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STRAWBERRIES.

By DOROTHY RICHARDSON.

THE roadways have been watered. The street, offering its surface now and then for a moment for rapid flight from curb to curb, is cool and slippery. Along the sun-baked pavements the dust swirls in a cloud. Scraps of straw and paper from the packing-rooms of the great store at the head of the street are blown about your ankles. Every opening eastwards brings a tributary stream of midday traffic, fresh torment of eddying refuse. The way seems endless through the impeding throng. Your random grasp at the thought of hay-time in far-away meadows, of butterflies flitting in scented gardens, heightens your helpless exasperation and brings no healing vision. You press mechanically towards your goal, the by-way opening at last and allowing you to turn in between quiet high grey stone houses. In the haze at the end of the street you may see, as the tumult dies away behind you, the radiant glimmer of trees against white stonework. A motor skims noiselessly by. A careless

Conflict?

some kindly interference at hand. Only as you move from row to row can you glance for a moment at the high-hung curtains of flame, at the darting streaks and the flashes that gleam like brandished knives. The crashing of the tempest through the dry air may even now be hiding the sound of footsteps coming through the garden. . . . But they do not come, and you fill your pannier to the brim, and see the end, the dimming and blurring of the waiting upturned face of earth under the rush of the rain.

You are driven hurrying through the grateful garden to find your place amongst the band of watchers. The storm is in the house. The daily challenge of the silent rooms is driven away. In the strong shelter of the tumult a charm is born in every homely face. In quiet intervals when the thunder is still, and the room is filled with the sound of the rush of the rain upon the full June garden, easy talk rises and flows. The preparation of the evening meal is a pleasant concert in the wide kitchen, and when twilight brings the dying down of the tempest to a softly slurring shower, the charm lingers, and the evening hours stand bright and memorable redeemed from the slumber of custom. In the short night the storm breaks again, suddenly, overhead, and rages for three sultry hours sweeping away at dawn—leaving a silence so pure and strange that it draws you to your window for a moment from the opening gateway of sleep. The crystal sky is high above the earth. No bird has spoken yet. The poplar plumes are almost black. Under your window hining in the grass is a row of little white toadstools.

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song pours from an open window. Down the vista gay door-blinds are outstretched here and there. The sun-stricken balconies are empty, waiting for the night. Your solitary footsteps echo back from the high façades promising peace. Presently the five stone steps are reached and left behind, the hall door is closed. You count the stairs as you mount from the stir of the lower rooms. The thick-walled house is cool and a strong breeze pours through curtained stairway-windows down the long flights. Far away above you you can hear the creak and the sharp tap-tap of your slow-swinging door. You reach the upper landing at last. It stands silent and dust-laden in the glare streaming through a barred skylight. The loose door-knob rattles in your hand, the hinge cries its full scale and your fortress is gained. The breeze falls with the closing of the door. The air is more lifeless here than in the street, and you must breathe and taste the floating dust, but the sting of the sun is away. Shade and stillness close round you at once. You may sink, if you will, into the sweet stupor of a dream and waken to find the burden of the day forgotten; or you may press forward with every sense at rest and pass once more through the difficult doorway of silence. . . . As you stand for a moment, tranquil, at the cross-roads, there comes a long cry echoing down the empty street far below: "Straw . . . berries . . . English straw . . . berries!"

It pierces like an arrow to the heart of memory, releasing a tide that sweeps away London lying tortured under the midday sun, and carries you out of the harbour of your enclosing room. You stand in the wide, high doorway of the wagon-barn. You can see the southern countryside spreading for miles north and east and west, ridge and valley and ridge, glaring in a shadowed midday. The distant sweeps of meadowland are deep-toned and near, a rich velvet beneath the curtained sky. Every farm-building, every coned oast and white-faced windmill stands sharp against the surrounding greenery. The farthest ridge lies languidly, like an arm heavy with hanging draperies along the horizon.

You pass from your shelter out into the strangely-staring world with your leaf-lined pannier. You make your way along the shining gravelled pathways, through the spellbound garden, past the orchard edge, where the talkative afternoon poultry huddle motionless in their weed-grown run. Out on the clear slope beyond the melon-frames the world of earth and sky gathered together in this strange stillness releases you from the smiling burden of every day. They welcome you; they promise and reward; they give a sign and reveal a secret. But you may not linger in your freedom. There is not a moment to be lost. The red fruits lie gleaming amongst their dark leaves against the burnish of the strewn straw, and by the time you have freed your booty from its sheltering nets a copper glow has come out upon the northern bank of sky, turning the distant woods from green to purple. Great massed cloud shapes are driving slowly over the grey. Now and again as you work at your little clumped plants there comes a faint stir through the breathless spaces, a moment's freshening, and a faint moan that passes by you and dies into the air, leaving the silence and the livid, mutual stare of earth and sky. With bent head you labour on. In your pannier is a slow-growing pile of fruit, heavy and chill. The sky is leaning nearer. Presently a few slow drops beat down upon your neck, you hear them tapping upon the ribbed leafage. Then they too cease and the silence waits. There are three more rows of the two-days' crop still to be searched. Your basket is nearly full. The first signal comes from the north, the first pale flame shooting across the grey, making an instant's daylight over the countryside. A moment later there is a sudden wide gleam from horizon to horizon, then another—a mad daylight dances round you with scarcely an interval, and at last as your hand hurries, fumbling for only the largest globes, the wheels of the open storm rattle deafening across the vault. Pressing down your joy, you work on with what carelessness you may. To pause, to look up, would surely be to find