

# The Snag

## *A Story by V. S. Pritchett*

THE marriages of middle age, the mad impromptus of reason, are the satisfying ones. By that time our obsessions have accumulated and assert their rights, and we find peace in the peculiarities of others. I am thinking of Mrs. Barclay and myself.

Our difficulty was the common one of turning a love affair into a marriage. We were held up by talking about it and by Sophia Barclay's belief in the sacred inferences of her divorce. She had been divorced from her husband in a noisy way years before I met her; she remembered what she wore in court; she was fixed in the occasion. This gave her a moral advantage over me that was too vested to be stimulating. She was like a cautious widow with a little capital but hers was that perfect disaster. Never myself having been married or divorced I had nothing equal to put into a settlement. We had reached a deadlock. And then my luck turned. Always rushing round to parties, often mixed up in her own or other people's love affairs, Sophia was the subject of a lot of gossip. Her taste for calamity involved her in a slander action which, for three hilarious days, the British public got to know of as "the Barclay case." Our lives suddenly became theatre. We spoke lines to each other which could only have been spoken on the stage. Here, at last, was the dramatic impetus that we needed. I must get her out of the limelight, I thought. I took action. It was July. I found a cottage in Wales where we could escape for a month. The Monday after the case I went up to get the place ready. On the Wednesday I was to re-

turn to London and fetch her and we would get married.

The cottage was a simple, cream-painted gate lodge with sharp Gothic windows. It was darkened by one of those tall firs that are often seen in rectory gardens and which are sometimes called Clergyman trees. One felt almost married standing under it. There was one advantage in the place from my point of view: it had no telephone. In our London days, Sophia's telephone had been my pestiferous rival, for Sophia lived by it. A few hours before returning to London to fetch her and on the day when I considered myself to be officially "running away with Mrs. Barclay" a boy arrived with a telegram from her. It told me to wait because she had decided to drive up to me. I had forgotten about telegrams. I saw that now I was not, in the strictest sense, "running off with Mrs. Barclay." The struggle for power had begun.

And so I see her as she was, on that day, driving towards me in the Border country. Sophia was a single-minded driver, but the mind she used was the unconscious. I see her green car unpredictable in the traffic lanes, waltzing at corners. I hear her shouted at by other motorists, I see her chancing the yellow light, parking in the wrong place at Cheltenham, backing into the traffic stream at the narrow end of Worcester, making cyclists swerve. She had a small pink hat half hidden in her hair, at an angle which gave her pale face the look of folly the waning moon has in a windy sky. I could imagine the restlessness of her pretty and conversable shoulders. I did not know what to do with myself until two o'clock when she was to arrive, and

the changeable July sun made the hours slower. Over and over again I looked at flowers I did not know the name of in the garden. That tedium was broken. Telegrams began to arrive as suddenly as telephone calls. Two came from London, altering the time of departure. One came from Kidderminster saying she had taken the wrong road. And a final one from a town in Shropshire telling me to ring the hotel. I drove to the nearest telephone box.

"My dear," she said with her low, fussed, guttural emphasis on the second word. "Avoid me. Keep out of my way. I am poison. Ugh."

I could imagine her shaking her head in a disgust with herself which used to please me.

"You know what has happened? It is unbelievable. Tyre burst!" She added that there was an awful man in shorts staring at her.

This, I knew, would be untrue. While she was telephoning Sophia would be regarding the man in shorts. Her ice-blue eyes would be staring in a rude, incredulous way; she was hypnotised by the sight of men, of terrible men. I suppose I describe myself.

"Stay where you are," I said. "Don't worry. Rest. I will come and fetch you."

"Yes," she said. "I must rest. I'm half dead."

IT TOOK me no more than half an hour to drive to the town. She was in the white lounge. She was wearing a grey suit and was sitting slim and very upright, with a silk scarf round her long and beautiful throat, and she was wearing the foolish hat on her greying hair. She was looking severely amused but when she saw me she put all her vanity into a deep, laughing groan.

"My dear," she said in an exhausted voice when she took my hand. Her hand was small, nervous, and brittle, as if it would break.

"You're a saint. What is it that happens to me? I wreck everything. Why did I take that wrong road at Kidderminster. What made me?"

We were neither of us any longer young.

Explanations were a game which gave us the illusion of youth and made our troubles and our past sparkle. We had grown up at the time when simplicity went out.

"You were trying not to come," I said.

That kind of remark delighted her. It pleased me too. We felt younger. A belief in fate was her form of hypocrisy.

"Have you had tea? If you have, let's go. I've got my car," I said.

"In two cars?" she said. "Don't be silly. You see what a muddle it is. We must talk."

"Not," I said, "with all these people. They are too interested. And why talk?"

"Look at them," she said. "I can't believe it."

We were sitting in a zoo. The lounge of the hotel smelled of white paint, of tea, new carpet, and roses, and there was a long beam of sunny blue cigarette smoke slanting between us and one of the sofas. Arranged in their armchairs were a number of what looked like dressed-up animals. There were giraffes, tigresses, monkeys, birds, dogs, and even a camel: they were middle-aged ladies, knitting or reading, and derisively interested in human nature, that is to say, Sophia and me. The only persons not listening to us had their backs to us. There was a man on the sofa beyond the beam of smoke with strong grey hair as thick as a schoolboy's. Near him sat a youth of sixteen wearing a school blazer and flannels. He wore spectacles. Of the man I could see only the sunburned neck and the shoulders of his tweed jacket. The youth was gazing at Sophia and turned his head, blushing, when I caught his look. He had a red note-book on his knee.

The man had a book, too. Suddenly he slapped it on his knee and said in a ringing and confident voice:

"We're absolutely stumped, old boy."

The zoo looked up from their knitting-needles.

"Ssh!" said Sophia to me. "Listen. It's fascinating. It's the man I told you about—the one in shorts who was staring at me."

"Umph!" said the boy in a voice that was far more elderly than the man's.

"He's a professor or something," Sophia

said. "Anyway he knows a lot of women professors. He's on holiday. That is his son. They're on a bus tour. He was looking at me as if he knew me."

"You are not a woman professor," I said. "How d'you know all that?"

Sophia was annoyed by this; she seriously liked to be whatever was going, if a man were concerned.

"He's been telling us all. Listen," she said.

"That boy will know you again," I said.

Sophia stared back at the boy in a prim and amused way that crushed him once more.

The man cleared his throat and the boy said something to his father, obviously about us. The father spoke again. He was making a speech to the room. The pitch of his voice was exacting. It was the good-humoured voice of a humourless man, questing, inflected by a note that blended educated anxiety with the exhilaration which is shared by sea lions and great bores. It was a voice both specifically victimising and blandly generic. It was the voice of a university.

"The 26th," it said. "That's where we're sunk."

"No bus," the boy said.

"Let's have a look at your book again," said the father.

Sophia sighed.

There was a pile of guide books and timetables on the table beside the boy among the magazines. He handed the red note-book to his father.

"I don't see," said the father opening the book and turning the pages, "how we've slipped up. We've done exactly what we planned." He took a pencil and ticked pages of the book, item by item. "July 16th. Leave Triggorin 8.15, arrive Llandor 11.30, church, museum, sandwiches. Stay George and Dragon—all right?"

He ticked these items in the book.

"July 19th," he continued, "leave nine—what's this? I can't read your writing. You must learn to write figures in a clear, uneducated hand—ha ha! I can't tell whether this is a three or a five . . ."

"Five," said the boy. "We've done that."

"I know, I know," said the father. "But I like things right. We may want to look this up in years to come. Now, 9.5." He altered the figure. The boy looked towards us with shame.

"July 19th," said the father. "Leave Llandor, arrive Creep 11.20, visit castle, Query dungeon. Yes, we did the dungeon. Early lunch Globe, another castle, bus 2 o'clock to Bronwen, waterfall, tea, stay Crown . . ."

"That poor boy," I said.

"There's lots more, the whole holiday," said Sophia. "Day by day. Why poor? That's exactly what one ought to do."

"Well, his poor wife," I said. "I can't see you doing it."

"That's where you're wrong," Sophia said. And then: "She's not with them. She's dead."

The certainty of Sophia made me laugh.

"Obviously she's dead," she said, and there was that dry, seductive, low-spirited choke in her throat, that grimace of ironical horror, that small, practical, disposing movement of the chin which indicated that Sophia was facing a decisive and congenial interment.

Sophia's words made me look more closely at the man. I picked up a magazine and looked over the top of it. I stopped smiling. Now I knew why I had noticed a peculiar quality in his voice. It was not generic. It was specific. I knew him. His wife *had* died. She had died three years before. It was a man called Charles Chaucer. I whispered this to Sophia.

"Ssh!" she said. "Listen."

"I know him," I repeated. "It is Charles Chaucer."

Sophia paid no attention. She was listening to Chaucer who was still speaking.

RATHER than dismay, I felt laughter rise through my feet and grow inside my body, getting deeper and deeper until I was submerged in it. Sophia believed in Fate and so did I. But my notion was different from hers. Her belief enabled her to make a devious escape into a melancholy which permitted her to get out of anything she wanted

to get out of. For me—I had only to look at Chaucer. Fate was the asinine. At forty-five I found my cheeks burning because the world's oldest joke was being played on me and, as always, at the time of crisis. To have met anyone, at this moment, would have been awkward. To meet Chaucer was farce.

For a little while I thought of quietly getting away. I studied the room. There was only one door, in the middle. I had come in by this door unseen for Chaucer would have sprung at once. There was no escape. I put down the magazine and stared at Chaucer's neck, daring him to look round.

Chaucer was farce because he was what is called my "oldest friend." I do not mean that he was a friend in any serious sense. His rôle in life was to be the oldest friend of everyone, the man who crops up in one's life on and off for twenty years and always at the unguarded moments. At Dieppe when one is sneaking out; at Dover when one is sneaking happily back. It is his knock at the door that stops the domestic quarrel, that interrupts the love affair or makes one put the pistol back in the drawer. Chaucer arrived in my life, every few years, like a clown or a conscience, innocently, creating guilt. His innocence lay in his efficiency in pursuing the single purpose of his life: "I like to keep in touch." The kiss is killed, the suicide misses his moment. Chaucer saves us.

"And you see what the 26th means," Chaucer was saying. "I can't believe that they don't run a bus every day—but here it is as plain as anything. Thursdays only. What a day to run a bus anyway. It's a real headache."

The boy murmured.

"The snag is," said Chaucer, "that it knocks Snowdon clean out."

He said this as if he had brought the whole mountain down on top of himself.

The idea of Snowdon, the highest mountain in England, being "knocked clean out," made several ladies in the lounge look with the *de haut en bas* expression of English unbelief. There were snobbish smiles but two ladies looked at Chaucer with sympathy. One of these was Sophia.

But there Snowdon rose implacably out of Chaucer's time-table, a mountain not subject to the climbing-boots of poets like the mountains of the Lake District, not fatal to clerks like Ben Nevis, but well clambered by lawyers, doctors, professors, and undergraduates, injuring its half-dozen, even killing its occasional woman school-teacher, every year, often in the headlines, sold to publicity. It rose out of Chaucer's time-table in the drifting Welsh rain, encircled by teams of cyclists, belted by motor coaches; the steep side falling into cones of scree, the sheep bleating like Wesleyan ministers on the gentler slopes, the farmers glowering at the tourists over the stone walls at the bottom, and the excursions from Manchester going up the long slope on foot or by the light railway to the café in the inevitable cloud at the summit. There they waited for the famous view, while the professional classes were roped on the chimney or the rock face. It stood there rather wet, very lordly, in its rock, hostile to Chaucer's passion for contact.

"W E ' L L have to miss it," the boy said in a false voice.

The sympathetic lady and Sophia, too, looked sorry for the boy.

"Miss it!" cried the dogged Chaucer. "But we can't miss Snowdon."

"Suppose we make it Wednesday," said the boy.

"No good," said the father looking at the time-table. "The eleven-twenty misses the connection by a quarter of an hour."

"No co-operation," said the boy.

I changed my mind. This seemed the moment to slip out.

"Darling," I said, "let's go."

"All right," said Sophia with resignation.

"Unless, unless," said Chaucer, "Here's an idea. Wait. Let me think."

Sophia had moved and the boy now gasped as if he were about to miss the biggest chance of his life. Agitatedly he tried to attract his father's attention. In the silence of Chaucer's thinking I heard the boy mutter:

# MAKE SURE OF

each issue—and treat a friend!

---

*Please send me ENCOUNTER for*

six months – 15s. – \$3

one year – 30s. – \$6

*starting with the.....issue.*

NAME .....

(BLOCK LETTERS)

ADDRESS .....

*Also enter a  six months' or  one year's  
subscription for the following, and send the  
bills to the above address :*

NAME .....

(BLOCK LETTERS)

ADDRESS .....

NAME .....

(BLOCK LETTERS)

ADDRESS .....

***N.B. This is not a subscription***

***renewal notice.***

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Postage  
will be  
paid by  
Licensee.

No Postage  
Stamp  
necessary if  
posted in  
Great Britain  
or  
Northern  
Ireland.

BUSINESS REPLY CARD  
Licence No. S.W. 1754

**ENCOUNTER**  
**25 HAYMARKET**  
**LONDON, S.W.1**

"Dad! Dad! That's the woman in the Barclay case."

"Damn!" I said. "The boy reads the papers."

"Where?" said Sophia looking round the room. She was paying no attention to me.

"Just a moment," said Chaucer. "I think I've got it. We don't go to Canwer, we take the early bus." (I did not catch the name of the place.) "Look at the time-table."

The boy rummaged among the books but did not take his eyes off Sophia.

"We can't do that," said the boy.

"We can. We can," cried Chaucer. "Why go to the *top* of Snowdon? We can work it if we go half-way up. What's wrong with that? Snowdon, half-way," he declared. "That's the idea."

There was a sigh from the snobbish ladies. They were satisfied. The gentler ones saw the wish to protect Chaucer made irrelevant. Sophia, who had been rapt and ironical, made her grimace and was suddenly set in the gloom I feared in her. I squeezed her hand.

"What's the *good* of going to the top, old boy? What's the point?" said Chaucer. "It's no different from other mountains. You get much the same view half-way."

"O.K.," said the boy getting out his pencil.

Chaucer sat forward on the sofa, elated.

"The important thing in life is to ask the right questions," he said.

Sophia sat back and picked up the magazine and leaned towards me. Looking at the advertisement of a fur coat, she said,

"How right he is! I've been going to the top, going to the limit all my life. Why? It is just as good half-way. That's why I am such a mess. I mean—take the case. Why did I go on with it? Why didn't you stop me?"

"I tried to," I said. "But there's no stopping you, you know, once you're set. You're stubborn."

"I need someone to stop me," she said. "You know who that man is?"

"I have just been telling you. It's Chaucer."

"Don't be silly. I'm serious," she said. "It's my husband, to the life."

We were back where we had so often been before—to the sacredness of Sophia's divorce.

"Listen," I said. "I'm telling you. It's a man called Chaucer, a friend of mine. I know him. What do we do now?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, opening her handbag and getting out her mirror. "Why on earth didn't you tell me! Let's go and speak to him. What an extraordinary man you are."

At this the unmistakable voice of my oldest friend spoke out.

"The Barclay case? Why didn't you tell me? Where?"

Chaucer stood up and recognised me at once. His face was as pink as his neck. His blue eyes shone.

"How absolutely splendid," he cried.

We went to him at once; Sophia still had the magazine in her hand as I introduced her.

"Marvellous," said Chaucer. "This is my son."

Chaucer's face did not astonish me. It was young, it was sunburned to the neck. What astonished me was his clothes. Perhaps because of the mild youthfulness of his face, they seemed to overpower and astonish and magnify him. A stupendous tropical butterfly in tweed had broken out of the chrysalis of mourning. I had never seen this Chaucer before. Fresher and even younger after grief, he now wore a blatant black, red, and green jacket in wide check. A blue and white check open-necked shirt seemed to boil on his chest and a few chest hairs showed like a whiff of steam at the neck. His khaki shorts made his pink knees look wilful, like smooth supernumerary faces, tripling his powers of observation; the dark red stockings with the green scout tabs of the garters, added a Tyrolean friskiness. In his ordinary crisis get-up he had been a grey figure. Now he was sporting and as blatant as a poster. A wishing for publicity had been submerged in him.

"How d'you do?" he was saying to Sophia, holding her hand and turning to his son to say:

"Janet Forth was here this afternoon, wasn't she, old boy? You remember?" (This to me.) "She was up at Newnham and went to the Foreign Office, until she left for Athens—the British school. Got a C.B.E.—did you know? You've only just missed her."

At least we had not been his first prey that day.

"Took a first in History," he went on to Sophia, at last releasing her hand. "Sit down," he said. "This is splendid."

We did not sit down.

"Trust C. C.," I said to Sophia, "to remember the learned ladies."

Chaucer laughed shyly and innocently, giving Sophia a look that searched her for her academic distinction. For Chaucer was Don Juan—but not the ordinary version of that character. He was the pursuer of academic women. To their persons and their sex he was indifferent; his lust and single-minded quest was for their intellectual particulars. Where had they been to school? To which university? In what year? With whom? When had they got their degrees? In what subjects? Had they taken a First or a Second? A large procession of educated women had given their academic all to Chaucer's amorous mind. Some had even become Dames. He sent blue-eyed glances at Sophia who suddenly became gay. What small academic jewel did she possess? An intermediate perhaps? A mere diploma? It was an academic undressing. I grinned. There was not a trace of intellect, beyond the usual socialite pickings, in Sophia. If she had graduated anywhere it was in the Courts—the Divorce Court and the Queen's Bench. Her only distinction was public scandal. Chaucer's son, standing back and unable to close his mouth, knew that. He was overcome.

In the meantime, Chaucer was eagerly telling us what we knew already.

"Snowdon," he said. "We've run into a spot of bother there. I thought of dropping in on Mary Cumberland. . . ."

He was off again on his quest. He gave me a knowing look as he drew once more on the notorious provender of his power to bore.

Then, without warning, he said genially to Sophia:

"My son was just telling me he was sure he knew you. He saw your picture in the papers . . . the Barclay case."

I could not speak. The son could not speak. All the ladies in the room—the giraffe, the dogs, the tigresses, and the camel—put down their books and stared.

"I expect he did," Sophia said. "It was everywhere. Which one did you see?" She put this question to the boy.

She was delighted and proud and radiant; and there was a pout of reproach at my annoyed face. I was depriving her of the only gain the case had brought her: publicity.

"I got my damages," she said impudently with a now defiant look at me.

"I know. A farthing," said the boy, a mild votary of fact.

Sophia saw my fidgeting shame. She knew the damages were contemptuous and that the case had been a calamity to her reputation.

"Splendid!" Chaucer said to her in his eager, pointless way. She was even more pleased. She turned to look at the ladies in the lounge and for a long time I had not seen her eyes so brilliant or heard her answering voice so vivacious. For myself, my worst memories of the scene in court were re-enacted. I expected to hear the judge, who looked like some moralising old woman in a red bath-robe and curlers—I expected to hear the judge say again:

"You may think the defendant is a woman of evil mind. . . . On the other hand, you may think that Mrs. Barclay is not a woman for whom discretion means very much and that she has shown a general disposition to meddle and to make much of very little. You have seen her in the witness box. You may ask if she is to be relied upon. . . ."

And I could hear myself saying to Sophia before the action:

"Leave it alone. The woman is a spy. She has got her friends to watch you. People like that destroy themselves. Let them. It can't hurt you."

"Unelevating society . . . frivolous action

... storm in a tea-cup ... ill-advised ladies. ..."

I could hear the judge going on. His voice melted into the voice of Chaucer who never dropped a piece of research.

"Who was the judge?" he said.

Sophia told him.

"He was up at Magdalen with me," said the ecstatic Chaucer, rumpling the rug at his feet.

SOPHIA liked a social titbit like that. She would have gone to the scaffold with pleasure if, on the way, she could have picked up a bit of gossip about the hangman. Her pleasure and Chaucer's were complete.

"Now tell me about your holiday," she said to the boy. "Let me see your marvellous book."

She rummaged among the magazines and soon had the table in disorder. She found his note-book.

"Ah, this is where you write it all down. What a good idea," she said. "You like to have everything planned."

The boy was ashamed.

"Dad does," said the boy.

"So do I," said Sophia.

I gaped at her.

"I wish I wrote everything down," she said. "You know where you are. There is nothing to worry about. You've got it all except for one day." She changed her lively manner and her argument. "Isn't it rather thrilling? Not knowing? I mean unless you'd planned all the others, this one wouldn't be so thrilling?"

The youth looked suspiciously at her.

"Now then you two," said Chaucer. "Sorry to break it up."

Chaucer's face was so sunburned, his son's face so pale, that he looked as if he had taken all the sunshine of their holiday for himself: now he was taking Sophia's kindness. I was relieved that it was he who was breaking up our meeting. I feared it would last for ever.

"En route," he said to his son. "Leave the books there. Five-thirty. We've just got time for the Castle. Let's meet later on at dinner."

I murmured something and they went.

"I hope not," I said to Sophia. She was looking for her magazine in the muddle she had made on the table. She picked it up.

"Now," I said. "I suppose that was all right."

"Let's sit down," she said. Her gaiety had gone. "I feel so low."

"Those clothes of his. That suit! I love you," I said.

We sat down where Chaucer had been sitting. The seat was warm with him still.

"What about his clothes?" said Sophia. "You men are sweet. Straighten the rug, my dear. Did you see him, how he drew the rug up between his feet when he was talking to us? I was fascinated. He had almost worked it up to his knees in a heap. Is he always confident like that?"

"I didn't notice," I said. "That wasn't confidence—it was nerves."

"I could not look at anything else," she said. "I can't bear men who stand still."

I straightened the rug.

"You did not tell me he was your oldest friend," she said.

"He isn't," I said. "But I've always known him."

I gave her my reflections on oldest friends. She did not laugh.

"How little I know about you," she said. "You don't really know me."

"We've known each other a long time," I said.

"A year," she said. "He's like my husband."

"Yes—you said. That was a bit of a shock, you know. Did *he* live on the examination papers of female dons?"

"Certainly not," said Sophia, flashing in defence of her husband. "Remember, I've been married. You have not."

"I'm glad for your sake."

"Why for mine?"

"You might have been jealous," I said.

"Are you?" she said.

Sophia's husband had been a bond between us. His gratifying stupidity, his dullness, his baldness, his obstinacy had convinced me of my power over all the gossip

about her. I had failed, of course, to stop her from going on with the silly slander action and I was put out by the scene with Chaucer which had shown me that unrepentantly she enjoyed the fight for its own sake and expected to be admired for it. What disturbed me was that Sophia's husband was an abstraction no longer. He was a real man. Possibly he wore a loud sports jacket and shorts and said things like "Absolutely splendid."

"DARLING," I said, "I did not come here to sit in this hotel but to take you home. We are going to be married."

"My dear," she said, drawing away, "we must talk."

"Talk," I said. "What for? What about? We've done all the talking. I said . . . marry."

She took my hand and squeezed it.

"I'm worn out," she said. "I'm so bewildered. I feel so numb."

"We shall be quiet and peaceful," I said.

"Peace; how I want it," she said.

"Look—I'll see about your car and we'll go home."

"I'm terribly sorry," she said. "This is not what I intended but I'm utterly whacked. I haven't slept for nights. And then Kidderminster. . . ."

"You've told me about Kidderminster! I'll go and see about the car."

"My dear," she said, "I can't. It wouldn't be fair."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be better in the morning," she said hurriedly. "It's just the journey and we must talk."

"Talk?" I said with exasperation.

"I promise you, in the morning," she said. "I'm going to stay here tonight. I've got a room. I'm sorry."

"Sophia!"

She became very pale.

"I know," she said. "Forgive me."

"But I've got the cottage. You let me get the cottage ready." I was angry. "When did you get a room here?" I asked. "If you stay, I stay."

"Oh no, you can't do that," she said in a prudish fluster that I always found attractive. "It wouldn't do."

She looked nervously at the row of women in the room. "You mustn't."

"Darling," I said, "I love you. You've come all this way to love me."

"You did not come to London for me," she said.

"My dear! Your telegram," I said. "You told me not to."

"Did I? Do you always do as you are told? Darling, your face. It looks so tragic. Don't, please, look like that. I can't bear it. It's only women, my dear. Oh lord, I'm always doing this."

"Always?" I said sharply.

Her husband had become real. Now all the scandals became real also. The judge returned in his red bath-robe.

"Unreliable . . . frivolous. . . ." he was still saying.

She listlessly picked up her magazine and she looked at me.

"I'm telling you the truth," she said. "Do you think I tell you the truth, always?"

"Yes," I said. Afterwards, very often afterwards, puzzling about this question of hers, I remembered a movement of her lower lip when I answered. It was a movement of disappointment. She wanted me to say that I knew she was telling a lie. She badly wanted to be seen through, but despair had made me blind.

"I'm going to get the car," I said decisively, and getting up, I walked out of the lounge into the hall and asked for the name of the garage. I was not away for more than a quarter of an hour.

When I came back she had gone. She had left a message with the hall porter saying that she would ring me in the morning.

"Madame said she was feeling tired," said the porter in a voice of pious intimacy.

"Give me the telephone."

"There are no telephones in the rooms," he said with pride.

Sophia and I had certainly moved into a different world.

THE man gave me her room number and, with disapproval, watched me walk up the shabby stairs. Her room was number eight on the first floor. I went up and crossed a landing which contained the largest case of stuffed seabirds I had ever seen. It gave a dead marine odour to the passage. I knocked. The door opened and there stood Chaucer.

"Splendid man!" cried Chaucer. "Come in. We're just back. Where's Mrs. Barclay? Let's all go and have a drink."

I looked at the number of the door. It was 18. The one had been badly defaced.

"She's gone to bed very tired," I had the resource to say. "I'm just going home."

Chaucer gave me a sly look that only the professional oldest friend can give. He knows the world is full of happenings he can only be on the edge of. He conveys: "Between us it is unnecessary to say anything, but I think you are being very unwise."

"She's in number eight," he said enthusiastically. "I looked it up, if you want her."

"No no. I'm just going home," I repeated.

"Well then, one for the road. You must," he said.

He marched me down the stairs.

"There's meeting you to celebrate," he said at the bar. "So many years. . . ." he said. "Not," he said with a killing, blue-eyed glance, "since Dieppe."

It was a sharp blow. Whatever else he was, Chaucer was a professional and efficient. I had been running off with a schoolteacher in those days. He had met us on the boat going over. He and she had had a most satisfying talk about the year she had taken her diploma.

There was a change in Chaucer's conversation now we were at the bar. Academic research vanished. He was blatant.

"Interesting case the Barclay case," he said. "Why did she do it?"

I headed him off. He was on at once to libel and slander. I headed him off again on to his holiday, but the taste for crime and law was growing fast in him. It was a new interest suddenly born. They had passed (he said) the mill at Duffin, the scene of the Purdom murder.

"The farmer's wife who poisoned her husband," he explained. There was a don at Queens' or somewhere who had been disqualified from driving. He had only once been to the Law Courts in his life, Chaucer said—and he gleamed with the intention of never missing a case now—and that was to hear an appeal. The appellant was the member of a gang of safe-breakers.

"It just shows you what a small place the world is. The man sitting next to me in court knew the prisoner. 'Pal of mine. Pal of mine,' he kept saying." Chaucer was enjoying himself. He looked younger and younger with every crime he mentioned.

He had actually been sitting next to somebody else's oldest friend. Chaucer's son had joined us now and suddenly blurted out:

"I don't think that woman doctor will get off, do you?"

"The husband of your chemistry mistress is a Q.C., isn't he?" Chaucer asked proudly of his son. Chaucer's age dropped to the early thirties.

Chaucer insisted on seeing me off to the door of my car. I was obliged to drive off. I drove out of the town to the bridge over the river and looked at the mild evening water where one or two men were fishing. . . . I waited for the moment when Chaucer and his son would be safely at dinner before I returned.

In an hour I was in Sophia's room. She was lying in bed.

"Didn't you get my message?" she said.

"You can't ring me. No telephone," I said.

"Silly," she said. "Come for me in the morning, early."

"About eleven," I said, knowing her habits.

"Earlier," she said.

"Ten-thirty," I laughed.

"No, ten," she said.

This was an old game of ours and it soothed me. I was restored.

"Ring me from the call box," she said, "I'll come down."

When I got back to the cottage and saw its white solitary walls in the July moon-

night, I saw she had been playing with me. Up and downstairs to the telephone she would go, yes; but she had been too "low" to come here. One gets jealous of ridiculous things. She would do anything for a telephone. I had a bad night and to teach her I waited until eleven o'clock before I drove back those ten miles to the hotel.

The porter was standing outside his desk as if waiting for me.

"Mrs. Barclay," he sneered, even before I asked him, "has gone. She went out at half-past nine. There's a note for you."

I took the letter and went out into the street to read it. I was not going to allow the porter to gaze at my destruction from the whitened sepulchre of his old age. I was back instantly. Sophia said she had by mistake picked up Chaucer's little red exercise book, the bible of his journey, the chart of his life, with her magazine, and had only found it this morning. She had gone after him with it.

"I'm death," she said.

The Chaucers had left by bus an hour earlier and no one knew where. On the wall of the office was the calendar. The figures 26 stood out large.

WHEN I look back at this period of Sophia Barclay's life and my own the fatal difference between us is clear. I had no unconscious mind; Sophia had no conscious mind. When I waited at the hotel for her to ring up or to come back, listening to the combustion of the summer traffic passing to the holiday mountains, I had leisure to go through her character inch by inch. It is a delusion that distance or waiting breed mystery and encourage desire. At the end of an hour there was little of Sophia's character left. I knew that when she returned I would start putting it together again and the knowledge made me laugh. I was laughing at Chaucer. Sophia had really brought off her most brilliant coup. To take away the planner's plan, to make away with the policy of the most insured man on earth—it was dazzling of her. I imagined the moment of discovery, the recriminations between father

and son. Chaucer would be defeated. Without his book he would not know whether he was to eat a sandwich or have the hotel lunch anywhere. He would be faced by a waterfall when he had expected a castle. It would be anarchy. For the first time he would be out of touch. Unless—and I laughed even more when I imagined Sophia saying this to him as she certainly would—his unconscious had been at work. For what phenomenal motive, in obedience to what fatal intimation, had he left the 26th blank?

On that decisive morning in our lives Sophia was true to herself. She had as little idea of where she was as she had of the whereabouts of the Chaucers. Her inevitable telephone calls conveyed this. I damned his little red book. She called me intolerant.

"I must put this right. It's frightful of me. It is not as if they were friends," she said.

And the next call:

"Still no luck. They must have gone on to Snowdon."

"But that's a terrible long way. Come back."

"I can't wreck their holiday," she said.

"What about us?" I said. "Are you running off with me or Chaucer *père et fils*?"

"Speaking French does not make it funny," she said. "People are serious," she added censoriously.

"Not Chaucer," I said.

"His wife is dead," she said. "He's a widower."

Like divorce, death brought out all Sophia's profound feeling for the respectable. I was made to feel outside the pale of the great central glooms of life.

"What has that to do with it?" I said.

I found out where she was.

"I'm coming for you," I said.

"Two cars again. Don't be silly," she said. "I'm going to Snowdon."

"So am I then," I said. "I can't wait wondering what all this chasing after widowers is about."

Her voice changed.

"All what?" she said very coldly.

"This," I said.

I recognised as I drove after her that what

I had just said was disastrously wrong. I recognise after five years, that it was one of those unforgivable mistakes one makes in one's life. Sophia was always doing the wrong thing but to call it "all this" was to make her feel in the right about it. I had once called the Barclay case "all this." I spent the rest of the journey trying not to see the ludicrous side of our situation; the Chaucers voyaging without chart, Sophia pursuing them without knowing where they were and myself pursuing her, and all of us not meeting at the mountain sacred to Welsh tourism. I was wrong.

The first thing I saw at that point of the mountain where the light railway starts for the summit was Sophia's small green car. Near it stood Chaucer's son. Round-shouldered, thin, pale, glum, he was staring enviously at the heavy motor traffic on the road.

I got out of my car. "Where are you all?" I asked.

He watched a motor cycle go roaring by and out of sight before he could collect himself to answer. He was deeply enjoying noise.

"Hullo," he said passively. "Dad's with Mrs. Barclay. They told me to wait here in case you came."

"Where are they?"

"Gone up," he said, nodding to the mountain. "Dad's taken her. We were in a mess. Dad couldn't find our book. She had taken it. We missed two buses."

He spoke in the relieved manner of one who was grateful that his father had missed something for once.

"If Mrs. Barclay hadn't found it and brought it we wouldn't have got here. She was very decent, she gave us a lift—that little Humber can shift when she steps on it."

But I was looking up the green slopes and hard shoulders of the mountain. I was listening for her chatter!

"You won't see them," he said.

"I'm sorry I've made you miss the trip. Why didn't you go?"

"Doesn't interest me," said the boy. "My idea was to take the motor bike to France. They didn't want me."

"How long have they gone?"

"I don't know. They're going right up to the top though. When she gave us a lift that is what she said: 'Now we can all go right up to the top.' Dad and I were only going half-way. You see, she said she'd give us a lift on afterwards. She said she'd never been to the top of a mountain before in her life."

The boy was grinning but he stopped shyly and frowned at me thoughtfully. Then he burst out:

"Do you think she got a fair deal in that case? She was telling Dad about it, he knows the judge. He said she ought to have got a thousand pounds. The woman doctor has in the paper this morning. Do you think the law's always right? I've never met anyone who's been in a case before. There was trouble about a water burst in Dad's office and Mother wanted him to bring a case, but he wouldn't, so we didn't get anything. I agree with Mrs. Barclay, you've got to go all out."

All out with Chaucer!

Many hours passed before they came down the mountain. Sophia was hot and blushed when she saw me. I had hardly ever seen her look so impudent. At half-past six that evening I was following them as she drove them a few miles on to their next stopping place and, as usual, she was soon out of sight. When I caught them up she had collided with the bus from Llanberis. They spent the night of the 26th in hospital. It was the beginning of their courtship.

**I** DINE with the Chaucers from time to time: he never loses touch with old friends. He looks at her with pride; she is his disaster, his news item. Entered no doubt in his little red book she is plump and safe. He does not often talk about academic women now but at dinner the talk often turns to judges, courts, points of law. He likes to talk about his marriage.

"She nearly killed me," he says to his guests, pointing down the table at her. "Stole my papers and nearly killed me, didn't you?"

I could have brought a case. And there's an interesting point. The insurance company fought. It was an unusual case. There was some point of law.

"It's the only time my picture has been in the papers," he said once in my hearing.

They were two news items; publicity had been Chaucer's craving; scandal, too.

"Or mine," said Sophia.

"Oh no, that's not true," protested Chaucer with pride on her behalf. "The Barclay case—tell them about it."

I changed the subject.

"No, you," she said.

"It is your story," he said. "But still if you won't I must—"

"And don't forget the book," she said.

"Oh yes, I always keep a book. . . ." he began.

She smiled at him, secure, satisfied, fulfilled, and as he told the tale he looked at me slyly, protectively. She is the scandal (he conveys) that I could never have managed. I am the scandal he has saved her from.

## Icarus

That dark patch on the rock was the shadow  
Of wings. It swung to the terraced fields,  
To the leaning maize and poppies. It climbed  
The white-washed wall, the line of cypress trees,  
And swerved to the cold headlands,  
Where the North wind hangs his mask.

But the dark shape returned. It circled  
The paved yard of my house, rolled round the stucco  
Cupids of the porch, windscratched, unable to fly,  
And flashed through the latched iron gate.  
There was no summer in the reeds of the beach,  
And no wistaria in my garden. Only the skeletons  
Of trees and ageing hands.

Naked bent the steep sky, silent.  
Was it a light-legged winter cloud? A wounded  
Bird? But that arched shadow reared the heart  
To light, to the wide streams of the wind  
And the savage liberty of height.

I did not hear the cry, nor the splash.  
I did not see the waxen tears. Only the shadow  
Of wings moving across the landscape,  
Hollow footfalls of those we loved,  
Who passed so strangely beyond our life—  
Grooves of yesterday's wind.

*C. A. Trypanis*