets lay on the leather blotter

in the middle of the desk. He'd even threaded a red ribbon through the edge to bind them, the way she remembered he always did when he was ready to send something off to his publishers at Booseys. But that hadn't happened for several years now. A new, finished, work? And it looked so fat. How on earth had he managed that, when only yesterday he'd been . . .? The top page was titled. She turned it around on the blotter to read.

The Noonday Pool.

For Peg ? (another enigma)

The words were written out in a big hand, with all the flourish and deliberation he reserved for his final copies. And how nice, Mrs. France couldn't help thinking, that he'd finally got something down at last. The title was a bit odd, but perhaps it was actually some fancy name for the third symphony he was always muttering about. But there was something else about the look of the paper. . . .

Glancing over her shoulder, checking that the room was still empty, Mrs. France picked up the manuscript. On the first page, below the title, there was nothing but blank staves. She turned over to the next. Again, blank. Turned again. Page after page of it. Empty, unwritten sheets, right through to the end. Which even Mrs. France knew signified only silence.

Well. . . . Puzzled, yet skilfully as always, she rearranged the desk as she had found it. Yesterday's news had obviously taken a big toll. The poor man. And where had he got to, anyway? Even if he had actually finished something, she knew that it was hardly like Him to take the rest of the morning off. And as for this. He'd surely be back by now if he'd just gone out and down the corridor to answer the call. And as for this . . .

Filled with the beginnings of a greater foreboding, Mrs. France glanced over the desk and out through the mullioned windows, across the long-shadowed lawn. Her hand went up to her bosom, and she drew a surprised breath. There was a figure with outstretched arms, standing on the grass, with head raised to the deep blue midsummer. So strange and uncharacteristic was the posture, so unlike the person she thought she knew, that it was some moments before she realized who it was.

Then, skirts and pinny flying, she was out and down the back stairs, through the kitchen and the stillness of the shadowed yard, around the side of the house to the main garden. And there he was: His Grouch, still just standing in the middle of the garden.

In a panic, fearing that his brain might already have gone -- that she'd already lost him as she lost Lady Caroline and her own Arthur -- she ran up to him across warm paving and cool wet grass.

"Sir Edward! I'm . . . I'm just . . ."

But he simply blinked and turned as though awakened, smiling one of his rare smiles.

"Yes?" he said, cheerful as you please.

Mrs. France gazed at him, her bosom heaving. She felt oddly angry: Him giving her such a turn. And yet. . .

"Your breakfast is waiting up in your study, Sir Edward. As always."

He nodded. A hand went up to twiddle the left tip of the mustache, thought better of it, and went down again.

"I was just thinking," he said, "it is such a fine morning . . . Now, Mrs. France, wouldn't you say so?"

She looked around, squinting, half-dazzled by the soft long rays of sunlight that were falling through the trees, her head filling like some deep empty pool with the wind-chatter of leaves, the song of thrush and blackbird and cuckoo.

"I suppose . . ." she conceded, taking a long breath, dabbing at a bead of sweat on her cheek. "That you could say so."

"Such a fine morning," he continued, "that I might as well stay out here and make the most of it . . ."

He gazed around, still smiling. Even with the telegram his shoulders seemed less stooped today. And the nostrils of his big nose flared as he breathed, his eyes sparkled. Mrs. France reflected that, after a whole lifetime of early rising, it was almost as if he'd never actually seen an early summer's morning before.

"But, Sir Edward, you must at least sit down."

The great man nodded. He pointed across the lawns to a bench over by the trees, and began to walk toward it, the old man's shuffle of his feet leaving a dark trail on the bright grass. For some moments, Mrs. France stood watching him, thinking of the many things as yet undone in her kitchen, the near-state it was in, and the ironing she couldn't trust anyone else to make a decent job of, and the bread that needed baking, and of course her new fox cub, and the maids who would soon be rising: of all the clamoring duties of her busy life. But then the great man stumbled slightly on a molehill, and she hurried across the lawn to join him.

"I was thinking, Mrs. France," he said, taking her arm, "that there was something I might one day show you and Lady Caroline . . . But then again," he continued, looking about him, and toward the bench in a patch of sun beneath the tree where the blackbird sang, "it can wait . . ."

They walked on through the endless morning light of summer.

Peg could hear the train coming the night express.

The breath of her muzzle clouded the air as she pushed her way through the sharply frosted undergrowth. She halted, and sniffed. The berries had withered on the bushes now, and last season's incautious young had grown too quick and wise to be easy prey for her. But it was a clear fine night, and her belly was still plump from long pampered months. She had nothing to fear from the winter.

The train was fast approaching trailing a long scarf of smoke diamond with sparks. This time, the lights of the carriage that the guard always reserved for the great man no longer shone over the sweet endless flow of his beloved river. The windows were black, and, inside, there was only rocking, creaking silence, the gleam of long mahogany, the white-scented gloom of tributes and flowers.

Tumbling out of the night, ragged beat of engine-breath echoing over the hills, the night express bore on, carrying the great man home for the last time, and on the start of the longest journey of all.

The tracks wheezed and creaked. The sound became a wall. Peg sank down onto the bare giving earth, and waited.

Author's note: This story reflects some aspects of the life of the greatest of all English composers, Sir Edward Elgar. My Sir Edward, however -- and Peg, and Mrs. France, and Mr. Groves, and The Noonday Pool -- live only through you, the reader, and on these pages.