



The Searchlight
Woolf, Virginia

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About Woolf:

Virginia Woolf (January 25, 1882 – March 28, 1941) was an English novelist and essayist regarded as one of the foremost modernist literary figures of the twentieth century. During the interwar period, Woolf was a significant figure in London literary society and a member of the Bloomsbury Group. Her most famous works include the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928), and the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with its famous dictum, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".

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The mansion of the eighteenth century Earl had been changed in the twentieth century into a Club. And it was pleasant, after dining in the great room with the pillars and the chandeliers under a glare of light to go out on to the balcony overlooking the Park. The trees were in full leaf, and had there been a moon, one could have seen the pink and cream coloured cockades on the chestnut trees. But it was a moonless night; very warm, after a fine summer's day.

Mr. and Mrs. Ivimey's party were drinking coffee and smoking on the balcony. As if to relieve them from the need of talking, to entertain them without any effort on their part, rods of light wheeled across the sky. It was peace then; the air force was practising; searching for enemy aircraft in the sky. After pausing to prod some suspected spot, the light wheeled, like the wings of a windmill, or again like the antennae of some prodigious insect and revealed here a cadaverous stone front; here a chestnut tree with all its blossoms riding; and then suddenly the light struck straight at the balcony, and for a second a bright disc shone—perhaps it was a mirror in a ladies' hand-bag.

"Look!" Mrs. Ivimey exclaimed.

The light passed. They were in darkness again

"You'll never guess what THAT made me see! she added. Naturally, they guessed.

"No, no, no," she protested. Nobody could guess; only she knew; only she could know, because she was the great-grand-daughter of the man himself. He had told her the story. What story? If they liked, she would try to tell it. There was still time before the play.

"But where do I begin?" she pondered. "In the year 1820? ... It must have been about then that my greatgrandfather was a boy. I'm not young myself"—no, but she was very well set up and handsome—"and he was a very old man when I was a child—when he told me the story. A very handsome old man, with a shock of white hair, and blue eyes. He must have been a beautiful boy. But queer... . That was only natural," she explained, "seeing how they lived. The name was Comber. They'd come down in the world. They'd been gentlefolk; they'd owned land up in Yorkshire. But when he was a boy only the tower was left. The house was nothing but a little farmhouse, standing in the middle of fields. We saw it ten years ago and went over it. We had to leave the car and walk across the fields. There isn't any road to the house. It stands all alone, the grass grows right up to the gate ... there were chickens pecking about, running in and out of the rooms. All gone to rack and ruin. I remember a stone fell from the tower suddenly." She paused. "There they lived," she

went on, "the old man, the woman and the boy. She wasn't his wife, or the boy's mother. She was just a farm hand, a girl the old man had taken to live with him when his wife died. Another reason perhaps why nobody visited them—why the whole place was gone to rack and ruin. But I remember a coat of arms over the door; and books, old books, gone mouldy. He taught himself all he knew from books. He read and read, he told me, old books, books with maps hanging out from the pages. He dragged them up to the top of the tower—the rope's still there and the broken steps. There's a chair still in the window with the bottom fallen out; and the window swinging open, and the panes broken, and a view for miles and miles across the moors."

She paused as if she were up in the tower looking from the window that swung open.

"But we couldn't," she said, "find the telescope." In the dining-room behind them the clatter of plates grew louder. But Mrs. Ivimey, on the balcony, seemed puzzled, because she could not find the telescope.

"Why a telescope?" someone asked her.

"Why? Because if there hadn't been a telescope," she laughed, "I shouldn't be sitting here now."

And certainly she was sitting there now, a well set-up, middle-aged woman, with something blue over her shoulders.

"It must have been there," she resumed, "because, he told me, every night when the old people had gone to bed he sat at the window, looking through the telescope at the stars. Jupiter, Aldebaran, Cassiopeia." She waved her hand at the stars that were beginning to show over the trees. It was growing draker. And the searchlight seemed brighter, sweeping across the sky, pausing here and there to stare at the stars.

"There they were," she went on, "the stars. And he asked himself, my great-grandfather—that boy: 'What are they? Why are they? And who am I?' as one does, sitting alone, with no one to talk to, looking at the stars."

She was silent. They all looked at the stars that were coming out in the darkness over the trees. The stars seemed very permanent, very unchanging. The roar of London sank away. A hundred years seemed nothing. They felt that the boy was looking at the stars with them. They seemed to be with him, in the tower, looking out over the moors at the stars.

Then a voice behind them said:

"Right you are. Friday."

They all turned, shifted, felt dropped down on to the balcony again.

"Ah, but there was nobody to say that to him," she murmured. The couple rose and walked away.

"HE was alone," she resumed. "It was a fine summer's day. A June day. One of those perfect summer days when everything seems to stand still in the heat. There were the chickens pecking in the farm-yard; the old horse stamping in the stable; the old man dozing over his glass. The woman scouring pails in the scullery. Perhaps a stone fell from the tower. It seemed as if the day would never end. And he had no one to talk to—nothing whatever to do. The whole world stretched before him. The moor rising and falling; the sky meeting the moor; green and blue, green and blue, for ever and ever."

In the half light, they could see that Mrs. Ivimey was leaning over the balcony, with her chin propped on her hands, as if she were looking out over the moors from the top of a tower.

"Nothing but moor and sky, moor and sky, for ever and ever," she murmured.

Then she made a movement, as if she swung something into position.

"But what did the earth look like through the telescope?" she asked.

She made another quick little movement with her fingers as if she were twirling something.

"He focussed it," she said. "He focussed it upon the earth. He focussed it upon a dark mass of wood upon the horizon. He focussed it so that he could see ... each tree ... each tree separate ... and the birds ... rising and falling ... and a stem of smoke ... there ... in the midst of the trees... . And then ... lower ... lower ... (she lowered her eyes) ... there was a house ... a house among the trees ... a farm-house ... every brick showed ... and the tubs on either side of the door ... with flowers in them blue, pink, hydrangeas, perhaps... ." She paused ... "And then a girl came out of the house ... wearing something blue upon her head ... and stood there ... feeding birds ... pigeons ... they came fluttering round her... . And then ... look... . A man... . A man! He came round the corner. He seized her in his arms! They kissed ... they kissed."

Mrs. Ivimey opened her arms and closed them as if she were kissing someone.

"It was the first time he had seen a man kiss a woman—in his telescope—miles and miles away across the moors!"

She thrust something from her—the telescope presumably. She sat upright.

"So he ran down the stairs. He ran through the fields. He ran down lanes, out upon the high road, through woods. He ran for miles and

miles, and just when the stars were showing above the trees he reached the house ... covered with dust, streaming with sweat"

She stopped, as if she saw him.

"And then, and then ... what did he do then? What did he say? And the girl ... " they pressed her.

A shaft of light fell upon Mrs. Ivimey as if someone had focussed the lens of a telescope upon her. (It was the air force, looking for enemy air craft.) She had risen. She had something blue on her head. She had raised her hand, as if she stood in a doorway, amazed.

"Oh the girl... . She was my—" she hesitated, as if she were about to say "myself." But she remembered; and corrected herself. "She was my great-grand-mother," she said.

She turned to look for her cloak. It was on a chair behind her.

"But tell us—what about the other man, the man who came round the corner?" they asked.

"That man? Oh, that man," Mrs. Ivimey murmured, stooping to fumble with her cloak (the searchlight had left the balcony), "he I suppose, vanished."

"The light," she added, gathering her things about her, "only falls here and there."

The searchlight had passed on. It was now focussed on the plain expanse of Buckingham Palace. And it was time they went on to the play.

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