

BEFORE BREAKFAST

Henry Grenfell, of Grenfell & Saunders, got resentfully out of bed after a bad night. The first sleepless night he had ever spent in his own cabin, on his own island, where nobody knew that he was senior partner of Grenfell & Saunders, and where the business correspondence was never forwarded to him. He slipped on a blanket dressing-gown over his pyjamas (island mornings in the North Atlantic are chill before dawn), went to the front windows of his bedroom, and ran up the heavy blue shades which shut out the shameless blaze of the sunrise if one wanted to sleep late — and he usually did on the first morning after arriving. (The trip up from Boston was long and hard, by trains made up of the cast-off coaches of liquidated railroads, and then by the two worst boats in the world.) The cabin modestly squatted on a tiny clearing between a tall spruce wood and the sea, — sat about fifty yards back from the edge of the red sandstone cliff which dropped some two hundred feet to a narrow beach — so narrow that it was covered at high tide. The cliffs rose sheer on this side of the island, were undercut in places, and faced the east.

The east was already lightening; a deep red streak burnt over the sky-line water, and the water itself was thick and dark, indigo blue — occasionally a silver streak, where the tide was going out very quietly. While Grenfell stood at his window, a big snowshoe hare ran downhill from the spruce wood, bounded into the grass plot at the front door, and began nervously nibbling the clover. He was puzzled and furtive; his jaws quivered, and his protruding eyes kept watch behind him as well as before. Grenfell was sure it was the hare that used to come every morning two summers ago and had become quite friendly. But now he seemed ill at ease; presently he started, sat still for an instant, then scampered up the grassy hillside and disappeared into the dark spruce wood. Silly thing! Still, it was a kind of greeting,

Grenfell left the window and went to his walnut washstand (no plumbing) and mechanically prepared to take a shower in the shed room behind his sleeping-chamber. He began his morning routine, still thinking about the hare.

First came the eye-drops. Tilting his head back, thus staring into the eastern horizon, he raised the glass dropper, but he didn't press the bulb. He saw something up there. While he was watching the rabbit the sky had changed. Above the red streak on the water line the sky had lightened to faint blue, and across the horizon a drift of fleecy rose cloud was floating. And through it a white-bright, gold-bright planet was shining. The morning star, of course. At this hour, and so near the sun, it would be Venus.

Behind her rose-coloured veils, quite alone in the sky already blue, she seemed to wait. She had come in on her beat, taken her place in the figure. Serene, impersonal splendour. Merciless perfection, ageless sovereignty. The poor hare and his clover, poor Grenfell and his eye-drops!

He braced himself against his washstand and still stared up at her. Something roused his temper so hot that he began to mutter aloud:

“And what’s a hundred and thirty-six million years to you. Madam? That Professor needn’t blow. You were winking and blinking up there maybe a hundred and thirty-six million times before that date they are so proud of. The rocks can’t tell any tales on you. You were doing your stunt up there long before there was anything down here but — God knows what! Let’s leave that to the professors, Madam, you and me!”

This childish bitterness toward “millions” and professors was the result of several things. Two of Grenfell’s sons were “professors”; Harrison a distinguished physicist at thirty. This morning, however, Harrison had not popped up in his father’s mind. Grenfell was still thinking of a pleasant and courtly scientist whom he had met on the boat yesterday — a delightful man who had, temporarily at least, wrecked Grenfell’s life with civilities and information.

It was natural, indeed inevitable, that two clean, close-shaven gentlemen in tailored woods clothes, passengers on the worst tub owned by the Canadian Steamships Company and both bound for a little island off the Nova Scotia coast, should get into conversation. It was all the more natural since the scientist was accompanied by a lovely girl — his daughter.

It was a pleasure to look at her, just as it is a pleasure to look at any comely creature who shows breeding, delicate preferences. She had lovely eyes, lovely skin, lovely manners. She listened closely when Grenfell and her father talked, but she didn’t bark up with her opinions. When he asked her about their life on the island last summer, he liked everything she said about the place and the people. She answered him lightly, as if her impressions could matter only to herself, but, having an opinion, it was only good manners to admit it. “Sweet, but decided,” was his rough estimate.

Since they were both going to an island which wasn’t even on the map, supposed to be known only to the motor launches that called after a catch of herring, it was natural that the two gentlemen should talk about that bit of wooded rock in the sea. Grenfell always liked to talk about it to the right person. At first he thought Professor Fairweather was a right person. He had felt alarm when Fairweather mentioned that last summer he had put up a portable house on the shore about two miles from Grenfell’s cabin. But he added that it would soon vanish as quietly as it had come. His geological work would be over this autumn, and his portable house would be taken to pieces and shipped to an island in the South Pacific. Having thus reassured him, Fairweather carelessly, in quite the tone of weather-comment small talk, proceeded to wreck one of Grenfell’s happiest illusions; the escape-avenue he kept in the back of his mind when he was at his desk at Grenfell & Saunders, Bonds. The Professor certainly meant no harm. He was a man of the world, urbane, not self-important. He merely remarked that the island was interesting geologically because the two ends of the island belonged to different periods, yet the ice seemed to have brought them both down together.

“And about how old would our end be. Professor?” Grenfell meant simply to express polite interest, but he gave himself away, parted with his only defence — indifference.

“We call it a hundred and thirty-six million years,” was the answer he got.

“Really? That’s getting it down pretty fine, isn’t it? I’m just a blank where science is concerned. I went to work when I was thirteen — didn’t have any education. Of course some

business men read up on science. But I have to struggle with reports and figures a good deal. When I do read I like something human — the old fellows: Scott and Dickens and Fielding. I get a great kick out of them.”

The Professor was a perfect gentleman, but he couldn't resist the appeal of ignorance. He had sensed in half an hour that this man loved the island. (His daughter had sensed it a year ago, as soon as she arrived there with her father. Something about his cabin, the little patch of lawn in front, and the hedge of wild roses that fenced it in, told her that.) In their talk Professor Fairweather had come to realize that this man had quite an unusual feeling for the island, therefore he would certainly like to know more about it — all he could tell him!

The sun leaped out of the sea — the planet vanished. Grenfell rejected his eye-drops. Why patch up? What was the use ... of anything? Why tear a man loose from his little rock and shoot him out into the eternities? All that stuff was inhuman. A man had his little hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to his endurance. If you took that away from him you left him spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything. He himself was, he realized, sitting in his bathrobe by his washstand, limp! No wonder: what a night! What a dreadful night! The speeds which machinists had worked up in the last fifty years were mere baby-talk to what can go through a man's head between dusk and daybreak. In the last ten hours poor Grenfell had travelled over seas and continents, gone through boyhood and youth, founded a business, made a great deal of money, and brought up an expensive family. (There were three sons, to whom he had given every advantage and who had turned out well, two of them brilliantly.) And all this meant nothing to him except negatively — “to avoid worse rape,” he quoted Milton to himself.

Last night had been one of those nights of revelation, reevaluation, when everything seems to come clear . . . only to fade out again in the morning. In a low cabin on a high red cliff overhanging the sea, everything that was shut up in him, under lock and bolt and pressure, simply broke jail, spread out into the spaciousness of the night, undraped, unashamed.

§

When his father died, Henry had got a job as messenger boy with the Western Union. He always remembered those years with a certain pride. His mother took in sewing. There were two little girls, younger than he. When he looked back on that time, there was nothing in it to be ashamed of. Those are the years, he often told the reformers, that make character, make proficiency. A business man should have early training, like a pianist, *at the instrument*. The sense of responsibility makes a little boy a citizen: for him there is no “dangerous age.” From his first winter with the telegraph company he knew he could get on if he tried hard, since most lads emphatically did not try hard. He read law at night, and when he was twenty was confidential clerk with one of the most conservative legal firms in Colorado.

Everything went well until he took his first long vacation — bicycling in the mountains above Colorado Springs. One morning he was pedalling hard uphill when another bicycle came

round a curve and collided with him; a girl coasting. Both riders were thrown. She got her foot caught in her wheel; sprain and lacerations. Henry ran two miles down to her hotel and her family. New York people; the father's name was a legend in Henry's credulous Western world. And they liked him, Henry, these cultivated, clever, experienced people! The mother was the ruling power — remarkable woman. What she planned, she put through — relentless determination. He ought to know, for he married that only daughter one year after she coasted into him. A warning unheeded, that first meeting. It was his own intoxicated vanity that sealed his fate. He had never been "made much over" before.

It had worked out as well as most marriages, he supposed. Better than many. The intelligent girl had been no discredit to him, certainly. She had given him two remarkable sons, any man would be proud of them. . . .

Here Grenfell had flopped over in bed and suddenly sat up, muttering aloud. "But God, they're as cold as ice! I can't see through it. They've never lived at all, those two fellows. They've never run after the ball — they're so damned clever they don't *have* to. They just reach out and *take* the ball. Yes, fine hands, like their grandmother's; long . . . white . . . beautiful nails. The way Harrison picked up that book! I'm glad my paws are red and stubby."

For a moment he recalled sharply a little scene. Three days ago he was packing for his escape to this island. Harrison, the eldest son, the physicist, after knocking, had entered to his father's "Come in!" He came to ask who should take care of his personal mail (that which came to the house) if Miss O'Doyle should go on her vacation before he returned. He put the question rather grimly. The family seemed to resent the fact that, though he worked like a steam shovel while he was in town, when he went on a vacation he never told them how long he would be away or where he was going.

"Oh, I meant to tell you, Harrison, before I leave. But it was nice of you to think of it. Miss O'Doyle has decided to put off her vacation until the middle of October, and then she'll take a long one." He was sure he spoke amiably as he stood looking at his son. He was always proud of Harrison's fine presence, his poise and easy reserve. The little travelling bag (made to his order) which on a journey he always carried himself, never trusted to a porter, lay open on his writing table. On top of his pyjamas and razor case lay two little books bound in red leather. Harrison picked up one and glanced at the lettering on the back. *King Henry IV, Part I.*

"Light reading?" he remarked. Grenfell was stung by such impertinence. He resented any intrusion on his private, personal, non-family life.

"Light or heavy," he remarked dryly, "they're good company. And they're mighty human."

"They have that reputation," his son admitted.

A spark flashed into Grenfell's eye. Was the fellow sarcastic, or merely patronizing?

"Reputation, hell!" he broke out. "I don't carry books around with my toothbrushes and razors on account of their reputation."

"No, I wouldn't accuse you of that." The young man spoke quietly, not warmly, but as if he meant it. He hesitated and left the room.

Sitting up in his bed in the small hours of the morning, Grenfell wondered if he hadn't flared up too soon. Maybe the fellow hadn't meant to be sarcastic. All the same he had no business to touch anything in his father's bag. That bag was like his coat pocket. Grenfell never bothered his family with his personal diversions, and he never intruded upon theirs. Harrison and his mother were a team — a close corporation! Grenfell respected it absolutely. No questions, no explanations demanded by him. The bills came in; Miss O'Doyle wrote the checks and he signed them. He hadn't the curiosity, the vulgarity to look at them.

Of course, he admitted, there were times when he got back at the corporation just a little. That usually occurred when his dyspepsia had kept him on very light food all day and, the dinner at home happening to be "rich," he confined himself to graham crackers and milk. He remembered such a little dinner scene last month. Harrison and his mother came downstairs dressed to go out for the evening. Soon after the soup was served, Harrison wondered whether Koussevitzky would take the slow movement in the Brahms Second as he did last winter. His mother said she still remembered Muck's reading, and preferred it.

The theoretical head of the house spoke up. "I take it that this is Symphony night, and that my family are going. You have ordered the car? Well, I am going to hear John McCormack sing *Kathleen Mavourneen*."

His wife rescued him as she often did (in an innocent, well-bred way) by refusing to recognize his rudeness. "Dear me! I haven't heard McCormack since he first came out in Italy years and years ago. His success was sensational. He was singing Mozart then."

Yes, when he was irritable and the domestic line-up got the better of him, Margaret, by being faultlessly polite, often saved the situation.

When he thought everything over, here in this great quiet, in this great darkness, he admitted that his shipwreck had not been on the family rock. The bitter truth was that his worst enemy was closer even than the wife of his bosom — was his bosom itself!

Grenfell had what he called a hair-trigger stomach. When he was in his New York office he worked like a whirlwind; and to do it he had to live on a diet that would have tried the leanest anchorite. The doctors said he did everything too hard. He knew that — he always had done things hard, from the day he first went to work for the Western Union. Mother and two little sisters, no schooling — the only capital he had was the ginger to care hard and work hard. Apparently it was not the brain that desired and achieved. At least, the expense account came out of a very other part of one. Perhaps he was a throw-back to the Year One, when in the stomach was the only constant, never sleeping, never quite satisfied desire.

The humiliation of being "delicate" was worse than the actual hardship. He had found the one way in which he could make it up to himself, could feel like a whole man, not like a miserable dyspeptic. That way was by living rough, not by living soft. There wasn't a big-game country in North America where he hadn't hunted; mountain sheep in the wild Rockies, moose in darkest Canada, caribou in Newfoundland. Long before he could really afford it, he took four

months out of every year to go shooting. His greatest triumph was a white bear in Labrador. His guide and packmen and canoe men never guessed that he was a frail man. Out there, up there, he wasn't! Out there he was just a "city man" who paid well; eccentric, but a fairly good shot. That was what he had got out of hard work and very good luck. He had got ahead wonderfully . . . but, somehow, ahead on the wrong road.

§

At this point in his audit Grenfell had felt his knees getting cold, so he got out of bed, opened a clothes closet, and found his eiderdown bathrobe hanging on the hook where he had left it two summers ago. That was a satisfaction. (He liked to be orderly, and it made this cabin seem more his own to find things, year after year, just as he had left them.) Feeling comfortably warm, he ran up the dark window blinds which last night he had pulled down to shut out the disturbing sight of the stars. He bethought him of his eye-drops, tilted back his head, and there was that planet, serene, terrible and splendid, looking in at him . . . immortal beauty . . . yes, but only when somebody saw it, he fiercely answered back!

He thought about it until his head went round. He would get out of this room and get out quick. He began to dress — wool stockings, moccasins, flannel shirt, leather coat. He would get out and find his island. After all, it still existed. The Professor hadn't put it in his pocket, he guessed! He scrawled a line for William, his man Friday: "BREAKFAST WHEN I RETURN," and stuck it on a hook in his dining-car kitchen. William was "boarded out" in a fisherman's family. (Grenfell wouldn't stand anyone in the cabin with him. He wanted all this glorious loneliness for himself. He had paid dearly for it.)

He hurried out of the kitchen door and up the grassy hillside to the spruce wood. The spruces stood tall and still as ever in the morning air; the same dazzling spears of sunlight shot through their darkness. The path underneath had the dampness, the magical softness which his feet remembered. On either side of the trail yellow toadstools and white mushrooms lifted the heavy thatch of brown spruce needles and made little damp tents. Everything was still in the wood. There was not a breath of wind; deep shadow and new-born light, yellow as gold, a little unsteady like other new-born things. It was blinking, too, as if its own reflection on the dewdrops was too bright. Or maybe the light had been asleep down under the sea and was just waking up.

"Hello, Grandfather!" Grenfell cried as he turned a curve in the path. The grandfather was a giant spruce tree that had been struck by lightning (must have been about a hundred years ago, the islanders said). It still lay on a slant along a steep hillside, its shallow roots in the air, all its great branches bleached greyish white, like an animal skeleton long exposed to the weather. Grenfell put out his hand to twitch off a twig as he passed, but it snapped back at him like a metal spring. He stopped in astonishment, his hand smarted, actually.

"Well, Grandfather! Lasting pretty well, I should say. Compliments! You get good drainage on this hillside, don't you?"

Ten minutes more on the winding uphill path brought him to the edge of the spruce wood and out on a bald headland that topped a cliff two hundred feet above the sea. He sat down on a rock and grinned. Like Christian of old, he thought, he had left his burden at the bottom of the hill. Now why had he let Doctor Fairweather's perfectly unessential information give him a miserable night? He had always known this island existed long before he discovered it, and that it must once have been a naked rock. The soil-surface was very thin. Almost anywhere on the open downs you could cut with a spade through the dry turf and roll it back from the rock as you roll a rug back from the floor. One knew that the rock itself, since it rested on the bottom of the ocean, must be very ancient.

But that fact had nothing to do with the green surface where men lived and trees lived and blue flags and buttercups and daisies and meadowsweet and steeplebush and goldenrod crowded one another in all the clearings. Grenfell shook himself and hurried along up the cliff trail. He crossed the first brook on stepping-stones. Must have been recent rain, for the water was rushing down the deep-cut channel with sound and fury till it leaped hundreds of feet over the face of the cliff and fell into the sea: a white waterfall that never rested.

The trail led on through a long jungle of black alder . . . then through a lazy, rooty, brown swamp . . . and then out on another breezy, grassy headland which jutted far out into the air in a horseshoe curve. There one could stand beside a bushy rowan tree and see four waterfalls, white as silver, pouring down the perpendicular cliff walls.

Nothing had changed. Everything was the same, and he, Henry Grenfell, was the same: the relationship was unchanged. Not even a tree blown down; the stunted beeches (precious because so few) were still holding out against a climate unkind to them. The old white birches that grew on the edge of the cliff had been so long beaten and tormented by east wind and north wind that they grew more down than up, and hugged the earth that was kinder than the stormy air. Their growth was all one-sided, away from the sea, and their land-side branches actually lay along the ground and crept up the hillside through the underbrush, persistent, nearly naked, like great creeping vines, and at last, when they got into the sunshine, burst into tender leafage.

This knob of grassy headland with the bushy rowan tree had been his vague objective when he left the cabin. From this elbow he could look back on the cliff wall, both north and south, and see the four silver waterfalls in the morning light. A splendid sight, Grenfell was thinking, and all his own. Not even a gull — they had gone screaming down the coast toward the herring weirs when he first left his cabin. Not a living creature — but wait a minute; there was something moving down there, on the shingle by the water's edge. A human figure, in a long white bathrobe — and a rubber cap! Then it must be a woman? Queer. No island woman would go bathing at this hour, not even in the warm inland ponds. Yes, it was a woman! A girl, and he knew what girl! In the miseries of the night he had forgotten her. The geologist's daughter.

How had she got down there without breaking her neck? She picked her way along the rough shingle; presently stopped and seemed to be meditating, seemed to be looking out at an old sliver of rock that was almost submerged at high tide. She opened her robe, a grey thing lined with white. Her bathing-suit was pink. If a clam stood upright and graciously opened its shell, it

would look like that. After a moment she drew her shell together again — felt the chill of the morning air, probably. People are really themselves only when they believe they are absolutely alone and unobserved, he was thinking. With a quick motion she shed her robe, kicked off her sandals, and took to the water.

At the same moment Grenfell kicked off his moccasins. “Crazy kid! What does she think she's doing? This is the North Atlantic, girl, you can't treat it like that!” As he muttered, he was getting off his fox-lined jacket and loosening his braces. Just how he would get down to the shingle he didn't know, but he guessed he'd have to. He was getting ready while, so far, she was doing nicely. Nothing is more embarrassing than to rescue people who don't want to be rescued. The tide was out, slack — she evidently knew its schedule.

She reached the rock, put up her arms and rested for a moment, then began to weave her way back. The distance wasn't much, but Lord! the cold, — in the early morning! When he saw her come out dripping and get into her shell, he began to shuffle on his fur jacket and his moccasins. He kept on scolding. “Silly creature! Why couldn't she wait till afternoon, when the death-chill is off the water?”

He scolded her ghost all the way home, but he thought he knew just how she felt. Probably she used to take her swim at that hour last summer, and she had forgot how cold the water was. When she first opened her long coat the nip of the air had startled her a little. There was no one watching her, she didn't have to keep face — except to herself. That she had to do and no fuss about it. She hadn't dodged. She had gone out, and she had come back. She would have a happy day. He knew just how she felt. She surely did look like a little pink clam in her white shell!

He was walking fast down the winding trails. Everything since he left the cabin had been reassuring, delightful — everything was the same, and so was he! The air, or the smell of fir trees — something had sharpened his appetite. He was hungry. As he passed the grandfather tree he waved his hand, but didn't stop. Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age. He crossed the sharp line from the deep shade to the sunny hillside behind his cabin and saw the wood smoke rising from the chimney. The door of the dining-car kitchen stood open, and the smell of coffee drowned the spruce smell and sea smell. William hadn't waited; he was wisely breakfasting.

As he came down the hill Grenfell was chuckling to himself: “Anyhow, when that first amphibious frog-toad found his water-hole dried up behind him, and jumped out to hop along till he could find another — well, he started on a long hop.”

According to her biographer James Woodress, Willa Cather wrote most of “The Best Years” in the summer of 1945, probably at the Asticou Inn in Northeast Harbor, Maine. It remained unpublished until after her death in 1947, when Alfred Knopf published it in a collection with two other unpublished stories, “The Old Beauty” and “The Best Years.” This text is from the first edition of that collection, *The Old Beauty and Others* (New York: Knopf, 1948).