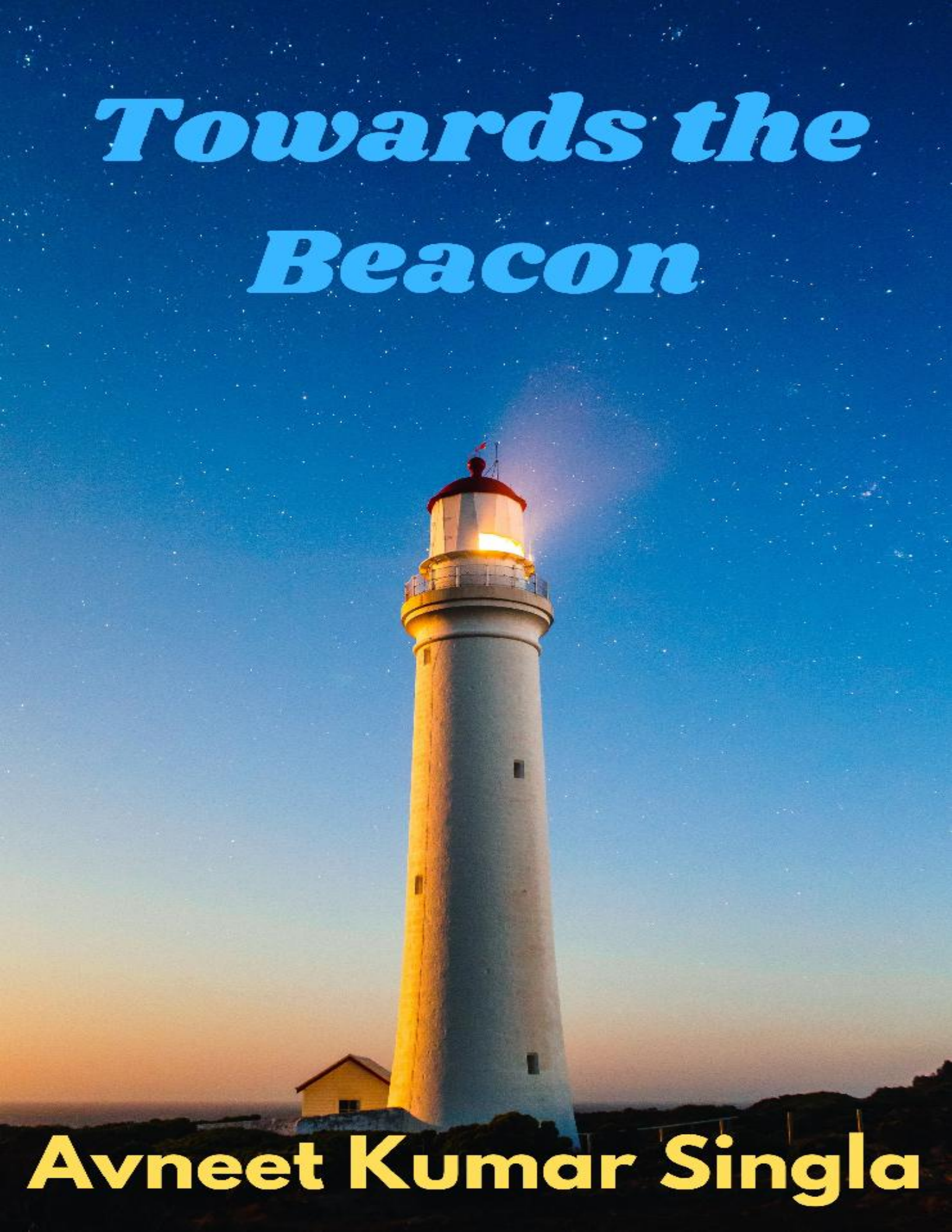
Towards the Beacon



Avneet Kumar Singla

Avneet Kumar Singla

Avneet Kumar Singla

avneetkumarsingla2@gmail.com

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Chapter 1

"Yes, of course, if it goes well tomorrow," said Mrs. Ahuja. "But you have to be done with the lark," she added.

For her son, these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if they were settled, the expedition was to take place, and the miracle he had been looking forward to for years and years, it seemed, after a night of darkness and a day of sailing, in contact. Since, at the age of six, he belonged to that great clan which cannot separate this feeling from it, but must let future perspectives with their joys and worries cloud what is actually at hand, since for such people, even in their earliest childhood, every turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transform the moment on which their darkness or radiance rests, James Ahuja, who sits on the ground and cuts out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of army and navy business, bestowed the image of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, heavenly bliss. It was full of joy. The wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, brightening leaves from the rain, stroking towers, knocking brooms, rustling clothes-all these were so colored and different in his head that he already had his private code, his secret language, although he appeared the image of strong and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably open and pure, slightly frowning at the sight of human frailty, so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly around the refrigerator, imagine him all red and ermine on the bench or run a strict and significant company in a crisis of public affairs.

"But," said his father, stopping in front of the living room window, " it's not going to be good."

If there had been an axe, a poker, or any weapon that ripped a hole in his father's chest and killed him, James would have grabbed it there and then. These were the extreme emotions that Mr. Ahuja aroused in the breasts of his children by his mere presence; as now, lean like a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and mocking his wife, who was in every way tens of thousands of times better than he (James thought), but also with a secret conceit in his own accuracy of judgment. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never changed an unpleasant word to suit the pleasure or comfort of a mortal being, least of all his own children, who, springing from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to the fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail man barks in the darkness (here Mr. Ahuja straightened his back and narrowed his little blue eyes on the horizon), one who above all needs courage, truth and the strength to endure.

"But it may be all right—I expect it will be all right," said Mrs. Ahuja, impatiently making a little twist of the reddish-brown stocking she was knitting. If she had finished it tonight, if they did go to the beacon, it should be given to the beacon keeper for his little boy, who was threatened with a tubercular hip; along with a bunch of old magazines and some tobacco, in fact, which she could lie about, she didn't really, but just wanted to acidify the room, to do nothing all day long to these poor guys who have to be bored to death, but to polish the lamp and cut the wick and rake around on their garden junk, something to amuse them. Because how would you like to be closed for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, on a rock the size of a tennis court? she would ask; and not to have letters or newspapers, and not to see anyone; if you

were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were— - if they were sick, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms; to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week and then a terrible storm comes and the spray-covered windows and birds crash against the lamp and the whole place swings, and not to be able to stick your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? How would you like that? she asked and especially addressed her daughters. So she added, quite differently, you have to take her what you can.

"It's to the west," said the atheist Tansley, holding his bony fingers spread so that the wind blew through them, for he divided Mr. Ahuja's evening walk up and down, up and down the terrace. That is, the wind blew from the worst possible direction to land at the beacon. Yes, he said unpleasant things, Mrs. Ahuja admitted; it was disgusting of him to rub that in and make James even more disappointed; but at the same time, she would not make her laugh at him. "The Atheist", they called him; " the little Atheist."Rose mocked him; Prue mocked him; Andrew, Jasper, Roger mocked him; even the old badger with no tooth in his head had bitten him because he was (as Nancy put it) the hundredth young man who chased them all the way to the Hebrides when it was always so much nicer to be alone.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Ahuja said with great severity. Apart from the habit of exaggeration they had of her, and from the implication (which was true) that she asked too many people to stay, and had to accommodate some in the city, she could "exceptionally capable" her guests, especially young men who were poor as church mice, said her husband, his great admirer, and came there for a holiday. In fact, she had the entire opposite sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for her chivalry and bravery, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finances; finally for an attitude toward

herself that no woman could feel or find pleasant without loss of dignity, something trusting, childlike, awesome; what an old woman could take from a young man without loss of dignity, and woe to the girl-pray heaven, it was none of her daughters!- who does not feel the value of it, and everything it implies, on the bone marrow of their bones!

She turned on Nancy with severity. He did not chase her, she said. He had been asked.

You need to find a way out. There might be an easier way, a less arduous one, she sighed. When she looked in the glass and saw her hair gray, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought maybe she had managed things better—her husband; money; his books. But for her own part, she would never regret her decision for a second, dodge difficulties, or slurp over duties. She was terrible to see now, and it was only in silence, looking up from her plates, after she had spoken so sternly about Charles Tansley that her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose-could live with infidel ideas they had concocted for themselves of a life other than hers; in Paris perhaps; a wilder life; not always to a man or another; for there was in all their minds a mute question of reverence and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, of ring fingers and tips, though there was something to them all in that essence of beauty which called forth masculinity in their girlish hearts, and caused them, as they sat at the table under their mother's eyes, to honor their strange severity, their utmost courtesy, like a queen raised from the mud to wash the dirty foot of a beggar, when she made them so very strict over the wretched Atheists admonished, the one who had hunted them-or, speaking accurately, was invited to stay with them-on the Isle of Skye.

"There will be no landing at the beacon tomorrow," said Charles Tansley, clapping his hands together as he stood by the window with her husband. Surely he had said enough.

She wished they would leave her and James alone and keep talking. She looked at him. He was such a wretched specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows. He could not play cricket; he pushed; he shuffled. He was a sarcastic brute, Andrew said. They knew what he liked best —always going up and down, up and down, with Mr Ahuja, and saying who had won this, who had won that, who was a "first-class man" in Latin verse, who was "brilliant, but I think fundamentally unhealthy," who was undoubtedly the "ablest fellow in Balliol," who had temporarily buried his light in Bristol or Bedford, but was obliged to be heard later when his prolegomena, of which Mr Tansley had written the first pages in Proof with him when Mr Ahuja see you, to a branch of mathematics or philosophy saw the light of day. They talked about it.

She couldn't help but laugh herself sometimes. She said something about " Waves mountains high."Yes," said Charles Tansley, it was a little rough. "Aren't you soaked in the skin?"she had said. "Wet, not wet through," said Mr. Tansley, pinching his sleeve and feeling his socks.

But it wasn't that they wanted it, the children said. It was not his face; it was not his manners. It was him-his point of view. When they talked about something interesting, people, music, history, anything, even said it was a nice evening, so why not sit out the door, then they complained about Charles Tansley until he had turned the whole thing around and it somehow reflected itself and disparaged them—he wasn't happy. And he would go to picture galleries, they said, and he would ask one, did one like his tie? God knows, Rose said, they didn't.

Disappearing as stealthily as deer from the dining table when the meal was over, the eight sons and daughters of Mr and Mrs Ahuja sought their bedrooms, their authenticity in a house where there was no other privacy to discuss anything,

anything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the reform bill; seabirds and butterflies; people living nearby; as the sun streamed into those attics which alone separated a plank so that every step could be clearly heard, the Swiss girl sobbed after her father, who was ill with cancer, in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink pots, paint pots, beetles and the skulls of small birds, while she drew from the long toasted strips of seaweed attached to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was also in the towels, gravelly with sand from bathing.

Quarrels, divisions, disagreements, prejudices twisted into the fiber of being, oh that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ahuja regretted. They were so critical of their children. They talked such nonsense. She walked out of the dining room and held James by the hand as he would not go with the others. It seemed such nonsense to her to invent differences when people, as heaven knows, were different enough without it. The real differences, she thought, standing at the living room window, are enough, quite enough. She had in mind at the moment, rich and poor, high and low; the great birth received from her, half resentfully, a certain respect, for she had not in her veins the blood of this very noble, though slightly mythical Italian house, whose daughters, scattered about English salons in the nineteenth century, lisped so charmingly, had stormed so wildly, and all her wit and bearing and temper came from them, and not from the sluggish English, or the cold Scotch; but deeper, she pondered over the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or this struggling woman in person with a bag on her arm, and a notebook and pencil, with which she carefully ruled in columns, around wages and expenses, employment and unemployment, hoping that she would stop being a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own outrage,

half a relief to her own curiosity, and what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator who elucidates the social problem.

Unsolvable questions they were, it seemed to her, standing there holding James by the hand. He had followed her into the drawing-room, that young man they were laughing at; he was standing at the table, fidgeting about something, clumsy, feeling out of things, as she knew, without looking around. They had all gone-the children; Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley; Augustus Carmichael; her husband-they had all gone. So she turned with a sigh and said, " Would you be bored to come with me, Mr. Tansley?"

She had a dull assignment in the city; she had one or two letters to write; she would be perhaps ten minutes; she would put on her hat. And with her basket and her parasol, she was back ten minutes later and gave out the feeling of being ready for a trip, which, however, must interrupt her for a moment as they passed the tennis court to ask Mr. Carmichael, who was basking in the sun with his yellow cat's eyes fixed so that they seemed like a cat's reflecting the moving branches or passing clouds, but giving no idea of inner thoughts or emotions when he wanted something.

For they were making the great expedition, she said, laughing. They went into the city. "Stamps, Writing-Paper, Tobacco?"she suggested stopping by his side. But no, he didn't want anything. His hands clasped over his big crunch, his eyes blinked as if he had wanted to respond kindly to these mild circumstances (she was seductive, but a little nervous), but could not, sunk in a gray-green somnolence that embraced them all without needing words, in a vast and benevolent lethargy of benevolence; the whole house; the whole world; all the people in it, for he had slipped a few drops of something into his glass at lunch, which, the children thought, accounted for the lively canary-yellow

stripe in his mustache and beard, which was otherwise milk-white. No, nothing, he muttered.

He should have been a great philosopher, said Mrs. Ahuja as they walked down the road to the fishing village, but he had made an unhappy marriage. She held her black parasol very upright and moved with an indescribable expectation, as if she were meeting someone around the corner, she told the story; an affair in Oxford with a girl; an early marriage; poverty; going to India; a little poetry "translate very nicely, I think", be willing to teach the young Persian or Hindustani, but what good was that really?—and then lying, as they saw him, on the lawn.

It flattered him; pushed as he had been, it reassured him that Mrs. Ahuja should tell him so. Charles Tansley revived. She also insinuated, as she did the greatness of the human intellect, even in its decay, the subjugation of all women—not that she blamed the girl, and the marriage had been happy enough, she believed—to her husband's work, she made him feel better satisfied with himself than he had yet done, and he would have liked it if, for example, they had taken a taxi to have paid the fare. As for your little bag, could he not carry it? No, no, she said, she always carried IT herself. She did it too. Yes, he felt that in her. He felt many things, especially something that aroused him and disturbed him for reasons he could not give. He wants her to see him, rubberized and hooded, walking in a procession. A scholarship, a professorship, he felt capable of everything and saw himself—but what did she look at? With a man who inserts an invoice. The huge fluttering sheet flattened, and each stroke of the brush revealed fresh legs, hoops, horses, glittering shades of red and blue, beautifully smooth, until half the wall was covered with the advertisement of a circus; a hundred horsemen, twenty seals, lions, tigers... Who pushed forward, because she was short-sighted, she read it... "will visit this city," she read. It was terribly dangerous

work for a one-armed man, she exclaimed, to stand on a ladder like that-his left arm had been cut off in a harvester two years ago.

"Let's all go!"she wept and went on as if all these horsemen and horses had filled her with childlike exultation and made her forget her pity.

"Let's go," he said, repeating her words but clicking them out with a self-confidence that made her wink. "Let's all go to the circus." No. He could not say it correctly. He couldn't feel it right. But why not? she wondered. Then what was wrong with him? She liked him very much at the moment. Had they not been taken, she asked, to circuses when they were children? Never, he answered, as if she asked exactly what he wanted; had longed all these days to say how they did not go to circuses. It was a large family, nine brothers and sisters, and his father was a worker. "My father is a chemist, Mrs Ahuja. He runs a business."He had paid his own way since he was thirteen. He often went out without a coat in winter. He could never "return hospitality" at college (those were his parched stiff words). He had to do things twice as long as other people; he smoked the cheapest tobacco; shag; the same was done by the old men in the quays. He worked hard-seven hours a day; his theme now was the influence of something on someone—they went on and Mrs. Ahuja didn't quite catch the meaning, just the words here and there... Dissertation... Community... Readership... Lecture. She couldn't follow the ugly academic jargon that rattled so slippery, but said to herself that she now saw why the circus had knocked him off his perch, the poor little man, and why he came out immediately, with all that about his father and mother and his brothers and sisters, and she would make sure they didn't laugh at him any more; she would tell Prue about it. What he would have wished for, she suspected, would have been to say how he would not have gone to the circus, but to Ibsen with the

Ahuja. He was a terrible prig - oh yes, an unbearable bore. For though they had now reached the city and were in the main street, with carts grinding by on the cobblestone pavement, he continued to talk, about settlements and teaching and labourers, helping our own class and lectures, until it gathered that he had got all the confidence back, had recovered from the circus and was about (and now again she liked him warmly) to tell her-but here, the houses that faded away on both sides, they came out on the quay, and the whole bay spread out before them and Mrs. Ahuja could not help, than exclaiming, " Oh, how beautiful!"For the great plate of blue water was before her; the hoarse beacon, distant, stern, in the middle; and to the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft deep folds, the green sand dunes with the wildly flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to run away into a moonland, uninhabited by men.

That was the view she said stop, growing greyer-eyed that her husband loved.

She paused for a moment. But now, she said, artists have come here. In fact, just a few steps away, one of them, in Panama hat and yellow boots, stood earnestly, quietly, absorbing, for all he was observed by ten little boys, with a touch of deep satisfaction on his round red face, and then, as he had looked, dipping; imitating the top of his brush in a soft mound of green or pink. Since Mr. Paunceforte was there, three years earlier, all the pictures were like this, she said, green and gray, with lemon-colored sailboats, and pink women on the beach.

But her grandmother's friends, she said, and looked discreetly as they passed, took the greatest pains; first they mixed their own colors, and then they ground them, and then they put damp cloths to keep them moist.

So Mr. Tansley said she wanted him to see that this man's picture was scarce, they said? The colors were not solid? Did they say that? Under the influence of that extraordinary Emotion which had grown all the time, had begun in the garden when he wanted to take her bag, had increased in the city, as he wanted to tell her everything about himself, he came to see himself, and everything he had ever known, was gone a little wrong. It was terribly strange.

There he stood in the drawing room of the poky Little House where she had taken him, waiting for her while she went upstairs for a moment to see a woman. He heard her quick step; heard her voice cheerful, then low; looked at the mats, tea-Caddies, glass shades; waited quite impatiently; looked excited on the way home; determined to carry her bag; then heard her come out; lock a door; say you have to keep the windows open and close the doors, ask in the house about everything you wanted (she has to talk to a child), when suddenly, when she came, she stood still for a moment (as if she had faked up there and left herself for a moment now), stood for a moment quite motionless against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the garter; when he suddenly realized that it was this: it was this:—She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets—what nonsense did he think? She was at least fifty; she had eight children. He walked through fields of flowers, and took to her breast buds that were broken, and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes, and the wind in her hair—He had held her purse.

"Good-bye, Elsie," she said, and they walked up the street, holding up her parasol and walking as if expecting to meet someone around the corner, while Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride for the first time in his life; a man digging in a drain stopped digging and looked at her,

dropped his arm and looked at her; for the first time in his life Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets, for he was walking with a beautiful woman. He had her bag in his hand.

Chapter 2

"No going to the Beacon, James," he said as he tried, out of respect for Mrs. Ahuja, to at least turn his voice into a semblance of genius.

Vile little man, thought Mrs. Ahuja, why do you keep saying that?

Chapter 3

"Maybe you'll wake up and see the sun shining and the birds singing," she said sympathetically, smoothing the little boy's hair, for her husband had smashed his spirits with his caustic saying that it would not be okay to see them. This way to the beacon was a passion of his, she saw, and then, as if her husband had not said enough, with his caustic saying that it would not be good tomorrow, this vile little man went and rubbed it again.

"Maybe tomorrow will be fine," she said, smoothing his hair.

All she could do now was admire the fridge and turn over the pages of the shopping list in the hope that she might come across something like a rake or a mowing machine, which with its tines and handles would require the greatest skill and care in cutting out. All these young men parodied her husband, she reflected; he said it was going to rain; they said it was going to be a positive tornado.

But here, as she turned the page, her search for the image of a rake or a mower was suddenly interrupted. The harsh murmur that was broken irregularly by the removal of pipes and the insertion of pipes that had repeatedly assured her, although she could not hear what was said (as she sat in the window that opened on the terrace), that the men were talking happily; this sound, which had now lasted half an hour and had taken its place reassuringly in the scale of sounds pressing on them, such as the knocking of balls on bats, the sharp, sudden barking now and then, "How is that? How is that?"from the kids playing cricket, had stopped; so that the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part struck a measured and soothing tattoo on her thoughts and seemed desolate, repeated again and again as she sat with the children, the words of an old

lullaby, muttered by nature ," I guard you—I am your support", but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind rose slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such friendly meaning, but like a ghostly drum roll she ruthlessly beat the measure of life, they thought of the destruction of the island and its devouring in the sea, and warned them, whose day had slipped by in one swift movement after another, that everything was transitory like a rainbow—this sound, which had been concealed and concealed under the other sounds, suddenly thundered hollow in their ears and made them look up with a pulse of terror.

They had stopped talking; that was the explanation. In a second of the tension she had packed to the other extreme, which, as if to regain her for her unnecessary cost of emotion, was cool, amused, and even faintly vicious, she came to the conclusion that poor Charles Tansley had been shed. This was not meaningful to them. When her husband needed sacrifice (and indeed he did), she cheerfully offered him Charles Tansley, who had pushed her little boy.

A moment more, with her head raised, she listened as if waiting for an ordinary sound, a regular mechanical sound; and then she heard something rhythmic, half-said, half-chanted, beginning in the garden, as her husband beat up and down the terrace, something between a croak and a song, she was reassured once more, reassured again that everything was all right, and when she looked down at the book on her knee, she found the picture of a pocket knife with six blades, which could only be cut out if James was very careful.

Suddenly a loud scream, as if from a sleepwalker, half aroused, something about

Hit with shot and grenade