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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Grass is Singing

Written by Doris Lessing

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DORIS LESSING

# *The Grass is Singing*



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*To*

Mrs GLADYS MAASDORP
of Southern Rhodesia
for whom I feel the greatest
affection and admiration

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the rooftree
Co co rico, co co rico
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder

From *The Waste Land* by T. S. ELIOT
with grateful acknowledgements to the
author and to Messrs Faber & Faber

'It is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses.'

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

# 1

MURDER MYSTERY

*By Special Correspondent*

Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime. No motive has been discovered.

It is thought he was in search of valuables.

The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have.

And then they turned the page to something else.

But the people in 'the district' who knew the Turners, either by sight, or from gossiping about them for so many years, did not turn the page so quickly. Many must have snipped out the paragraph, put it among old letters, or between the pages of a book, keeping it perhaps as an omen or a warning, glancing at the yellowing piece of paper with closed, secretive faces. For they did not discuss the murder; that was the most extraordinary thing about it. It was as if they had a sixth sense which told them everything there was to be known, although the three people in a position to explain the facts said nothing. The murder was simply not discussed. 'A bad business,' someone would remark; and the faces of the people round about would put on that reserved and guarded look. 'A very bad business,' came the reply – and that was the end of it. There was, it

seemed, a tacit agreement that the Turner case should not be given undue publicity by gossip. Yet it was a farming district, where those isolated white families met only very occasionally, hungry for contact with their own kind, to talk and discuss and pull to pieces, all speaking at once, making the most of an hour or so's companionship before returning to their farms where they saw only their own faces and the faces of their black servants for weeks on end. Normally that murder would have been discussed for months; people would have been positively grateful for something to talk about.

To an outsider it would seem perhaps as if the energetic Charlie Slatter had travelled from farm to farm over the district telling people to keep quiet; but that was something that would have never have occurred to him. The steps he took (and he made not one mistake) were taken apparently instinctively and without conscious planning. The most interesting thing about the whole affair was this silent, unconscious agreement. Everyone behaved like a flock of birds who communicate – or so it seems – by means of a kind of telepathy.

Long before the murder marked them out, people spoke of the Turners in the hard, careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and the self-exiled. The Turners were disliked, though few of their neighbours had ever met them, or even seen them in the distance. Yet what was there to dislike? They simply 'kept themselves to themselves'; that was all. They were never seen at district dances, or fêtes, or gymkhanas. They must have had something to be ashamed of; that was the feeling. It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else; what had they got to be so stuck-up about? What, indeed! Living the way they did! That little box of a house – it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way.

And then it was that someone used the phrase 'poor whites'. It caused disquiet. There was no great money-cleavage in those days (that was before the era of the tobacco barons), but there

was certainly a race division. The small community of Afrikaners had their own lives, and the Britishers ignored them. 'Poor whites' were Afrikaners, never British. But the person who said the Turners were poor whites stuck to it defiantly. What was the difference? What was a poor white? It was the way one lived, a question of standards. All the Turners needed were a drove of children to make them poor whites.

Though the arguments were unanswerable, people would still not think of them as poor whites. To do that would be letting the side down. The Turners were British, after all.

Thus the district handled the Turners, in accordance with that *esprit de corps* which is the first rule of South African society, but which the Turners themselves ignored. They apparently did not recognize the need for *esprit de corps*; that, really, was why they were hated.

The more one thinks about it, the more extraordinary the case becomes. Not the murder itself; but the way people felt about it, the way they pitied Dick Turner with a fine fierce indignation against Mary as if she were something unpleasant and unclean, and it served her right to get murdered. But they did not ask questions.

For instance, they must have wondered who that 'Special Correspondent' was. Someone in the district sent in the news, for the paragraph was not in newspaper language. But who? Marston, the assistant, left the district immediately after the murder. Denham, the policeman, might have written to the paper in a personal capacity, but it was not likely. There remained Charlie Slatter, who knew more about the Turners than anyone else, and was there on the day of the murder. One could say that he practically controlled the handling of the case, even taking precedence over the Sergeant himself. And people felt that to be quite right and proper. Whom should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mentioned? It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living, at stake.

But to the outsider it is strange that Slatter should have been

allowed to take charge of the affair, to arrange that everything should pass over without more than a ripple of comment.

For there could have been no planning: there simply wasn't time. Why, for instance, when Dick Turner's farm boys came to him with the news, did he sit down to write a note to the Sergeant at the police camp? He did not use the telephone.

Everyone who has lived in the country knows what a branch telephone is like. You lift the receiver after you have turned the handle the required number of times, and then, click, click, click, you can hear the receivers coming off all over the district, and soft noises like breathing, a whisper, a subdued cough.

Slatter lived five miles from the Turners. The farm boys came to him first, when they discovered the body. And though it was an urgent matter, he ignored the telephone, but sent a personal letter by a native bearer on a bicycle to Denham at the police camp, twelve miles away. The Sergeant sent out half a dozen native policemen at once, to the Turners' farm, to see what they could find. He drove first to see Slatter, because the way that letter was worded roused his curiosity. That was why he arrived late on the scene of the murder. The native policemen did not have to search far for the murderer. After walking through the house, looking briefly at the body, and dispersing down the front of the little hill the house stood on, they saw Moses himself rise out of a tangled ant-heap in front of them. He walked up to them and said (or words to this effect): 'Here I am.' They snapped the handcuffs on him, and went back to the house to wait for the police cars to come. There they saw Dick Turner come out of the bush by the house with two whining dogs at his heels. He was off his head, talking crazily to himself, wandering in and out of the bush with his hands full of leaves and earth. They let him be, while keeping an eye on him, for he was a white man, though mad, and black men, even when policemen, do not lay hands on white flesh.

People did ask, cursorily, why the murderer had given himself up. There was not much chance of escape. But he did have a sporting chance. He could have run to the hills and hidden for a while. Or he could have slipped over the border

to Portuguese territory. Then the District Native Commissioner, at a sundowner party, said that it was perfectly understandable. If one knew anything about the history of the country, or had read any of the memoirs or letters of the old missionaries and explorers, one would have come across accounts of the society Lobengula ruled. The laws were strict: everyone knew what they could or could not do. If someone did an unforgivable thing, like touching one of the King's women, he would submit fatalistically to punishment, which was likely to be impalement over an ant-heap on a stake, or something equally unpleasant. 'I have done wrong, and I know it,' he might say, 'therefore let me be punished.' Well, it was the tradition to face punishment, and really there was something rather fine about it. Remarks like these are forgiven from native commissioners, who have to study languages, customs, and so on; although it is not done to say things natives do are 'fine'. (Yet the fashion is changing: it is permissible to glorify the old ways sometimes, providing one says how depraved the natives have become since.)

So that aspect of the affair was dropped, yet it is not the least interesting, for Moses might not have been a Matabele at all. He was in Mashonaland; though of course natives do wander all over Africa. He might have come from anywhere: Portuguese territory, Nyasaland, the Union of South Africa. And it is a long time since the days of the great king Lobengula. But then native commissioners tend to think in terms of the past.

Well, having sent the letter to the police camp, Charlie Slatter went to the Turners' place, driving at a great speed over the bad farm roads in his fat American car.

Who *was* Charlie Slatter? It was he who, from the beginning of the tragedy to its end, personified Society for the Turners. He touches the story at half a dozen points; without him things would not have happened quite as they did, though sooner or later, in one way or another, the Turners were bound to come to grief.

Slatter had been a grocer's assistant in London. He was fond of telling his children that if it had not been for his energy and enterprise they would be running round the slums in rags. He

was still a proper cockney, even after twenty years in Africa. He came with one idea: to make money. He made it. He made plenty. He was a crude, brutal, ruthless, yet kindhearted man, in his own way, and according to his own impulses, who could not help making money. He farmed as if he were turning the handle of a machine which would produce pound notes at the other end. He was hard with his wife, making her bear unnecessary hardships at the beginning; he was hard with his children, until he made money, when they got everything they wanted; and above all he was hard with his farm labourers. They, the geese that laid the golden eggs, were still in that state where they did not know there were other ways of living besides producing gold for other people. They know better now, or are beginning to. But Slatter believed in farming with the sjambok. It hung over his front door, like a motto on a wall: 'You shall not mind killing if it is necessary.' He had once killed a native in a fit of temper. He was fined thirty pounds. Since then he had kept his temper. But sjamboks are all very well for the Slatters; not so good for people less sure of themselves. It was he who had told Dick Turner, long ago, when Dick first started farming, that one should buy a sjambok before a plough or a harrow, and that sjambok did not do the Turners any good, as we shall see.

Slatter was a shortish, broad, powerful man, with heavy shoulders and thick arms. His face was broad and bristled; shrewd, watchful, and a little cunning. He had a crop of fair hair that made him look like a convict; but he did not care for appearances. His small blue eyes were hardly visible, because of the way he screwed them up, after years and years of South African sunshine.

Bent over the steering wheel, almost hugging it in his determination to get to the Turners quickly, his eyes were little blue chinks in a set face. He was wondering why Marston, the assistant, who was after all his employee, had not come to him about the murder, or at least sent a note. Where was he? The hut he lived in was only a couple of hundred yards from the house itself. Perhaps he had got cold feet and run away? Anything was possible, thought Charlie, from this particular

type of young Englishman. He had a rooted contempt for soft-faced, soft-voiced Englishmen, combined with a fascination for their manner and breeding. His own sons, now grown up, were gentlemen. He had spent plenty of money to make them so; but he despised them for it. At the same time he was proud of them. This conflict showed itself in his attitude towards Marston: half hard and indifferent, half subtly deferential. At the moment he felt nothing but irritation.

Half-way he felt the car rock, and swearing, pulled it up. It was a puncture: no, two punctures. The red mud of the road held fragments of broken glass. His irritation expressed itself in the half-conscious thought, 'Just like Turner to have glass on his roads!' But Turner was now necessarily an object of passionate, protective pity, and the irritation was focused on Marston, the assistant who, Slatter felt, should somehow have prevented this murder. What was he being paid for? What had he been engaged for? But Slatter was a fair man in his own way, and where his own race was concerned. He restrained himself, and got down to mending one puncture and changing a tyre, working in the heavy red slush of the roads. This took him three-quarters of an hour, and by the time he was finished, and had picked the pieces of green glass from the mud and thrown them into the bush, the sweat was soaking his face and hair.

When he reached the house at last, he saw, as he approached through the bush, six glittering bicycles leaning against the walls. And in front of the house, under the trees, stood six native policemen, and among them the native Moses, his hands linked in front of him. The sun glinted on the handcuffs, on the bicycles, on the masses of heavy wet leaves. It was a wet, sultry morning. The sky was a tumult of discoloured clouds: it looked full of billowing dirty washing. Puddles on the pale soil held a sheen of sky.

Charlie walked up to the policemen, who saluted him. They were in fezes, and their rather fancy-dress uniform. This last thought did not occur to Charlie, who liked his natives either one way or the other: properly dressed according to their station, or in loincloths. He could not bear the half-civilized

native. The policemen, picked for their physique, were a fine body of men, but they were put in the shade by Moses, who was a great powerful man, black as polished linoleum, and dressed in a singlet and shorts, which were damp and muddy. Charlie stood directly in front of the murderer and looked into his face. The man stared back, expressionless, indifferent. His own face was curious: it showed a kind of triumph, a guarded vindictiveness, and fear. Why fear? Of Moses, who was as good as hanged already? But he was uneasy, troubled. Then he seemed to shake himself into self-command, and turned and saw Dick Turner, standing a few paces away, covered with mud.

'Turner!' he said, peremptorily. He stopped, looking into the man's face. Dick appeared not to know him. Charlie took him by the arm and drew him towards his own car. He did not know he was incurably mad then; otherwise he might have been even more angry than he was. Having put Dick into the back seat of his car, he went into the house. In the front room stood Marston, his hands in his pockets, in a pose that seemed negligently calm. But his face was pale and strained.

'Where were you?' asked Charlie at once, accusingly.

'Normally Mr Turner wakes me,' said the youth calmly. 'This morning I slept late. When I came into the house I found Mrs Turner on the verandah. Then the policemen came. I was expecting you.' But he was afraid: it was the fear of death that sounded in his voice, not the fear that was controlling Charlie's actions: he had not been long enough in the country to understand Charlie's special fear.

Charlie grunted: he never spoke unless necessary. He looked long and curiously at Marston, as if trying to make out why it was the farm natives had not called a man who lay asleep a few yards off, but had instinctively sent for himself. But it was not with dislike or contempt he looked at Marston now; it was more the look a man gives a prospective partner who has yet to prove himself.

He turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a

crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that one would have expected to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary. His brows knotted, and for a few seconds his lips curled back over his teeth in a vicious grimace. He had his back to Marston, who would have been astonished to see him. Then, with a hard, angry movement, Charlie turned and left the room, driving the young man before him.

Marston said: 'She was lying on the verandah. I lifted her on to the bed.' He shuddered at the memory of the touch of the cold body. 'I thought she shouldn't be left lying there.' He hesitated and added, the muscles of his face contracting whitely: 'The dogs were licking at her.'

Charlie nodded, with a keen glance at him. He seemed indifferent as to where she might be lying. At the same time he approved the self-control of the assistant who had performed the unpleasant task.

'There was blood everywhere. I cleaned it up . . . I thought afterwards I should have left it for the police.'

'It makes no odds,' said Charlie absently. He sat down on one of the rough wood chairs in the front room, and remained in thought, whistling softly through his front teeth. Marston stood by the window, looking for the arrival of the police car. From time to time Charlie looked round the room alertly, flicking his tongue over his lips. Then he lapsed back into his soft whistling. It got on the young man's nerves.

At last, cautiously, almost warningly, Charlie said: 'What do *you* know of this?'

Marston noted the emphasized *you*, and wondered what Slatter knew. He was well in control of himself, but as taut as wire. He said: 'I don't know. Nothing really. It is all so difficult . . .' He hesitated, looking appealing at Charlie.

That look of almost soft appeal irritated Charlie, coming from a man, but it pleased him too: he was pleased the youth deferred to him. He knew the type so well. So many of them came from England to learn farming. They were usually ex-public school, very English, but extremely adaptable. From Charlie's point of view, the adaptability redeemed them. It was

strange to see how quickly they accustomed themselves. At first they were diffident, though proud and withdrawn; cautiously learning the new ways, with a fine sensitiveness, an alert self-consciousness.

When old settlers say, 'One has to understand the country,' what they mean is, 'You have to get used to our ideas about the native.' They are saying, in effect, 'Learn our ideas, or otherwise get out: we don't want you.' Most of these young men were brought up with vague ideas about equality. They were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated. They were revolted a hundred times a day by the casual way they were spoken of, as if they were so many cattle; or by a blow, or a look. They had been prepared to treat them as human beings. But they could not stand out against the society they were joining. It did not take them long to change. It was hard, of course, becoming as bad oneself. But it was not very long that they thought of it as 'bad'. And anyway, what had one's ideas amounted to? Abstract ideas about decency and goodwill, that was all: merely abstract ideas. When it came to the point, one never had contact with natives, except in the master–servant relationship. One never knew them in their own lives, as human beings. A few months, and these sensitive, decent young men had coarsened to suit the hard, arid, sun-drenched country they had come to; they had grown a new manner to match their thickened sunburnt limbs and toughened bodies.

If Tony Marston had been even a few more months in the country it would have been easy. That was Charlie's feeling. That was why he looked at the young man with a speculative frowning look, not condemning him, only wary and on the alert.

He said: 'What do you mean, it is all so difficult?'

Tony Marston appeared uncomfortable, as if he did not know his own mind. And for that matter he did not: the weeks in the Turners' houshold with its atmosphere of tragedy had not helped him to get his mind clear. The two standards – the one he had brought with him and the one he was adopting – conflicted still. And there was a roughness, a warning note, in

Charlie's voice, that left him wondering. What was he being warned against? He was intelligent enough to know he was being warned. In this he was unlike Charlie, who was acting by instinct and did not know his voice was a threat. It was all so unusual. Where were the police? What right had Charlie, who was a neighbour, to be fetched before himself, who was practically a member of the household? Why was Charlie quietly taking command?

His ideas of right were upset. He was confused, but he had his own ideas about the murder, which could not be stated straight out, like that, in black and white. When he came to think of it, the murder was logical enough; looking back over the last few days he could see that something like this was bound to happen, he could almost say he had been expecting it, some kind of violence or ugliness. Anger, violence, death, seemed natural to this vast, harsh country . . . he had done a lot of thinking since he had strolled casually into the house that morning, wondering why everyone was so late, to find Mary Turner lying murdered on the verandah, and the police boys outside, guarding the houseboy; and Dick Turner muttering and stumbling through the puddles, mad, but apparently harmless. Things he had not understood, he understood now, and he was ready to talk about them. But he was in the dark as to Charlie's attitude. There was something here he could not get hold of.

'It's like this,' he said. 'When I first arrived I didn't know much about the country.'

Charlie said, with a good-humoured but brutal irony, 'Thanks for the information.' And then, 'Have you any idea why this nigger murdered Mrs Turner?'

'Well, I have a sort of idea, yes.'

'We had better leave it to the Sergeant, when he comes then.'

It was a snub; he had been shut up. Tony held his tongue, angry but bewildered.

When the Sergeant came, he went over to look at the murderer, glanced at Dick through the window of Slatter's car, and then came into the house.

'I went to your place, Slatter,' he said, nodding at Tony, giving him a keen look. Then he went into the bedroom. And his reactions were as Charlie's had been: vindictiveness towards the murderer, emotional pity for Dick, and for Mary, a bitter contemptuous anger: Sergeant Denham had been in the country for a number of years. This time Tony saw the expression on the face, and it gave him a shock. The faces of the two men as they stood over the body, gazing down at it, made him feel uneasy, even afraid. He himself felt a little disgust, but not much; it was mainly pity that agitated him, knowing what he knew. It was the disgust that he would feel for any social irregularity, no more than the distaste that comes from failure of the imagination. This profound instinctive horror and fear astonished him.

The three of them went silently into the living-room.

Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham stood side by side like two judges, as if they had purposely taken up this attitude. Opposite them was Tony. He stood his ground, but he felt an absurd guiltiness taking hold of him, simply because of their pose, standing like that, looking at him with subtle reserved faces that he could not read.

'Bad business,' said Sergeant Denham briefly.

No one answered. He snapped open a notebook, adjusted elastic over a page, and poised a pencil.

'A few questions, if you don't mind,' he said. Tony nodded.

'How long have you been here?'

'About three weeks.'

'Living in this house?'

'No, in a hut down the path.'

'You were going to run this place while they were away?'

'Yes, for six months.'

'And then?'

'And then I intended to go on a tobacco farm.'

'When did you know about this business?'

'They didn't call me. I woke and found Mrs Turner.'

Tony's voice showed he was now on the defensive. He felt wounded, even insulted that he had not been called: above all, that these two men seemed to think it right and natural that he

should be bypassed in this fashion, as if his newness to the country unfitted him for any kind of responsibility. And he resented the way he was being questioned. They had no right to do it. He was beginning to simmer with rage, although he knew quite well that they themselves were quite unconscious of the patronage implicit in their manner, and that it would be better for him to try and understand the real meaning of this scene, rather than to stand on his dignity.

'You had your meals with the Turners?'

'Yes.'

'Apart from that, were you ever here – socially, so to speak?'

'No, hardly at all. I have been busy learning the job.'

'Get on well with Turner?'

'Yes, I think so. I mean, he was not easy to know. He was absorbed in his work. And he was obviously very unhappy at leaving the place.'

'Yes, poor devil, he had a hard time of it.' The voice was suddenly tender almost maudlin, with pity, although the Sergeant snapped out the words, and then shut his mouth tight, as if to present a brave face to the world. Tony was disconcerted: the unexpectedness of these men's responses was taking him right out of his depth. He was feeling nothing that they were feeling: he was an outsider in this tragedy, although both the Sergeant and Charlie Slatter seemed to feel personally implicated, for they had unconsciously assumed poses of weary dignity, appearing bowed down with unutterable burdens, because of poor Dick Turner and his sufferings.

Yet it was Charlie who had literally turned Dick off his farm; and in previous interviews, at which Tony had been present, he had shown none of this sentimental pity.

There was a long pause. The Sergeant shut his notebook. But he had not yet finished. He was regarding Tony cautiously, wondering how to frame the next question. Or that was how it appeared to Tony, who could see that here was the moment that was the crux of the whole affair. Charlie's face: wary, a little cunning, a little afraid, proclaimed it.

'See anything out of the ordinary while you were here?' asked the Sergeant, apparently casual.

'Yes, I did,' blurted Tony, suddenly determined not to be bullied. For he knew he was being bullied, though he was cut off from them both by a gulf in experience and belief. They looked up at him, frowning; glanced at each other swiftly – then away, as if afraid to acknowledge conspiracy.

'What did you see? I hope you realize the – unpleasantness – of this case?' The last question was a grudging appeal.

'Any murder is surely unpleasant,' remarked Tony drily.

'When you have been in the country long enough, you will understand that we don't like niggers murdering white women.'

The phrase, 'When you have been in the country', stuck in Tony's gullet. He had heard it too often, and it had come to jar on him. At the same time it made him feel angry. Also callow. He would have liked to blurt out the truth in one overwhelming, incontrovertible statement; but the truth was not like that. It never was. The fact he knew, or guessed, about Mary, the fact these two men were conspiring to ignore, could be stated easily enough. But the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to him, was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives. And it was not so easy to do. He had arrived at the truth circuitously: circuitously it would have to be explained. And his chief emotion, which was an impersonal pity for Mary and Dick and the native, a pity that was also rage against circumstances, made it difficult for him to know where to begin.

'Look,' he said, 'I'll tell you what I know from the beginning, only it will take some time, I am afraid . . .'

'You mean you know why Mrs Turner was murdered?' The question was a quick, shrewd parry.

'No, not just like that. Only I can form a theory.' The choice of words was most unfortunate.

'We don't want theories. We want facts. And in any case, you should remember Dick Turner. This is all most unpleasant for him. You should remember him, poor devil.'

Here it was again: the utterly illogical appeal, which to these two men was clearly not illogical at all. The whole thing was preposterous! Tony began to lose his temper.

'Do you or do you not want to hear what I have to say?' he asked, irritably.

'Go ahead. Only remember, I don't want to hear your fancies. I want to hear facts. Have you ever seen anything *definite* which would throw light on this murder? For instance, have you seen this boy attempting to get at her jewellery, or something like that? Anything that is definite. Not something in the air.'

Tony laughed. The two men looked at him sharply.

'You know as well as I do this case is not something that can be explained straight off like that. You know that. It's not something that can be said in black and white, straight off.'

It was pure deadlock; no one spoke. As if Sergeant Denham had not heard those last words, a heavy frown on his face, he said at last: 'For instance, how did Mrs Turner treat this boy? Did she treat her boys well?'

The angry Tony, fumbling for a foothold in this welter of emotion and half-understood loyalties, clutched at this for a beginning.

'Yes, she treated him badly, I thought. Though on the other hand . . .'

'Nagged at him, eh? Oh well, women are pretty bad that way, in this country, very often. Aren't they, Slatter?' The voice was easy, intimate, informal. 'My old woman drives me mad – it's something about this country. They have no idea how to deal with niggers.'

'Needs a man to deal with niggers,' said Charlie. 'Niggers don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place.' He laughed. The Sergeant laughed. They turned towards each other, even including Tony, in an unmistakable relief. The tension had broken; the danger was over: once again, he had been bypassed, and the interview, it seemed, was over. He could hardly believe it.

'But look here,' he said. Then he stopped. Both men turned to look at him, a steady, grave, irritated look on their faces. And the warning was unmistakable! It was the warning that might have been given to a greenhorn who was going to let *himself* down by saying too much. This realization was too

much for Tony. He gave in; he washed his hands of it. He watched the other two in utter astonishment: they were together in mood and emotion, standing there in perfect understanding; the understanding was unrealized by themselves, the sympathy unacknowledged; their concerted handling of this affair had been instinctive: they were completely unaware of there being anything extraordinary, even anything illegal. And was there anything illegal, after all? This was a casual talk, on the face of it, nothing formal about it now that the notebook was shut – and it had been shut ever since they had reached the crisis of the scene.

Charlie said, turning towards the sergeant, 'Better get her out of here. It is too hot to wait.'

'Yes,' said the policeman, moving to give orders accordingly.

And that brutally matter-of-fact remark, Tony realized afterwards, was the only time poor Mary Turner was referred to directly. But why should she be? – except that this was really a friendly talk between the farmer who had been her next neighbour, the policeman who had been in her house on his rounds as a guest, and the assistant who had lived there for some weeks. It wasn't a formal occasion, this: Tony clung to the thought. There was a court case to come yet, which would be properly conducted.

'The case will be a matter of form, of course,' said the Sergeant, as if thinking aloud, with a look at Tony. He was standing by the police car, watching the native policemen lift the body of Mary Turner, which was wrapped in a blanket, into the back seat. She was stiff; a rigid outstretched arm knocked horribly against the narrow door; it was difficult to get her in. At last it was done and the door shut. And then there was another problem: they could not put Moses the murderer into the same car with her; one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him. And there was only Charlie's car, and mad Dick Turner was in that, sitting staring in the back. There seemed to be a feeling that Moses, having committed a murder, deserved to be taken by car; but there was no help for it, he would have to

walk, guarded by the policemen, wheeling their bicycles, to the camp.

All these arrangements completed, there was a pause.

They stood there beside the cars, in the moment of parting, looking at the red-brick house with its shimmering hot roof, and the thick encroaching bush, and the group of black men moving off under the trees on their long walk. Moses was quite impassive, allowing himself to be directed without any movement of his own. His face was blank. He seemed to be staring straight into the sun. Was he thinking he would not see it much longer? Impossible to say. Regret? Not a sign of it. Fear? It did not seem so. The three men looked at the murderer, thinking their own thoughts, speculative, frowning, but not as if he were important now. No, he was unimportant: he was the constant, the black man who will thieve, rape, murder, if given half a chance. Even for Tony he no longer mattered; and his knowledge of the native mind was too small to give him any basis for conjecture.

'And what about him?' asked Charlie, jerking his thumb at Dick Turner. He meant: where does he come in, as far as the court case is concerned?

'He looks to me as if he won't be good for much,' said the Sergeant, who after all had plenty of experience of death, crime and madness.

No, for them the important thing was Mary Turner, who had let the side down; but even she, since she was dead, was no longer a problem. The one fact that remained still to be dealt with was the necessity for preserving appearances. Sergeant Denham understood that: it was part of his job, though it would not appear in regulations, was rather implicit in the spirit of the country, the spirit in which he was soaked. Charlie Slatter understood it, none better. Still side by side, as if one impulse, one regret, one fear, moved them both, they stood together in that last moment before they left the place, giving their final silent warning to Tony, looking at him gravely.

And he was beginning to understand. He knew now, at least, that what had been fought out in the room they had just left was nothing to do with the murder as such. The murder, in

itself, was nothing. The struggle that had been decided in a few brief words – or rather, in the silences between the words – had had nothing to do with the surface meaning of the scene. He would understand it all a good deal better in a few months, when he had 'become used to the country'. And then he would do his best to forget the knowledge, for to live with the colour bar in all its nuances and implications means closing one's mind to many things, if one intends to remain an accepted member of society. But, in the interval, there would be a few brief moments when he would see the thing clearly, and understand that it was 'white civilization' fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, 'white civilization' which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners' failure.

For the sake of those few lucid moments, and his half-confused knowledge, it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day. For it would never have occurred to either Slatter or the Sergeant that they might be wrong: they were upheld, as in all their dealings with the black–white relationship, by a feeling of almost martyred responsibility. Yet Tony, too, wanted to be accepted by this new country. He would have to adapt himself, and if he did not conform, would be rejected: the issue was clear to him, he had heard the phrase 'getting used to our ideas' too often to have any illusions on the point. And, if he had acted according to his by now muddled ideas of right and wrong, his feeling that a monstrous injustice was being done, what difference would it make to the only participant in the tragedy who was neither dead or mad? For Moses would be hanged in any case; he had committed a murder, that fact remained. Did he intend to go on fighting in the dark for the sake of a principle? And if so, which principle? If he had stepped forward then, as he nearly did, when Sergeant Denham climbed finally into the car, and had said: 'Look here, I am just

not going to shut up about this,' what would have been gained? It is certain that the Sergeant would not have understood him. His face would have contracted, his brow gone dark with irritation, and, taking his foot off the clutch, he would have said, 'Shut up about what? Who has asked you to shut up?' And then, if Tony had stammered out something about responsiblity, he would have looked significantly at Charlie and shrugged. Tony might have continued, ignoring the shrug and its implication of his wrongmindedness: 'If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner. You can't have it both ways. Either the white people are responsible for their behaviour, or they are not. It takes two to make a murder – a murder of this kind. Though, one can't really blame her either. She can't help being what she is. I've lived here, I tell you, which neither of you has done, and the whole thing is so difficult it is impossible to say who is to blame.' And then the Sergeant would have said, 'You can say what you think right in court.' That is what he would have said, just as if the issue had not been decided – though ostensibly it had never been mentioned – less than ten minutes before. 'It's not a question of blame,' the Sergeant might have said. 'Has anyone said anything about blame? But you can't get away from the fact that this nigger has murdered her, can you?'

So Tony said nothing and the police car went off through the trees. Charlie Slatter followed in his car with Dick Turner. Tony was left in the empty clearing, with an empty house.

He went inside, slowly, obsessed with the one clear image that remained to him after the events of the morning, and which seemed to him the key to the whole thing: the look on the Sergeant's and Slatter's faces when they looked down at the body; that almost hysterical look of hate and fear.

He sat down, his hand to his head, which ached badly; then got up again and fetched from a dusty shelf in the kitchen a medicine bottle marked 'Brandy'. He drank it off. He felt shaky in the knees and in the thighs. He was weak, too, with repugnance against this ugly little house which seemed to hold within its walls, even in its very brick and cement, the fears and

horror of the murder. He felt suddenly as if he could not bear to stay in it, not for another moment.

He looked up at the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun, at the faded gimcrack furniture, at the dusty brick floors covered with ragged animal skins, and wondered how those two, Mary and Dick Turner, could have borne to live in such a place, year in and year out, for so long. Why, even the little thatched hut were he lived at the back was better than this! Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings? It was enough to drive anyone mad, the heat in this place.

And then, feeling a little muddle-headed (the heat made the brandy take effect at once), he wondered how all this had begun, where the tragedy had started. For he clung obstinately to the belief, in spite of Slatter and the Sergeant, that the causes of the murder must be looked for a long way back, and that it was they which were important. What sort of woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm and had been driven slowly off balance by heat and loneliness and poverty? And Dick Turner himself – what had he been? And the native – but here his thoughts were stopped by lack of knowledge. He could not even begin to imagine the mind of a native.

Passing his hand over his forehead, he tried desperately, and for the last time, to achieve some sort of a vision that would lift the murder above the confusions and complexities of the morning, and make of it, perhaps, a symbol, or a warning. But he failed. It was too hot. He was still exasperated by the attitude of the two men. His head was reeling. It must be over a hundred in this room, he thought angrily, getting up from his chair, and finding that his legs were unsteady. And he had drunk, at the most, two tablespoons of brandy! This damned country, he thought, convulsed with anger. Why should this happen to me, getting involved with a damned twisted affair like this, when I have only just come; and I really can't be expected to act as judge and jury and compassionate God into the bargain!

He stumbled on to the verandah, where the murder had been

committed the night before. There was a ruddy smear on the brick, and a puddle of rainwater was tinged pink. The same big shabby dogs were licking at the edges of the water, and cringed away when Tony shouted at them. He leaned against the wall and stared over the soaked greens and browns of the veld to the kopjes, which were sharp and blue after the rain; it had poured half the night. He realized, as the sound grew loud in his ears, that cicadas were shrilling all about him. He had been too absorbed to hear them. It was a steady, insistent screaming from every bush and tree. It wore on his nerves. 'I am getting out of this place,' he said suddenly. 'I am getting out of it altogether. I am going to the other end of the country. I wash my hands of the thing. Let the Slatters and the Denhams do as they like. What has it got to do with me?'

That morning, he packed his things and walked over to the Slatters' to tell Charlie he would not stay. Charlie seemed indifferent, even relieved; he had been thinking there was no need of a manager now that Dick would not come back.

After that the Turners' farm was run as an overflow for Charlie's cattle. They grazed all over it, even up to the hill where the house stood. It was left empty: it soon fell down.

Tony went back into town, where he hung round the bars and hotels for a while, waiting to hear of some job that would suit him. But his early carefree adaptability was gone. He had grown difficult to please. He visited several farms, but each time went away: farming had lost its glitter for him. At the trial, which was as Sergeant Denham had said it would be, a mere formality, he said what was expected of him. It was suggested that the native had murdered Mary Turner while drunk, in search of money and jewellery.

When the trial was over, Tony loafed about aimlessly until his money was finished. The murder, those few weeks with the Turners, had affected him more than he knew. But his money being gone, he had to do something in order to eat. He met a man from Northern Rhodesia, who told him about the copper mines and the wonderfully high salaries. They sounded fantastic to Tony. He took the next train to the copper belt, intending to save some money and start some business on his own

account. But the salaries, once there, did not seem so good as they had from a distance. The cost of living was high, and then, everyone drank so much . . . Soon he left underground work and was a kind of manager. So, in the end, he sat in an office and did paperwork, which was what he had come to Africa to avoid. But it wasn't so bad really. One should take things as they came. Life isn't as one expects it to be – and so on; these were the things he said to himself when depressed, and was measuring himself against his early ambitions.

For the people in 'the district', who knew all about him by hearsay, he was the young man from England who hadn't the guts to stand more than a few weeks of farming. No guts, they said. He should have stuck it out.