Songs My Father Sang Me

'WHAT's the matter,' he asked, 'have I said something?'

Not troubling to get him quite into focus, she turned her head and said, 'No, why – did you say anything?'

'Or p'r'aps you don't like this place?'

'I don't mind it – why?' she said, looking round the night club, which was not quite as dark as a church, as though for the first time. At some tables you had to look twice, to see who was there; what lights there were were dissolved in a haze of smoke; the walls were rather vaultlike, with no mirrors; on the floor dancers drifted like pairs of vertical fish. He, meanwhile, studied her from across their table with neither anxiety nor acute interest, but with a dreamlike caricature of both. Then he raised the bottle between them and said, 'Mm-mm?' to which she replied by placing the flat of her hand mutely, mulishly, across the top of her glass. Not annoyed, he shrugged, filled up his own and continued, 'Then anything isn't really the matter, then?'

'This tune, this song, is the matter.'

'Oh – shall we dance?'

'No.' Behind her agelessly girlish face, sleekly framed by the cut of her fawn-blonde hair, there passed a wave of genuine trouble for which her features had no vocabulary. 'It's what they're playing – this tune.'

'It's pre-war,' he said knowledgeably.

'It's last war.'

'Well, last war's pre-war.'

'It's the tune my father remembered he used to dance to; it's the tune I remember him always trying to sing.'

'Why, is your father dead?'

'No, I don't suppose so; why?'

'Sorry,' he said quickly, 'I mean, if . . . '

'Sorry, why are you sorry?' she said, raising her eyebrows. 'Didn't I ever tell you about my father? I always thought he made me rather a bore. Wasn't it you I was telling about my father?'

'No. I suppose it must have been someone else. One meets so many people.'

'Oh, what,' she said, 'have I hurt your feelings? But you haven't got any feelings about me.'

'Only because you haven't got any feelings about me.'

'Haven't I?' she said, as though really wanting to know. 'Still, it hasn't seemed all the time as though we were quite a flop.'

'Look,' he said, 'don't be awkward. Tell me about your father.'

'He was twenty-six.'

'When?'

'How do you mean, "when"? Twenty-six was my father's age. He was tall and lean and leggy, with a casual sort of way of swinging himself about. He was fair, and the shape of his face was a rather long narrow square. Sometimes his eyes faded in until you could hardly see them; sometimes he seemed to be wearing a blank mask. You really only quite got the plan of his face when it was turned halfway between a light and a shadow – *then* his eyebrows and eyehollows, the dints just over his nostrils, the cut of his upper lip and the cleft in his chin, and the broken in-and-out outline down from his temple past his cheekbone into his jaw all came out at you, like a message you had to read in a single flash.'

She paused and lighted a cigarette. He said, 'You sound as though you had never got used to him.'

She went on, 'My father was one of the young men who were not killed in the last war. He was a man in the last war until that stopped; then I don't quite know what he was, and I don't think he ever quite knew either. He got his commission and first went out to France about 1915, I think he said. When he got leaves he got back to London and had good times, by which I mean something larky but quite romantic, in the course of one of which, I don't know which one, he fell in love with my mother and they used to go dancing, and got engaged in that leave and got married the next. My mother was a flapper, if you knew about flappers? They were the pin-ups *de ses jours*, and at the same time inspired idealistic feeling. My mother was dark and fluffy and as slim as a wraith; a great *glacé* ribbon bow tied her hair back and stood out like a calyx behind her face, and her hair itself hung down in a plume so long that it tickled my father's hand while he held her while they were dancing and while she sometimes swam up at him with her violet eyes. Each time he had to go back to the front again she was miserable, and had to put her hair up, because her relations said it was high time. But sometimes when he got back again on leave she returned to being a flapper again, to please him. Between his leaves she had to go back to live with her mother and sisters in West Kensington; and her sisters had a whole pack of business friends who had somehow never had to go near the front, and all these combined in an effort to cheer her up, but, as she always wrote to

my father, nothing did any good. I suppose everyone felt it was for the best when they knew there was going to be the patter of little feet. I wasn't actually *born* till the summer of 1918. If you remember, I told you my age last night.

'The first thing *I* remember, upon becoming conscious, was living in one of those bungalows on the flats near Staines. The river must have been somewhere, but I don't think I saw it. The only point about that region is that it has no point and that it goes on and on. I think there are floods there sometimes, there would be nothing to stop them; a forest fire would be what is needed really, but that would not be possible as there are no trees. It would have looked better, really, just left as primeval marsh, but someone had once said, "Let there be bungalows". If you ever motored anywhere near it you probably asked yourself who lives there, and why. Well, my father and mother and I did, and why? – because it was cheap, and there was no one to criticize how you were getting on. Our bungalow was tucked well away in the middle, got at by a sort of maze of in those days unmade roads. I'm glad to say I've forgotten which one it was. Most of our neighbours kept themselves to themselves for, probably, like ours, the best reasons; but most of them kept hens also; we didn't even do that. All round us, nature ran riot between corrugated iron, clothes-lines and creosoted lean-to sheds.

'I know that our bungalow had been taken furnished; the only things we seemed to have of our own were a number of satin cushions with satin fruits stitched on. In order to dislodge my biscuit crumbs from the satin apples my mother used to shake the cushions out of the window on to the lawn. Except for the prettiness of the dandelions, our lawn got to look and feel rather like a hearthrug; I mean, it got covered with threads and cinders and shreds; once when I was crawling on it I got a pin in my hand, another time I got sharp glass beads in my knee. The next-door hens used to slip through and pick about; never, apparently, quite in vain. At the far end, some Dorothy Perkins roses tried to climb up a pergola that was always falling down. I remember my father reaching up in his shirt-sleeves, trying to nail it up. Another thing he had to do in our home was apply the whole of his strength to the doors, french window and windows, which warped until they would not open nor shut. I used to come up behind him and push too.

'The war by now, of course, had been over for some years; my father was out of the British Army and was what was called taking his time and looking around. For how long he had been doing so I can't exactly tell you. He not only read all the "post vacant" advertisements every day but composed and succeeded in getting

printed an advertisement of himself, which he read aloud to me: it said he was prepared to go anywhere and try anything. I said, "But what's an ex-officer?," and he said, "I am." Our dining-room table, which was for some reason, possibly me, sticky, was always spread with new newspapers he had just brought home, and he used to be leaning over them on his elbows, biting harder and harder on the stem of his pipe. I don't think I discovered for some years later that the principal reason for newspapers is news. My father never looked at them for that reason – just as he always lost interest in any book in which he had lost his place. Or perhaps he was not in the mood for world events. My mother had never cared much for them at the best of times. "To think of all we expected after the war," she used to say to my father, from day to day.

'My mother, by this time, had had her hair shingled – in fact, *I* never remember her any other way than with a dark shaved point tapered down the back of her neck. I don't know when she'd begun to be jealous of him and me. Every time he came back from an interview that he hadn't got to or from an interview that hadn't come to anything, he used to bring me back something, to cheer himself up, and the wheels off all the mechanical toys got mixed with the beads and the threads and the cinders into our lawn. What my mother was really most afraid of was that my father would bundle us all off into the great open spaces, in order to start fresh somewhere and grow something. I imagine he knew several chaps who had, or were going to. After one or two starts on the subject he shut up, but I could see she could see he was nursing it. It frustrated her from nagging at him all out about not succeeding in getting a job in England: she was anxious not to provide an opening for him to say, "Well, there's always one thing we *could* do . . . " The hard glassy look her eyes got made them look like doll's eyes, which may partly have been what kept me from liking dolls. So they practically never talked about anything. I don't think she even knew he minded about her hair.

'You may be going to ask when my father sang. He often *began* to sing – when he hammered away at the pergola, when something he thought of suddenly struck him as good, when the heave he gave at the warped french window sent it flying open into the garden. He was constantly starting to sing, but he never got very far – you see, he had no place where he could sing unheard. The walls were thin and the lawn was tiny and the air round the bungalow was so silent and heavy that my mother was forced to listen to every note. The lordly way my father would burst out singing, like the lordly way he cocked his hat over one eye, had come to annoy her, in view of everything else. But the still more unfortunate thing was that my father only knew, or else only liked,

two tunes, which were two tunes out of the bygone years which made him think of the war and being in love. Yes, they were dance tunes; yes, we have just heard one; yes, they also reminded my mother of war and love. So when he had got to the fourth or fifth bar of either, she would call out to know if he wanted to drive her mad. He would stop and say, "Sorry," but if he was in the mood he'd be well away, the next minute, with the alternative tune, and she would be put to the trouble of stopping that.

'Mother did not know what to look like now she was not a flapper. Mostly she looked like nothing – I wonder whether she knew. Perhaps that was what she saw in the satin cushions: they looked like something – at least, to her. The day she and I so suddenly went to London to call on her sister's friend she did certainly manage, however, to look like something. My father, watching us down the garden path, ventured no comment on her or my appearance. However, which ought to have cheered me up, we created quite a furore in the train. We went sailing into the richly-appointed office of mother's sister's friend, who was one of those who, during the war, had felt mother should be cheered up. Can I, need I, describe him? The usual kind of business pudge, in a suit. He looked in a reluctant way at my mother, and reluctantly, slightly morbidly, at me. I don't know how I got the impression mother held all the cards. The conversation, of course, flowed over my head – I just cruised round and round the room, knocking objects over. But the outcome – as I gathered when we got home – was that mother's sister's friend said he'd give my father a job. He had said he could use an ex-officer, provided it was an ex-officer with charm. What my father would have to do was to interest housewives, not in himself but in vacuum cleaners. If it helped to interest some housewives in vacuum cleaners, he could interest them just a little bit in himself. Mother's sister's friend called this using judgment of character.

'When my mother, that evening, put all this to my father, he did not say anything but simply stood and stared. *She* said, "Then I suppose you want us to starve?"

'So my father stopped being a problem and became a travelling salesman. The best part was that the firm allowed him a car.

'I must say for my mother that she did not ask my father how he was getting on. At least she had much less trouble about the singing: sometimes he'd be away for two or three days together; when he was home he simply sprawled in his chair, now and then asking when there'd be something to eat, as unmusical as a gramophone with the spring broken. When I came filtering in he sometimes opened one eye and said. "And what have *you* been doing?" – as though he'd just finished telling me what he'd been

doing himself. He garaged the car some way down the next road, and in the mornings when he was starting off I used to walk with him to the garage. He used to get into the car, start up the engine, back out, then look round at me and say, "Like to come out on the job? – yes, I bet you would," then let the clutch in and whizz off. Something about this always made me feel sick.

'I don't of course clearly remember when this began, or how long it went on for; but I know when it stopped. The night before my seventh birthday was a June night, because my birthdays are in June. The people who lived all round us were sitting out, on the verandas or on their lawns, but my mother had sent me to bed early because she was having a party for me next day and did not want to get me over-excited. My birthday cake which had arrived from the shop was on the dining-room sideboard, with a teacloth over it to keep the flies off, and my father and mother were in the lounge with the french windows shut, because she had several things to say to him that she did not want the people all round to hear. The heat travelled through the roof into all the rooms, so that I could not sleep: also, my bed was against the wall of my room, and the lounge was the other side of the wall. My mother went on like someone who has been saving up – just some touch, I suppose, had been needed to set her off. She said she would like to know why there was not more money – my father's job, I suppose now, was on a commission basis. Or, she said, was he keeping another woman? – a thing she had heard that most travelling salesmen did. She said she really felt quite ashamed of having foisted my father on to her sister's friend, and that she only wondered how long the firm would stand for it. She said her sisters pitied her, though she had tried to conceal from them that her life was hell. My father, who had as usual got home late and as usual had not yet had any supper, could not be heard saying anything. My mother then said she wished she knew why she had married him, and would like still more to know why he had married her.

'My father said, "You were so lovely – you've no idea."

'Next morning there was a heat-haze over everything. I bustled into the dining-room to see if there was anything on my plate. I forget what my mother had given me, but her richest sister had sent me a manicure-set in a purple box: all the objects had purple handles and lay in grooves on white velvet. While I was taking them out and putting them back again, my father suddenly looked up from his coffee and said *his* present for me was in the car, and that I'd have to come out and fetch it. My mother could hardly say no to this, though of course I saw her opening her mouth. So out we set, I gripping the manicure-set. I don't think my father seemed odder than usual, though he was on the point of doing an

unexpected thing – when he had got the car started and backed out he suddenly held open the other door and said, "Come on, nip in, look sharp; my present to you is a day trip." So then I nipped in and we drove off, as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

'The car was a two-seater, with a let-down hood . . . No, of course I cannot remember what make it was. That morning, the hood was down. Locked up in the dickie behind my father kept the specimen vacuum cleaner he interested women in. He drove fast, and as we hit the bumps in the road I heard the parts of the cleaner clonking about. As we drove, the sun began to burn its way through the haze, making the roses in some of the grander gardens look almost impossibly large and bright. My bare knees began to grill on the leather cushion, and the crumples eased out of the front of my cotton frock.

'I had never been with my father when he was driving a car – it felt as though speed and power were streaming out of him, and as if he and I were devouring everything that we passed. I sat slumped round with my cheek against the hot cushion and sometimes stared at his profile, sometimes stared at his wrists, till he squinted round and said, "Anything wrong with *me*?" Later on, he added, "Why not look at the scenery?" By that time there *was* some scenery, if that means grass and trees; in fact, these had been going on for some time, in a green band streaming behind my father's face. When I said, "Where are we going?" he said, "Well, where *are* we going?" At that point I saw quite a large hill, in fact a whole party of them, lapping into each other as though they would never stop, and never having seen anything of the kind before I could not help saying, "Oh, I say, look!"

'My father gave a nod, without stopping singing – I told you he had begun to sing? He had not only started but gone on: when he came to the end of his first tune he said, "Pom-*pom*", like a drum, then started through it again; after that he worked around to the second, which he sang two or three times, with me joining in. We both liked the second still better, and how right we were – and it's worn well, hasn't it? That's what this band's just played.'

'Oh, what they've just played?' he said, and looked narrowly at the band; while, reaching round for the bottle on the table between them he lifted it to replenish her glass and his. This time she did not see or did not bother to stop him: she looked at her full glass vaguely, then vaguely drank. After a minute she went on:

'Ginger beer, sausage rolls, chocolate – that was what we bought when we stopped at the village shop. Also my father bought a blue comb off a card of combs, with which he attempted to do my hair, which had blown into tags and ratstails over my eyes and face. He

looked at me while he combed in a puzzled way, as though something about me that hadn't struck him became a problem to him for the first time. I said, "Aren't we going to sell any vacuum cleaners?" and he said, "We'll try and interest the Berkshire Downs." I thought that meant, meet a family; but all we did was turn out of the village and start up a rough track, to where there could not be any people at all. The car climbed with a slow but exciting roar: from the heat of the engine and the heat of the sun the chocolate in the paper bag in my hands was melting by the time we came to the top.

'From the top, where we lay on our stomachs in the shade of the car, we could see – oh well, can't you imagine, can't you? It was an outsize June day. The country below us looked all colours, and was washed over in the most reckless way with light; going on and on into the distance the clumps of trees and the roofs of villages and the church towers had quivering glimmers round them; but most of all there was space, sort of moulded space, and the blue of earth ran into the blue of sky.

'My father's face was turned away from me, propped up on his hand. I finally said to him, 'What's that?"

'"What's what?" he said, startled.

'"What we're looking at."

'"England," he said, "that's England. I thought I'd like to see her again."

"But don't we live in England?"

'He took no notice. "How I loved her," he said.

'"Oh, but don't you now?"

'"I've lost her," he said, "or she's lost me; I don't quite know which; I don't understand what's happened." He rolled round and looked at me and said, "But *you* like it, don't you? I thought I'd like you to see, if just once, what I once saw."

'I was well into the third of my sausage rolls: my mouth was full, I could only stare at my father. He said, "And there's something else down there – see it?" I screwed my eyes up but still only saw the distance. "Peace," he said. "Look hard at it; don't forget it."

'"What's peace?" I said.

'"An idea you have when there's a war on, to make you fight well. An idea that gets lost when there isn't a war."

'I licked pastry-crumbs off my chin and began on chocolate. By this time my father lay on his back, with his fingers thatched together over his eyes: he talked, but more to the sky than me. None of the things he was saying now went anywhere near my brain – a child's brain, how could they? – his actual words are gone as though I had never heard them, but his meaning lodged itself in some part of my inside and is still there and has grown up with me.

He talked about war and how he had once felt, and about leaves and love and dancing and going back to the war, then the birth of me – "Seven years ago today," he said, "seven years; I remember how they brought me the telegram."

'Something else, on top of the sausage and heat and chocolate suddenly made me feel sick and begin to cry. "Oh please, oh please don't," I said, "it's my birthday."

'"Don't what?" he said. I, naturally, didn't know. My father again looked at me, with the same expression he had worn when attempting to comb my hair. Something about me – my age? – was a proposition. Then he shut his eyes, like – I saw later, not at the time – somebody finally banishing an idea. "No; it wouldn't work," he said. "It simply couldn't be done. You can wait for me if you want. I can't wait for you."

'Then he began acting like somebody very sleepy: he yawned and yawned at me till I yawned at him. I didn't feel sick any more, but the heat of the afternoon came down like a grey-blue blanket over my head. "What you and I want," my father said, watching me, "is a good sleep."

'I wish I could tell you at *which* moment I fell asleep, and stopped blurrily looking at him between my eyelids, because *that* was the moment when I last saw my father.

'When I woke, there was no more shadow on my side of the car; the light had changed and everything looked bright yellow. I called to my father but he did not answer, for the adequate reason that he was not there. He was gone. For some reason I wasn't at all frightened; I thought he must have gone to look for something for us for tea. I remembered that I was not at my birthday party, and I must say I thought twice about that pink cake. I was more bored than anything, till I remembered my manicure-set, which owing to the funniness of the day I had not been able to open a second time. I took the objects out of their velvet bedding and began to prod at my nails, as I'd seen my mother do. Then I got up and walked, once more, all the way round the car. It was then that I noticed what I had missed before: a piece of white paper twisted into the radiator. I couldn't read handwriting very well, but did at last make out what my father had put. *"The car and the vacuum cleaner are the property of Messrs X and X"* (the firm of my mother's sister's friend), *"the child is the property of Mrs So-and-So, of Such-and such"* (I needn't bother to give you my mother's name and the name of our bungalow), *"the manicure-set, the comb and anything still left in the paper bags are the property of the child. Signed — "*
It was signed with my father's name.

'The two dots I saw starting zigzag up the side of the down turned out to be two sweating policemen. What happened when

they came to where I was was interesting at the moment but is not interesting now. They checked up on the message on the front of the car, then told me my father had telephoned to the police station, and that I was to be a good girl and come with them. When they had checked up on the cleaner, we all drove down. I remember the constable's knobbly, sticky red hands looked queer on the wheel where my father's had lately been . . . At the police station, someone or other's wife made quite a fuss about me and gave me tea, then we piled into another car and drove on again. I was soon dead asleep; and I only woke when we stopped in the dark at the gate of the bungalow.

'Having tottered down the path, in the light from the front door, my mother clawed me out of the car, sobbing. I noticed her breath smelt unusual. We and the policeman then trooped into the lounge, where the policeman kept nodding and jotting things on a pad. To cheer up my mother he said that England was very small – "And he's not, so far as you know, in possession of a passport?" I sucked blobs of chocolate off the front of my frock while my mother described my father to the policeman. "But no doubt," the policeman said, "he'll be thinking better of this. A man's home is a man's home, I always say."

'When my mother and I were left alone in the lounge, we stared at each other in the electric light. While she asked if I knew how unnatural my father was, she kept pouring out a little more from the bottle: she said she had to have medicine to settle her nerves, but it seemed to act on her nerves just the opposite way. That I wouldn't say what my father had said and done set her off fairly raving against my father. To put it mildly, she lost all kind of control. She finished up with: "And such a fool, too – a fool, a fool!"

'"He is not a fool," I said, "he's my father."

'"He is not your father,' she screamed, "and he is a fool."

'That made me stare at her, and her stare at me.

'"How do you mean," I said, "my father is not my father?"

'My mother's reaction to this was exactly like as if someone had suddenly pitched a pail of cold water over her. She pulled herself up and something jumped in her eyes. She said she had not said anything of the sort, and that if I ever said she had I was a wicked girl. I said I hadn't said she had, but she had said so. She put on a worried look and put a hand on my forehead and said she could feel I'd got a touch of the sun. A touch of the sun, she said, would make me imagine things – and no wonder, after the day I'd had.

'All next day I was kept in bed; not as a punishment but as a kind of treat. My mother was ever so nice to me; she kept coming in to put a hand on my forehead. The one thing she did not do was get

the doctor. And afterwards, when I was let get up, nothing was good enough for me; until really anyone would have thought that my mother felt she was in my power. Shortly after, her rich sister came down, and my mother then had a fine time, crying, talking and crying; the sister then took us back with her to London, where my mother talked and cried even more. Of course I asked my aunt about what my mother had said, but my aunt said that if I imagined such wicked things they would have to think there was something wrong with my brain. So I did not re-open the subject, and am not doing so now. In the course of time my mother succeeded in divorcing my father for desertion; she was unable to marry her sister's friend because he was married and apparently always had been, but she did marry a friend of her sister's friend's, and was soon respectably settled in Bermuda, where as far as I know she still is.'

'But your father?' he said.

'Well, what about my father?'

'You don't mean you never heard anything more of him?'

'I never said so – he sent me two picture postcards. The last' – she counted back – 'arrived fourteen years ago. But there probably have been others that went astray. The way I've always lived, I'm not long at any address.'

He essayed, rashly, 'Been a bit of a waif?'

The look he got back for this was halfway between glass and ice. 'A waif's the first thing I learned not to be. No, more likely my father decided, better leave it at that. People don't, on the whole, come back, and I've never blamed them. No, why should he be dead? Why should not he be – any place?'

'Here, for instance?'

'Tonight, you mean?'

'Why not?' he said. 'Why not – as you say?'

'Here?' She looked round the tables, as though she hardly knew where she was herself. She looked round the tables, over which smoke thickened, round which khaki melted into the khaki gloom. Then her eyes returned, to fix, with unsparing attention, an addled trio of men round the fifty-mark. 'Here?' she repeated, 'my father? – I hope not.'

'But I thought,' he said, watching her watching the old buffers, 'I thought we were looking for someone of twenty-six?'

'Give me a cigarette,' she said, 'and, also, don't be cruel.'

'I wouldn't be,' he said, as he lighted the cigarette, 'if you had any feeling for me.'