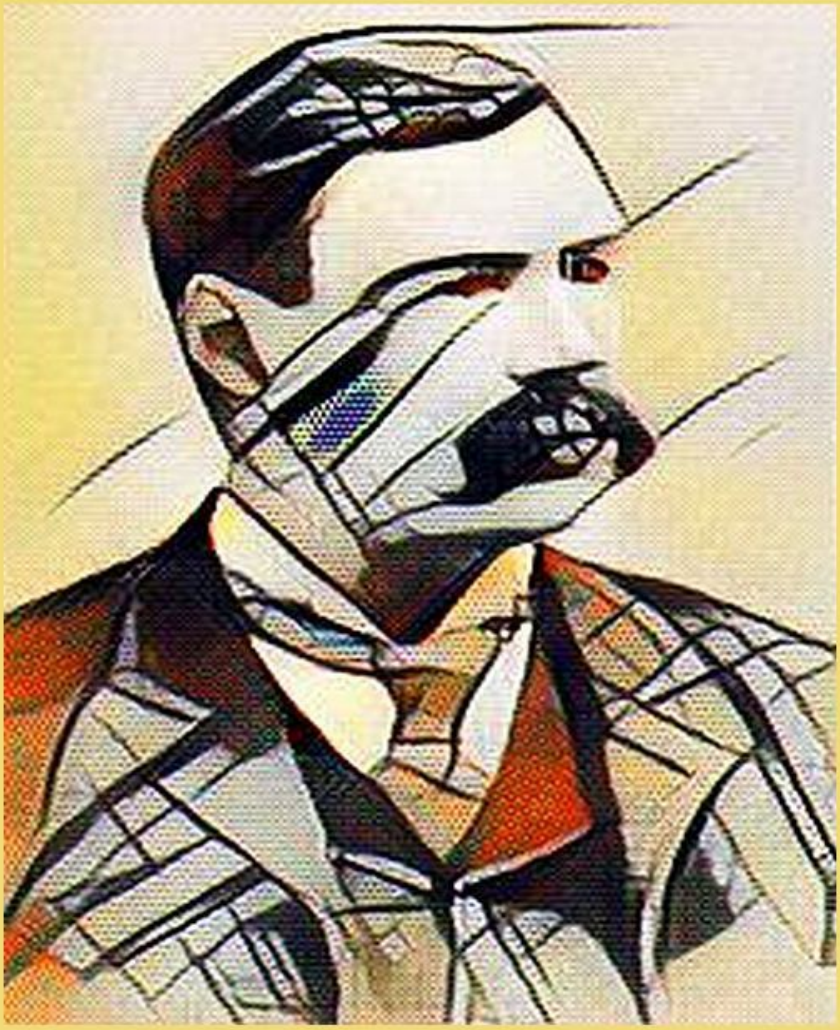
HAROLD FREDERIC



MARCH HARES

March Hares

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Chapter I.

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday, Mr. David Mosscrop lounged against the low stone parapet of Westminster Bridge, and surveyed at length the unflagging procession of his fellow-creatures plodding past him northward into the polite half of London town.

He had come upon the bridge in a melancholy frame of mind, and had paused first of all gloomily to look down at the water. His thoughts were a burden to him, and his head ached viciously. This was no new experience of a morning, worse luck; he had grown accustomed to these evil opening hours of depression and nausea. The fact that it was his birthday, however, gave uncomfortable point to his reflections. He had actually crossed the threshold of the thirties, and he came into the presence of this new lustrum worse than empty-handed. He had done none of the great things which his youth had promised. He had not even found his way into helpful and cleanly company. The memory of the people with whom he spent his time nowadays — in particular, the recollection of the wastrels and fools with whom he had started out yesterday to celebrate the eve of his anniversary — made him sick. He stared down at the slowly-moving flood, and asked himself angrily why a man of thirty who had learned nothing worth learning, achieved nothing worth the doing; who didn't even know enough to keep sober over-night, should not be thrown like garbage into the river.

The impulse to jump over the parapet hung somewhere very close to the grasp of his consciousness. His mind almost touched it as his eyes dwelt upon the broad, opaque mass of shifting drab waters. He said to himself that he had never before been so near the possibility of deliberate suicide as he was at this moment.

He did not allow the notion to take any more definite shape, but mused for a while upon the fact of its lying there, vaguely formless at the back of his brain, ready to leap into being at his will. Of course, he would not give the word: it was merely interesting to think that he was in the same street, so to speak, with the spirit of self-murder.

After a little, the effect of this steadily drifting body of water seemed to soothe his vision. He grew less conscious of mental disturbance and physical disgust alike. Then he stood up, yawned, and glanced at the big clock-tower, where the laggard hands still clung to the unreasonable neighborhood of seven o'clock. For some reason, he felt much better. The sensation was very welcome. He drew a long breath of satisfaction, and, leaning with his back to the stonework, fell to watching the people go past. By a sudden revulsion of mood, he discovered all at once that the excess of the night was now offering him compensations. His brain was extremely clear, and, now that the lees of drink were gone, served him with an eager and almost fluttering acuteness which it was pleasant to follow.

He noted with minute attention the varying types of workmen, shop girls, clerks, and salesmen as they trooped by in the throng, and found himself devoting to each some appropriate mental comment, some wondering guess into their history, or some flash of speculation as to their future. The instantaneous play of his fancy among these flitting items brought great diversion. He rollicked in it — picking out as they trudged along side by side the book-keeper who was probably short in his accounts, the waiter who had been backing the wrong horses, the barmaid with the seraph's face who at luncheon time would be listening unmoved to conversation from City men fit to revolt a dock laborer. It was indeed as good as a play, this marvelous aggregation of human dramatic possibilities surging

tirelessly before him. He wondered that he had never thought of seeing it before.

From amusing details his mind lifted itself to larger conceptions. He thought of the mystery of London's vast economy; of all its millions playing dumbly, uninstructedly, almost like automata, their appointed parts in the strange machinery by which so many droves of butchers' cattle, so many thousands of tons of food and trucks of clothing and coals and oil were brought in daily, and Babylon's produce was sent out again in balancing repayment. The miracle of these giant scales being always kept even, of London's ever-craving belly and the country's never-failing response, loomed upon his imagination. Then, stifling another yawn, it occurred to him that a brain capable of such flights deserved a better fate than to be banged out by a dirty tide against some slime-stained wharf-pile down the river. Yes, and it merited a nobler lot in life, too, than that of being nightly drenched with poisonous drink. Decidedly he would forswear sack, and live cleanly.

The hour struck in the clock-tower. The boom of the great bell swelled hopefully upon his hearing. The chime of the preceding quarter had saddened him, because he heard in it the knell of thirty wasted years. The louder resonance now bore a different meaning. A birthday exposed a new leaf as well as turned down an old one. The twenties were behind him, and undoubtedly they were not nice. Very well; he turned his back upon them. The thirties were all before him; and, as Big Ben thundered forth its deep-voiced clamor, he straightened himself, and turned to look them confidently in the face.

His eyes fell upon the figure of a young woman, advancing in a little eddy of isolation from the throng, a dozen feet away. Even on the instant he was conscious of a feeling that his gaze had not distinguished her from the others by mere chance; it was, indeed, as if there were no others. In the concentrated scrutiny which he found himself

bending upon her, there was a sense of compulsion. His perceptions raced to meet and envelop her.

She was almost tall, and in carriage made the most of her inches. She had much yellow hair of a noticeable sort, pale flaxen in bulk but picked with lemon in its lights, about her brows. He thought that it was dyed, and in the same breath knew better. He mastered the effect of her fine face — with its regular contour, its self-conscious eyes, its dainty roseleaf of a chin thrust reliantly forth above a broad, white throat — all in some unnamed fraction of a second.

The impression of her filled every comer of his mind. He tried to think about who and what she was, and only built up scaffoldings of conjecture to knock them down again. She was a girl who tried on mantles and frocks in some big Regent Street place: no, the lack of dignity in such an avocation would be impossible to one who carried her chin so high. A woman journalist? No, she was too pretty for that. What was she — typewriter, restaurant-waitress, saleswoman? No, these all wore black, with white collar and wristbands; and her apparel was of an almost flaring order. Her large-sleeved bodice of flowered blue silk, snug to the belted waist, suggested Henley rather than the high road out of squalid Lambeth. Her straw sailor-hat, jauntily borne on the primrose fluff and coils of hair, belonged, too, not a mile lower on the river than Teddington. She should by rights have a racquet in her hand, and be moving along over the close-shaved lawn of Ranelagh's park, on a hazy, languid summer afternoon. What on earth was she doing on Westminster Bridge, at this ridiculous hour, in this dismal company?

Then speculation died abruptly. She was close to him now, and he recognized her. She was a young woman whom he had seen in the British Museum reading-room a score of times. Her face was entirely familiar to him. Only the other day he had got down for her, from the county-histories shelves, two ponderous volumes which she had seemed

unable to manage by herself. She had thanked him with a glance and a pleasant nod. He seemed to recall in that glance a tacit admission that they were old acquaintances by sight. He looked her square in the eye, meanwhile, the inner muscles of his face preparing and holding in readiness a smile in case she gave a sign of remembering him.

For a moment it appeared that she was passing without recognition. He had the presence of mind to feel that this was a gross and inexcusable mischance. His feet instinctively poised themselves to follow her, as if it were for this, and this only, that they had tarried so long on the bridge.

Before he could take a step, however, she had halted, and, in a wavering fashion, moved sidelong out of the main current of pedestrianism. She stood irresolutely by the parapet for a few seconds, with a pretense of being interested in the view of the river and the prim stretch of Parliamentary architecture on its right bank. Then, with a little shrug of decision, she turned to him.

" It is a fine morning," she said.

He had stepped to her side, and he bent upon her now the smile which had so nearly gone a-begging. " I was afraid you hadn't noticed me — and I had quite resolved to go after you."

She flashed inquiry into his face, then let her glance wander vaguely off again. " Oh, I saw you well enough," she confessed, with a curious intermingling of hesitation and boldness; " but at first I wasn't going to pretend I did. In fact, I don't in the least know why I did stop. Or, rather, I do know, but you don't, and you never will. That is to say, I shan't tell you! "

" Oh, but I do know," he answered genially. " How should you imagine me so deficient in discernment? Only — only, I think I won't tell either."

She looked at him again with a kind of startled intentness, and parted her lips as if to speak. He fancied that he caught in this gaze the suggestion of a painful and humbled diffidence. But then she tossed her head with a saucy air and smiled archly. "What a tremendous secret we shall carry to our graves! " she laughed. " Tell me, do you sleep on the bridge? One hears such remarkable stories, you know, about the readers at the Museum."

He regarded her with pleasure beaming in his eyes. " No, I go entirely without sleep," he replied, with gravity, " and walk about the streets turning a single idea for ever in my mind; and every morning at daybreak — oh, this has gone on for years now — I come here to watch for the beautiful girl with the yellow hair who some time is to come up to me and remark, 'It is a fine morning.' A fortuneteller told me, ever so long ago, that this was what I must do, and I've never had a moment's rest since."

" You must be very tired," she commented, "and a good deal mixed in your mind, too, especially since yellow hair has come so much into fashion. And did the fortune-teller mention what was to happen after the — the beautiful lady had really appeared? "

" Ah, that is another of my secrets! " he cried, delightedly.

They had begun to stroll together toward the clock-tower. The throng bustling heedlessly past with hurried steps gave them an added sense of detachment and companionship. They kept close together by the parapet, their shoulders touching now and again. When they reached the end of the bridge, and paused to look again upon the river prospect, their manner had taken on the ease of people who have known each other for a long time.

The tide was running out now with an exaggerated show of perturbed activity. The girl bent over, and stared at the hurrying current, sweeping along in swirling eddies under the arch, and sucking at the brown-grey masonry of the

embankment wall as it passed. Her silence in this posture stretched out over minutes, and he respected it.

At last she had looked her fill and turned, and they resumed their walk, " I could never understand drowning," she remarked, musingly; " it doesn't appeal to me at all, somehow. They talk about its being pleasant after the first minute or so, but I don't believe it. Do you? "

" There might possibly be some point about it — if one could choose the fluid," he replied, achieving flippancy with an effort. " Like the Duke of Clarence, for example."

" How do you mean? The papers all said it was influenza. Oh, I see — you mean the Shakespeare one." Her good faith was undoubted. " But no, we were speaking of drowning — of suicide."

" No, we weren't," he said, soberly. The memory of his own mood a brief half -hour ago stirred uneasily within him. " And we're not going to, either. What the mischief have you — young and healthy and happy and pretty as a peach — to do with any such things? "

" In fact," she went on thoughtfully, as if he had not spoken, " all kinds of death seem an outrage to me. They make me angry. It is too stupid to have to die. What right have other people to say to me, 'Now you must die '? I was born to live just as much as they were, and I have every whit as much right on the earth as they have. And I have a right to what I need to keep me alive, too. That must be so, according to common-sense! "

Mosscrop had listened to this declaration of principles but indifferently. A sense of drowsiness had stolen over him, and, yielding to it for the moment, he had hung his head, with an aimless regard upon the pavement. All at once he caught sight of something that roused him. His companion's little boot, disclosed in movement beneath her skirt, was broken at the side, and almost soleless. He lagged behind for a step or two, and made sure of what he saw. The girl in the silken blouse was shod like a beggar.

" Which way are you going? " he asked, with a pretense of suddenly remembering something. He had halted, and they stood at the corner, looking up Whitehall. He smothered a yawn with a little explanatory laugh. " I made rather a night of it — it's my birthday to-day — and I'm half asleep. I hadn't noticed where we'd walked to. I hope I haven't taken you out of your way."

The girl hesitated, looked up the broad, stately street, and bit her lip in strenuous thought of some sort.

" Good morning, then! " she blurted out, confusedly, and turned to move away.

The impulse to be quit of her had been very sharply defined in his mind, and had dictated not only his words, but his awkward, half -shamefaced, half -familiar, manner in suggesting a parting. Now it vanished again with miraculous swiftness.

" No, no! You mustn't go off like that! " he urged, and sprang forward to her side. " I only asked you which was your way."

She was blinking her eyes in a struggle to regain facial composure. He could see that she had been on the point of tears, and the sight moved him to recklessness. It was not surprising to hear her confess: " Me? I have no way."

He took charge of her with a fine paternal tone. " Oh yes, you have! Your way is my way. You are going with me. It's my birthday, you know, and you have come to help me celebrate it. What do you say to beginning with a special breakfast? — or perhaps you've spoiled your appetite already. But you can pretend to eat a little."

The girl laughed aloud, with pathetic irony at some conceit which curled her lip in scornful amusement. Words rose to her tongue, but she forbore to utter them, and stared up the street.

" You'll come along, won't you? " He had held up his hand, and a four-wheeler, with a driver and horse of advanced

years and dejected aspect, was crawling diagonally across the roadway toward them.

She took courage to look him frankly in the face. " I shall be very much obliged to you, indeed," she said, keeping her voice up till the avowal should be finished. " I've had no breakfast."

The ancient cab, with a prodigious rattling of framework and windows for its snail's progress, bore them along past Trafalgar Square, and westward through narrow streets, already teeming with a busy, foreign-looking life, till it halted before a restaurant in one of the broader thoroughfares of Soho.

When they had alighted, and the sad old driver, pocketing his shilling in scowling silence, had started off, a thought occurred to Mosscrop.

" I tell you what we'll do," he broke forth. " We'll decree that it's your birthday, too, so that we can celebrate them together. That will be much more fun. And before we go into breakfast, I must get you a little present of some sort, just to mark the occasion. Come, you haven't anything to say about it at all. It's my affair, entirely."

He led the way along past several shops, and halted in front of a narrow window in which a small collection of women's boots was displayed. A man in shirt-sleeves and apron had just taken down the shutter, and stood now in the doorway, regarding them with a mercantile yet kindly smile.

"It is the best Parisian of make," the shoeman affirmed, to help forward Mosscrop's decision.

" You can see how different they are from ordinary English things," said David, argumentatively. "The leather is like a glove, and the workmanship — observe that! I don't believe any lady could have a more unique present than a pair of real French boots."

The girl had come up, and stood close beside him, almost nestling against his shoulder. He saw in the glass the dim

reflection of her pleased face, and moved toward the door as if it were all settled. Then, as he stepped on the threshold, she called to him.

" No — please! " she urged. " I think we won't, if you don't mind."

" Of course we will! " he insisted, turning in the doorway. " Why on earth shouldn't we? It's your birthday, you know. Come, child, you mustn't be obstinate; you must be nice, and do what you're told."

As she still hung back, shaking her head, he went out to her. "What's the matter? You liked the idea well enough a minute ago. I saw you smiling in the window there. Come! don't let a mere trifle like this spoil the beginning of our great joint-birthday. It's too bad of you! Won't you really have the boots — from me? "

" Well," she made answer, falteringly, " it's very kind — but if I do, I'd rather you didn't come into the shop — that is, that you went out while I was trying them on — because — well, it is my birthday, you know, and I must have my own way — a little. You will stop outside, won't you? "

This struck him as perhaps an excess of maidenly reserve. He smiled impatiently. " By all means, if it is your whim. But — but I'm bound to say — I suppose different people draw the line at different places, but feet always seemed to me to be relatively blameless things, as things go. Still, of course, if it's your idea."

"No, if you take it that way," she said, " we'll go and get our breakfast, and say no more about it." She found the fortitude to turn away from the window as she spoke.

" If *I* take it that way! " The perverseness of this trivial tangle annoyed him. " Why, I consented to stop outside, didn't I? What more is demanded? Do you want me to pass a vote of confidence, or shall I whistle during the performance, so that you may know I am cheerful, or what? Suppose I told you that I had been a salesman in a boot-shop myself, and had measured literally thousands of pretty

little feet — would that reassure you? I might come in, then, mightn't I? "

" No — you never were that — you are a gentleman." She stole a perplexed glance up at him, and sighed. " I should dearly love the boots — but you won't understand. I don't know how to make you." Looking into his face, and catching there a reflection of her own dubiety, she burst suddenly into laughter. " You are a gentleman, but you are a goose, too. My stockings are too mournful a patchwork of holes and darning to invite inspection — if you will have it."

" Poor child! " He breathed relief, as if a profoundly menacing misunderstanding had been cleared up. " Here, take this and run across to that fat Jewess in the doorway there. She will fit you out."

Presently she returned, with beaming eyes, and an air of shyness linked with complacent self-approbation which he found delightful.

" Oh, I should simply insist on your coming in now", she cried gaily, at the door of the boot-shop, in answer to his mock look of deferential inquiry.