

Ann

Jessie H. Cochran

THE WOODS, if you could call them that, stretched down to the pond with the benevolent neatness of an English park. Or, you sensed there was a pond there, or perhaps a small lake, where the ground sloped suddenly out of sight. The trees were of a grandfatherly variety, huge dying willows, gray and decaying in part, and incredibly monstrous live oaks. Here and there a spindly birch shone through the greenness, for it seemed that even the air was faintly green and moist.

"But where is this?" Ann said.

She had a way of presenting questions in that fashion; it gave her an air of other-worldliness, that of a wandering spirit. The people who didn't like her maintained it was deliberate; the ones who did said Ann's mind worked more directly from her unconscious through her conscious. They were fond of saying this.

Johnny at this point had concluded he had had just about enough of Ann. That was the way he phrased it to himself, spontaneously. But at once he perceived it to be poor phraseology, unworthy of himself. It's tedious to picnic with pure psyche, he thought, and felt better. Therefore his answer to Ann was kinder than his first spontaneous one would have been.

"It's Sussex, pure Sussex, dear," he replied, knowing she would be pleased. That's what she had meant.

"Of course! I might have known it at once." She turned and smiled up at him, her frail neck stretched up and back in an arc, like a ballerina or a horse. The greenish light was reflected in her pale, disheveled hair and in the hollows of her face. For a moment Johnny felt the returning of the old attraction, but it left him almost at once; he noticed her teeth weren't quite as clean as they could have been.

He set the picnic basket, an intricate affair of vari-colored woven straw, on the ground, and spread the brown Mexican poncho beside it. Then he sat, cross-legged, on the poncho and proceeded to remove the picnic from the basket. A long, thin loaf of foreign-looking bread, some cheese in a little earth-colored pot, a bottle of Chianti and a can of smoked shrimp. He scratched around in the bottom of the basket, but that was all. And there was no can opener for the shrimp.

"Ann," he called. She was standing a little distance away from him, hands laced behind her back, face heavenward, or treeward. A picture, Johnny thought. She's making a picture.

"Ann!" he said again, this time sharply.

She turned on the balls of her feet, then ran toward him, laughing lightly. She threw herself down beside him on the poncho, on palms and knees, her face close to his.

"Johnny, we must go to England. Take me to England."

"You didn't bring a can opener for the shrimp."

Still laughing, she shook his arm. "Tell me we'll go at once. Let's lay plans."

"Let's lay plans about opening the shrimp. Today shrimp, tomorrow the world."

Ann clapped her hands and said, "That's really very good, Johnny. It must be marvelous to have such a quick mind."

He was struggling now with a little wire device that secured the top of the cheese jar. It refused to divulge its secret intricacy to him, and he cursed, wrenching at it. Ann sat, arms hugging knees, and talked of England. Her accent, or rather her tone, assumed a faintly British lilt.

"And we shall see—we shall really see—all the heavenly places we've read about. Johnny, do you think it odd of me to want to see Stonehenge? Might we really visit Stonehenge, do you suppose, and perhaps find there a druid or even a warlock? I'm certain I should see one. Even an old, not very aggressive warlock would do."

Johnny bit savagely into the heel of the bread, his teeth making a grinding sound on the tough crust. The bread was mostly crust. He reached for the bottle of wine, but it was of a more expensive variety and had a cork rather than a cap. There was no corkscrew.

"Ann, do you happen to have a Boy Scout knife?"

"Oh, darling. You know I always carry one in my 'Be Prepared Kit'."

Johnny shook his head. "No, I'm serious. Make it a Girl Scout knife. Do you have one?"

Ann's laugh was uncertain and questioning, with a merry interrogation point.

"I suppose," he said, "it's ridiculous for a wood nymph to carry a knife. I know it is ridiculous for a wood nymph to pack a picnic basket."

"Didn't I put in anything you like? The shrimp and the wine were very dear. I wanted to please you."

The "dear" annoyed him beyond caring for past love. He not only concluded he had had about enough of Ann, he damned well had had a bellyful of Ann.

"One *mayn't* eat *tinned* shrimp without a *tin* opener, and one *mayn't* drink *dear* wine without a corkscrew. Damn it, this whole thing was your idea, and I'm hungry! Come on, little dryad, conjure up a way to get at this stuff. And furthermore, this bread might be just dandy for a Moravian peasant, but it does nothing to me."

He picked up the gouged loaf from the poncho and surveyed it. There was a fine film of dust and lint on the shiny crust. He hurled it underhand at the base of a willow, where it thudded deadily, and turned truculently to see the effect on Ann. She was watching him, her lower lip sucked under the upper one, chin on knees. Her eyes were opened very wide and peered up at him through the tangled fringe of her bangs. The basic pitch, thought Johnny. The hurt child

routine; I know them all.

"This poncho is filthy," he informed her, staring back.

Ann arose wearily and wandered over to the discarded bread, her thin shoulders slumped and head bowed. She poked at it with her toe, and it rolled over and settled into a trough of dead leaves, partially buried. Johnny watched her for a moment, then took a stone and knocked the wire gadget from the top of the cheese, which he proceeded to eat by scooping it up with his forefinger. It had a grainy texture and an unpleasant sharpness which made him thirsty. The bottle of wine lay pristine and adamant in the basket, defiantly corked.

"Damn you," he said to it softly.

It was Ann who had driven him to thinking and talking like this: Army talk. No, not simply Ann, but too much Ann. He had carefully trained himself out of the G. I. mode of expression when he saw it had been milked dry by other, quicker ex-G. I. writers. Now he considered: was Ann, or his association with her, an unconscious effort to expunge that old habit? And was it in that effort that all her attraction for him lay? It was a new thought, and he sat considering it. It was difficult for him to view his own emotions clearly, since they always seemed to react on him physically in a violent fashion. Anger, for instance, transfused him so thoroughly that he always forgot the cause of his anger and was aware only of the feelings; love was so immediately desire that it had at once to be fulfilled, if reasonably possible, or he could not think. Why, then, did he now feel acquitted of Ann? Had the mental metamorphosis been completed, perhaps, and he no longer had need of her? He concluded this was true, since in his annoyance he had immediately reverted to a manner of speech he had deliberately dropped, because of Ann. No, not because, but through. Partially. The idea pleased him, as he chose to conceive of himself as an artist who demands and does not give, deservedly so. Any artist has the right, he had stipulated many times. Once when he had said this someone had answered, "Very comfortable for you artists," but whoever had said it was immediately taken to task by Ann. Well, that had been very decent of her. He glanced over at her small, forlorn figure and was touched. If she had said that, she would understand now the necessity for their break. Should it be mercifully quick, right now, in this Sussex-like woods? The day was ruined anyway, so why not.

"Ann, dear."

She shook her head, her back to him, but didn't answer. He felt a surge of pity for her, so small and defenseless in the face of his art. She did look rather like a wood nymph, he thought generously, or perhaps an oread. All pale greens and greenish gold and slight and almost dappled, like a slyly camouflaged fawn. He rose and walked toward her, feeling suddenly Pan-like. She turned as he approached, and he saw that her unpowdered cheeks bore the faint, wet paths of tears.

"Was it England?" she asked him.

"Was what England?"

She raked a small foot through the leaves, like an impatient doe. "Was it England or the shrimps?"

Christ, thought Johnny, and then controlled himself. Yes, he had thoroughly enough of stream of consciousness questions. Her manner imposed an intimacy on their relationship that no longer existed.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Of course he knew.

"Yes, you do. What annoyed you, my saying we should go to England or not having any opener for the tin—the can of shrimp?" Since he couldn't, truly, choose between the two, he didn't answer. She persisted.

"You aped me and called me a dryad, which of course proves you are annoyed. To call me a dryad in that way, I mean. But it was especially cruel since I was fleetingly happy."

Fleetingly happy! Of course, there was his cue. Very well then.

"Ann, I am a beast."

"Yes." The Hemingway yes, the universal, all-encompassing yes, thought Johnny. Cast aside was the dryad, kissed off was the wood nymph. Here was a knowing woman.

"But I must be."

"Yes."

"You know as well as I all artists must be."

She tilted her head. "Shaw said that, I think. And it is true."

"Then you know?" He almost added, "Lady Brett."

"For longer than you, I suspect." A slight smile played around her lips. Her eyes were clear and above all courageous. "No England, then, Johnny?"

"No England, dearest Ann."

But, thought Johnny, God *bleess* England, God bless Hemingway and Shaw and Noel Coward and the whole Group of Bloomsbury. And thanks.

The Headache

William Backemeyer

DAVIS awoke with a splitting headache. It had been years since he'd had a headache. He couldn't understand where this one came from. Certainly nothing unusual had happened yesterday. He took two aspirins before breakfast and tried to forget about it. But he could not.

On the way to the subway, it grew worse. It was as if a sharp knife had made a narrow pie-like incision from the bridge of his nose, over the top of his head, to the back of his right ear. The sun poured into the crack. He could feel the pain of its heat upon his exposed nerves.

In the subway the noise of the thundering trains entered the