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Sugar in the air

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CHAPTER I

SITUATIONS VACANT

THE last chestnut had fallen from the trees in the Hatch; the mushrooms were no longer to be had for the taking, in the early morning, from the dewy fields by the Antelope Inn. It was already late October, and Charles Pry, who lived in the old oast-house at Guff's Farm, had boarded himself up for the winter. In summer it did not matter that the floor was only hessian spread over laths — the old drying floor of the oast — or that the window had long since rotted away, leaving a hole through which the swallows flew. In winter it would be another story, and by six in the evening it was then already dark. So Pry had got from the farmer some pieces of frayed oilcloth which he nailed over the floor, and an ancient lattice window and some sacking, with which he made good the hole in the wall. With these improvements the old oast-house, having a sound roof and fourteen-inch walls, was comfortable enough. An oilstove kept it warm, and a stable lamp, swung from a beam, patterned its walls with warm shadows and mellow areas of light. The place was barely ten feet square, but it suited Pry: there was a plank, supported on two boxes, on which to do his cooking, and a bed, made of sacks filled with straw, which occupied a quarter of the floor. These, with a table, a seat made of the top of a piano stool

stuck in a broken stove, and a box full of books and personal belongings, were all that Pry needed for what he happened to be doing.

He was trying to write a book, a treatise. Some eleven thin wads of manuscript, much bethumbed and the worse for wear, and headed with chapter numbers, indicated the progress he had made during the spring and summer. But Charles Pry was not a writer, he was an engineer, a fairly capable chemical engineer, who had served his apprenticeship, taken a degree in engineering and diploma in chemistry, and worked on some quite responsible jobs for his age, which was then twenty-nine. It was not of choice that Pry lived in a derelict oast-house, and tortured himself with trying to write a book, when it would have been so much easier for him to have installed machinery in chemical factories, and thereby earned money. It was simply that Charles Pry was unemployed; there were no jobs to be had, except on the manufacture of munitions, to which, for some reason, he could not bring himself to stoop. So he made the best of it; ekeing out the savings from his last job, which had ended some eighteen months before, and enjoying, for once in his life, a whole year round in the countryside. The book was only to occupy his mind. He did not know the names of half the things in the wild and colourful vegetation of the Chart, but his surroundings delighted him, and he had taken great pleasure in observing how the bees buzz round the willow trees, when they are in flower, in measuring the length of new wood that the firs put out each year, and in chatting to the farmer

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about the diet and life history of pigs. In his happier moods Pry found reasons for persuading himself that this spell of unemployment had been the best part of his life so far.

For one thing, his friend Abner Muller, who was habitually unemployed, in the sense that he never worked for gain and was therefore an experienced outcast from the economic life of society, came and lived near Pry. Abner read incessantly from the works of Walt Whitman, Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence, and he appeared to Pry, for whom these writers' ideas had all the charm of new acquaintance, to be no less than what he said he was: a transvaluer of values. At any rate, Pry could talk with Muller and the conversation was not superficial; so far from regarding Pry's aspirations and anxieties as so much sob stuff, to be avoided as matter for conversation, and keeping as everyone else did to the safe repetition of formulae, commonplaces and mere sociable noise, Muller was interested only in what was to Pry a vague world of spirit and feeling, to which the pass-word was 'Experience'. This very nearly turned the world inside out for Mr. Pry, and profoundly disturbed his premature conclusion that the written or spoken word had just two uses, one for the record of facts and the laws of nature, and the other for working up such things as poetry, religion, politics and philosophy, which could be dismissed as so much 'talk' vaguely related to the emotionalism of women, which he affected to despise. When Muller quietly demonstrated that there are no 'Laws' in nature, that 'Facts' are only notions widely

accepted, and that the subject matters of religion and philosophy are things more real than concrete and harder than chrome steel, Pry was greatly shocked and surprised. When Muller went on to the subject of 'Values' Pry found that those things which he had come to regard as his ideals were falling about his head in a litter of unimportance, and his whole attitude to 'Life' stood revealed to him as trumpery, adolescent and mean. For this he blamed his social environment — until Muller went on to talk about 'Environment'.

Sustained to some extent by the force of Muller's personality, Pry went on writing his book, it became for him, at one and the same time a gesture of independence of society and defiance of Muller, but it did not banish Pry's sense of guilt and exile in being unemployed. Although he never acknowledged it, Pry spent at least half his time writing unsuccessful applications for jobs as an engineer, and he was oppressed with a constant anxiety: his money was rapidly running out and in a few months he would be destitute.

'It is a boom year,' he would explain to Muller, 'there has been a splendid recovery under the Nominal Government, the wheels of industry are turning, manufactures are up, exports are up, trade is flourishing. Don't look at these fields of weeds that were once hop gardens, don't look at those blasted moth-eaten chickens, take the greater view — the Nominal view — look at the pictures on the hoardings, the pictures of streets and streets of new houses and happy, laughing families; look at the pictures of brawny medieval blacksmiths, resting their sledge hammers on gear

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wheels, against a background of prosperously smoking stack chimneys. Look at the pictures of barrels of beer — do you not see how fortunate we all are. The hoarding and the pronouncements of the inspired newspapers are the true indices of Prosperity. Don't notice me, a skilled engineer with nothing to do; don't notice the thousands like me, who fight like starving cats for every bit of a job that gets advertised in *The Times*. It's our fault entirely, or just an accident of distribution.'

Muller would regard him with half-amused eyes, noticing rather the intensity of feeling than the meaning of what Pry had said, asking him why he should disturb himself because other people told lies.

'That's all very well for you,' Pry would retort. 'You are a priest, or you would be, if there were any such thing as a living Church. People "lend" you money, and pay your rent because they want somebody to perform the priestly function for them. You have only to look like yourself, say "I am hungry, give me bread", talk disinterestedly for a bit, and people give you all you want, counting it a privilege. Nobody would pay me anything because of my presence, or what I have to say: I have no particular presence, and I've nothing that matters to say. I am not an itinerant Christian, I'm an Engineer.'

Then Muller would change the subject, back to Edward Carpenter, and the austere masters of beauty. The while Pry silently brooded on, tormented by the idea that since others had employment, since others must be getting the few jobs that were advertised,

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there must be some fault or weakness in himself, whereby he could not follow his calling.

Pry had a peculiar fondness for children, but he had never dared to be the father of a child. He would go over in a curious, sly way to Muller's cottage in the afternoon, in the hope that Kristin would let him take little Absolom, their boy, aged three, out on the heath to collect pine cones or down to the brook for sticklebacks. Kristin understood this perfectly, and challenged him with big eyes and a she-smile that might mean anything. Pry did all kinds of ingenious things to amuse the child, but little Absolom remained as much afraid of Pry as Pry was of Absolom. He would never touch the child or pick him up.

It was not that Pry lived a celibate life, for he certainly did not. For two years past he had been sleeping, every week or so, with Mary, and she now came down from London, regularly every Friday evening and returned on Monday morning. She was a schoolmistress working for the London County Council. She passed for Pry's wife in the little hamlet round Guff's farm, and she was in fact as much his wife as she would ever be, whilst they continued to use contraceptives. That was not half-way, but Pry, as he never ceased to remind himself, was unemployed, and his savings would scarcely last out to the end of the year. A child could not be fed on air, and were they to have a child Mary would be unemployed as well. Even the formality of marriage at a Registry Office, a pinch of incense on the altar, would not prevent her losing her job.

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During the long week days, when Pry sat humped up in the corner of the oast-house, labouring at his manuscript, Mary was never absent from his thoughts. That was not because he was in love with her, in any superficial sense of the word, but because he had set himself to describe, with the rigorous exactitude of an engineering specification and the patience of ten mules, the exact stages by which, in two years, they had reached their present condition of frustrated intimacy. It had been a slow, progressive process, in the strategy of which Pry had taken the keenest intellectual interest. In eleven chapters Pry had only got to the point where Mary had bought tinned cream to put on wild blackberries — an action which gravely offended his sense of good taste — and after a sulkiness which lasted for hours they had suddenly flung themselves together and stayed at an hotel under an assumed name. The breakdown at this point led inevitably to the episode where two brass wedding rings purchased by Pry from Woolworth's were flung into the River Avon. It was, in Pry's opinion, an important transition, but its accurate description in terms, not of blackberries and wedding rings, but of psychological and sexological processes, called for so nice a precision of words, and so clear a realization of the forces at work, that for hours he was unable to cope with its difficulty. There were also aspects of his subject matter that were still decidedly painful, for Pry had encountered Mary on the rebound from an earlier and more idyllic love, and sometimes he thought her unworthy of him because she was a schoolmistress and could neither write poetry nor sing.

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When Pry could not get on with his remarkable thesis on the technology of seduction, he would relapse into apathy and brood wretchedly, until the following Friday, about unemployment. As a kind of penance for idleness he read the long *Maurizius Case* and other works by Jacob Wassermann, the words thumping at him like the heavy, interminable arguments of advocates in courts of law. The oast-house at such times with its tramps who lay wheezing in the straw below, seemed an intolerable prison and he himself some spectral figure in a nightmare of futility. Then he would tear open the last copy of *The Engineer*, which he had posted to him every week, and apply for any job that was advertised, suitable or unsuitable, taking a horrible pleasure in the dull repetition of the particulars of his career, which he had committed to memory, parrot fashion.

One morning in late October, when this story opens, Pry went to the farm to get his usual daily half pint of milk, and found a letter for him — a reply to one of his applications. It was typed on a cheap piece of plain paper. It requested him to attend for interview on Thursday of that week, and gave only the name of the firm: Hydro-Mechanical Constructions (Great Britain) Ltd., with an address at Agastral House, London. Pry turned the piece of paper over and over: queer, he thought, that they had not used their business note-paper; they did not want to disclose the names of their Directors. A gag, probably, some ruse for getting young men to go out and live syphilitic lives on the Ruritanian oil wells, or from door to door selling

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vacuum cleaners. He placed before him a great file of papers, which he had labelled 'Search for Employment', and found the cutting of the advertisement to which the box number referred. It read:

Chemical Engineer, also Chemist, required to work near London. Must have highest qualifications, long industrial and research experience, be capable of holding really responsible positions, and at present unemployed. Apply Box No. K. 777, with fullest particulars in first instance.

Pry smiled grimly. One might suppose such men to be vital in Industry. Industry was booming — according to the Nominal Government — why should there be any such key men unemployed. The very wording of the advertisement was unpatriotic and seditious. It was fortunate that no one would ever hear of the five hundred and ninety odd men, all more or less satisfying the requirements, who would inevitably be scrambling for the job, whatever the salary. Pry decided to spend a shilling and search the records of Hydro-Mechanical Constructions (Great Britain) Ltd. at Somerset House.

It was at this time that Pry quarrelled with Muller. It was ostensibly about the hieroglyphics. Pry had a whim to copy hieroglyphics out of the Book of the Dead at the British Museum and to paint a frieze of them, bit by bit, in blue paint around the walls of the oast-house. Some of the characters were distinctly symbolic, not to say phallic, and conveyed all kinds of meanings to Pry when he gazed at them steadily. He was merry with the paint pot when Muller came over

to borrow the typewriter. He told Muller eagerly about the letter from Hydro-Mechanical Constructions Ltd. Muller showed not the least interest in either hieroglyphics or hydromechanics, he was silently contemptuous and pitying.

'You are an idler,' he said, 'with a few pretty recreations.'

The truth in these words, and the sudden breach of a certain delicately sustained sympathy, cut Pry to the quick. He attacked Muller instantly and bitterly, none the less bitterly because he knew that he had failed Muller. He was idling away his time, and having found no way of living as a free lance, was preparing to sell himself again into Industry. Muller went away in silence, and it was Kristin who brought the typewriter back later.

Pry went to Somerset House, penetrated into the ward-rooms of Industrial Property, and turned up the number of Hydro-Mechanical Constructions Ltd. in a great register of Companies. He paid his shilling for a search ticket, handed it to a severe-eyed janitor, who observed his healthy appearance with suspicion, and took his seat amongst the people with unpleasant faces, the sharks, the skinflints and the brutal-jowled lawyers, who have to do with companies. The fat file of original documents, complete with signatures, was presently laid before him. Pry did not understand much about Company Law, and the significance of half the documents was obscure to him. The authorized capital of the Company was £3,000,000, divided into 1,500,000 Preference Shares at £1, and 6,000,000

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Ordinary Shares at 5s. Pry read the prospectus, and gathered that the object of the Company was to put up houses by pumping transparent cement from central pumping stations into steel shells, which were to be dismantled and used over and over again, until new towns stood glistening in the sun around the temporary buildings which housed their maternal pumps. This was the Hydro-Mechanical Constructional proposition, and the Company had begun by acquiring the world rights, together with a laboratory plant in Belgrade, from one Usidlenie Kosoff for £500,000 in cash and £500,000 in fully paid-up shares. The price paid for the invention seemed to Pry to be very nearly as dazzling as its possibilities; but the main point was that it was an enterprise that would most certainly need engineers, a good many engineers. It might even work, presumably it did, or nobody would have paid so much for it. The prospectus gave no estimate of the profits, but suggested darkly that because of the great importance of the new constructional process to Builders, Contractors, Municipal Authorities, Government Departments and War Offices over the entire civilized world it was impolitic to disclose the terrific profits that the shareholders would get. Nothing was contained in the prospectus about any houses that had actually been made by the process, but a letter from a chartered municipal engineer (in Urania) expressed the considered opinion that it would revolutionize the architectural industry [*sic*] and a university laboratory (in England) had tested a six-inch cube of the new material, and found it to have such and such a tensile strength, and

such and such a modulus of elasticity, both of which figures were highly satisfactory. Pry wrote down the names of the Directors, for further investigation, and came away from Somerset House with a splitting headache through which struggled pleasurable anticipations of a 'job', squirting up a new town of crystal dwelling houses on some of the virgin pastures of England.

Pry spent the rest of the day in the Patent Office Library, concentrating on the technology of cement. In the evening he met Mary in a tea-shop, and told her what he had found out. Mary, who had little time for *talk* about independence and freedom, or for most of the things that Pry had discussed at such length with Muller in the oast-house, warmly congratulated him on the job he was within sight of getting, and said how satisfactory it would be to have a crystal home of their own, somewhere in the country, where they could live together all the time, and not just at week-ends.

Pry gathered that it would be just about nine months after the date of his appointment — if he should be appointed — that their first child would blink at the sunlight through its crystal container, and he spoilt the rest of the evening completely by a violent exposition of all this as an example of the way women tie men up with ropes, and heave on the last knot that fixes them for ever into the cage of the economic and industrial system.