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1937

GREENGATES

by

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Author of

JOURNEY'S END,
THE FORTNIGHT IN SEPTEMBER,
ETC., ETC.

LONDON

VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD

First published May 1936
Second impression before publication
Third impression May 1936
Fourth impression (fast cheap edition) September 1937

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., London and Southampton

CHAPTER I

IN FROSTY DAYS GONE BY, the chief lunch-hour entertainment for the City of London was the watching of men raise horses that had fallen in Cornhill. To-day there is a better supply of sand to keep up the few horses that remain, and the loiterer has turned to less exciting things. A workman with an electric drill can command a five-deep audience, a man clicking spoons between his fingers to the music of an organ can do almost as well. Police have to be called to regulate the crowd when a water main bursts, and any old building can draw a mass of sky-gazers during the first dangerous days of its demolition. On fine days the whole City enjoys a few minutes in the fresh air between the end of lunch and the beginning of the afternoon: but for so short a time the entertainment must be free and the Londoner's principle is that anything is worth watching for nothing, particularly other people in trouble and other people working.

Mr. Baldwin enjoyed his own quiet form of entertainment, and frequently, for a few minutes after two o'clock, you would see a slight, well-dressed man, with grey hair and a thoughtful, clean-shaven face, leaning against the parapet of London Bridge, watching the barges unload.

Sometimes, on a fine day, a few boys would perch up on the parapet beside him, eat sandwiches and throw the crusts to the gulls.

But usually he was almost alone, with the river beneath him and the clattering steps of passers-by. He was alone one autumn afternoon, for a raw east wind was blowing up the Thames, a hint of frost lay in the air, and people hurried across the Bridge for the shelter of the narrow streets.

It was not an exciting entertainment at the best of times, but the blue-jerseyed, toiling backs on the wharf were a change from those that only moved to toss a few papers into a wire letter basket, and the smell of mud and tar was healthier, to Mr. Baldwin's way of thinking, than floor polish and centrally heated mahogany. The river had not changed as the streets had changed: they would never change this distant view of Tower Bridge, or the red, muddy swirl, or block out these last remaining stretches of London sky. The Bridge gave command of the open air, in the City you crept like an insect in a rut.

The giant cranes on the far side of the river were the only arrivals in recent years. Sometimes Mr. Baldwin crossed the Bridge to watch them slowly raise themselves like stiff, lumbago-stricken monsters, curtsey and drop fat bales of merchandise into open hatches as neatly as one would drop a seed into a hole. But generally his conservative eye preferred the blue-jerseyed, toiling backs, the skilful twist that took a rolling barrel through a narrow door.

Despite the cold wind he stayed beyond his usual time this afternoon. His lunch hour closed at a quarter past two, but even when he turned and walked away, he hesitated, and wandered down the side streets. He pictured the whole staff busy at the afternoon's work and the one empty desk behind the glass screen. He felt like a small boy playing

truant, for he rarely failed to be back on the stroke of time. But when Wilson, the Manager, had passed him as he had left for lunch, he had said, " Don't hurry back to-day."

So Mr. Baldwin loitered against his will. The City still fascinated him: he could still probe into forgotten corners and find unexpected things. It fascinated him but had never made him feel at ease. Every inch of it was too fantastically valuable: the ownership of a few square yards would keep a man in luxury for life and you could not love a piece of land that could bury itself in its own gold. Every inch of it had been so many times disturbed, so honeycombed with wires and pipes, tunnelled and vaulted, chewed and spat out by mechanical excavators, turned over and built over, fought over and schemed over. Even when they had hollowed out the space for the new office lavatories they had found a Roman Milestone and a wooden water pipe from Cromwell's day. The best Museums of London still lay underground.

No one appeared to look with unusual interest at Mr. Baldwin as he walked into the office at three o'clock. The Cashiers were busy as they always were on the days following Michaelmas: the telephone was ringing, several clients stood at the rail with papers spread before them—everything was so exactly the same, so normal that he could not avoid a slight sense of disappointment. A day of such consequence to him might at least have sent a ripple across those bowed, working heads.

As Chief Cashier, he occupied a screened-in corner to himself, but glass played so large a part in the screens that

the official behind them was always known as the goldfish. His desk was clear of official papers, but it still remained for him to clear out the personal relics that had accumulated there; a strange assortment that had travelled with him from desk to desk in his gradual rise to the screened-in corner; odd things that for some reason or another had not been destroyed or taken home.

For once and for all he had got to decide what to do with his Menu of the Staff Jubilee Dinner, held at Gatti's in 1889. It had been too valuable to destroy but too dangerous to take home, for Denny had been on the staff in those days, and Denny had become a famous black-and-white artist a few years later. Amongst the high-spirited after-dinner scribbings on the Menu card was an authentic, early Denny—unfortunately a somewhat indecent Denny. To rub it out would have been vandalism, to take it home and risk Edith seeing it would have been unthinkable, and so it had lain amongst this jetsam, dusty and fading, for thirty-six years.

It occurred to Mr. Baldwin that one of the Juniors might like to have it, but there would be no purpose in giving it away unless he pointed out the reason for its value, and to do that would scarcely be in keeping with his position as Chief Cashier. The card was still creased where he had folded it for his pocket on that distant night: it had been his first Dinner: he had been in the office five years and he was to marry Edith in the summer. Huitres—Potage Russe—Whitebait—Duckling—somebody had scrawled here, "Where are you going when this is over?" He tried to decipher the names, and the misty pencil scrawls took misty form—ghosts in high collars—in frock coats that dangled to boot heels hitched to the crossbars of absurdly

high stools: flickering gas jets over each office desk, a baking heat from fifty jets when a pea-soup fog demanded lights all day. A curious crowd round the first telephone, touching it as if it were a bomb—a whiskered Messenger screwing down a copying book in a machine that looked like Caxton's printing press—pulling out clammy, sodden letters, folding them and stamping them. The Queen was nearly seventy and they used to wonder how much longer the head of a girl would appear on her lilac postage stamps. The office itself had scarcely changed, except for the central heating and electric light. The Management prided itself upon its old foundation and tried to retain the atmosphere of the past. The door was the same that the merry party had used on their way up West for the Gatti's Dinner, but they had climbed on to a growling iron rimmed omnibus, young Mr. Baldwin beside the driver, with a lamp-lit view of a swaying tail and sweating haunches. Everybody above the rank of office boy had worn a top hat in those times, and a woman in the City was as rare as a horse to-day. And the streets themselves: swirls of dust on an August evening; a mire on a winter night; unbelievably quiet when the staff worked late at overtime. Now and then the clip-clop of a hansom, taking a City Magnate to the station ... so near to yesterday that the closing of the eyes brought back the very sounds. . . .

He lay the Menu card aside, for despite years of indecision he still had a few more minutes to decide its fate. These casually collected relics linked themselves together and formed a panorama. He propped up the lid of his desk, for he did not want anyone to see what he was doing. There were a few picture postcards from men on

their holidays: Bexhill, Lowestoft—one from an adventurer who had gone to Guernsey: a report of an Inter-Office Chess Match, kept for its record of "T. H. Baldwin, i. F. Cass, o"—report of an Office Cricket Match: "Baldwin, run out, 3." There was a cigarette picture of Mornington Cannon, the jockey, a few fossilised pieces of india-rubber and a sweepstake ticket. Amongst the fluff and cake crumbs in a corner there lay a small splinter of anti-aircraft shell that he had picked up in the doorway of the office. He destroyed the papers but he dropped the splinter into his pocket. There was a musty sentiment about old papers that was best forgotten, but the sentiment of this jagged, glittering piece of steel was of another kind. It conjured up cold starlight nights of loneliness, with whistle and truncheon, when for a few dark hours he had been a different kind of man from the Baldwin who had defeated F. Cass at chess and the Baldwin run out for three in the office cricket match.

He scraped a few nibs and paper clips together, dropped them into an envelope and put them in his pocket. The desk was empty, he lowered the lid and was surprised to see Henslip the Messenger just closing the main doors. He had been dreaming in his desk for over half an hour, but he was glad the time had passed so quickly.

He knew exactly what was going to happen now. Strictly speaking it was a secret shared by the staff and withheld from him alone, but he had shared the secret with the others so many times in, the past that it could not hold any surprise for him now.

First of all, Henslip the Messenger disappeared into the Manager's room. Then he emerged, went downstairs and returned with a small brown-paper parcel. After another

short disappearance he re-emerged and passed with a furtive importance from one member of the staff to another whispering something to each. Each member of the staff, upon receiving the whisper, glanced curiously towards Mr. Baldwin's desk, slid off his stool and disappeared into the Manager's room.

He saw the girls file downstairs from the typewriting rooms and follow the men: gradually the office emptied until Mr. Baldwin sat alone behind his glass screen. Then there was a hitch. The telephone rang, Henslip hurried with an impatient grunt to answer it, and called out, " Mr. Robins !—Somebody wants to report a Fire Claim ! " A harassed Junior came out of the Manager's room, and for a few moments Mr. Baldwin sat listening to words that seemed now to eddy back from the past—" Yes—I see—curtain blew into candle flame—have you got your policy number ?—Never mind, I'll turn it up. I'll send you a Claim Form. Good-bye."

Henslip was fidgeting outside the telephone box. He hustled the Junior back to the Manager's room and crossed the silent office to Mr. Baldwin's desk.

" Will you come into Mr. Wilson's room, sir ? "

Mr. Baldwin looked up from an almanack with an attempt at surprise.

" Yes. All right. I'll come now."

He was glad to feel so calm and controlled, for he had been dreading this moment for days. He waited until Henslip had gone, then tore the Gatti's Menu into little squares and threw them into the fire as he passed on his way to the Manager's room. It seemed to be the right and only moment to destroy it.

Mr. Wilson had a spacious, cheerful room, flooded with

sunlight on fine mornings, for its windows were upon a side street with low buildings opposite. Now the lights were on and above the buildings lay a green strip of smoky sky. On the mantelpiece stood a photograph of Mr. Wilson's wife, for it was a custom of successive Managers to have some personal decoration in this room. At one time Mr. Baldwin had had visions of a photograph of Edith standing there, but things had not worked out that way.

The whole staff, men and girls, were grouped round the walls, and Mr. Wilson stood behind his desk, his tea tray pushed aside to make way for the brown-paper parcel.

" Are we all here ? "

" Yes, sir," said Henslip, closing the door.

It is embarrassing for people who know each other to stand together in a crowd. Young ones, unused to the ceremony, shuffled, looked down at their feet or at their fingernails, older ones gazed with bland smiles at Mr. Baldwin, the sort of smiles used at weddings, turned on very carefully to half pressure to prevent them wearing out too soon. Mr. Baldwin took up his position a little in front of the rest, like a prisoner about to hear sentence at Court Martial. He smiled feebly at Mr. Wilson, then lowered his eyes to the edge of the Manager's desk. Henslip stood nearest him and he caught the slight odour of long-used flannel that always rose from the Messenger's red, polished face. A coal popped in the fire, and there was silence. Then Mr. Wilson cleared his throat and began.

" Mr. Baldwin. The staff has asked me to hand you this little souvenir on the occasion of your retirement. I need hardly say what a sad occasion it is for us although I'm

sure it's a very happy one for you. We shall miss you, for although we may be able to fill your official position we cannot replace your personality."

There were some appreciative murmurs, and Mr. Wilson turned to the staff.

" Mr. Baldwin joined the staff of this office in 1884: he has given honourable service for forty-one years. He could tell us some interesting stories of the naughty nineties if he wanted to—even of the eighties, too ! There's no need for me to enlarge upon Mr. Baldwin's virtues, for they are known to you all. The office will remember him as a loyal and devoted servant: we personally shall remember him as an upright gentleman. We all wish you, Mr. Baldwin, many years of the happiness and leisure that you so justly deserve, and we hope you will often come in to see us. We ask you to accept this little present as a token of our esteem."

Mr. Wilson waited for the polite applause to die away, then drew aside the brown paper and revealed a neat square clock in varnished oak. He picked it up with a smile and put it down again on the corner of the desk nearest Mr. Baldwin.

It was Mr. Baldwin's turn. He took a step forward, his fingers fumbled the clock as he turned to face the staff. He did not feel like Mr. Baldwin at all, he was a strange, light-headed person who had had some vague connection with a Mr. Baldwin in the past, who began to recite words that this Mr. Baldwin had taught him.

" Mr. Wilson, Ladies and Gentlemen. I really can't tell you how much I—I value this lovely present. I shall always keep it to remind me of the days in the old office, because they've been good days. I'm sorry they're over,

and I'm going to miss you all. It's very kind of you to think of giving me such a beautiful present. Thank you very much . . . very much indeed."

The short speech, with its abrupt close took everybody by surprise and there was an awkward little silence before Mr. Wilson nodded to Henslip to open the door. The telephone began calling out like a spoilt child annoyed at being left alone: someone hurried off to soothe it, the girls and the Juniors edged along the walls and disappeared. Some of the senior men shook hands with Mr. Baldwin, others, less senior, nearly did. Gradually the room emptied and Mr. Baldwin was alone with the Manager.

He had never felt at ease with Wilson. Five years Mr. Wilson's senior, it had been difficult for him when this tall, puckered man arrived from the Head Office to take command.

" Well, Baldwin—you're a gentleman of leisure now ! "

" Yes," said Mr. Baldwin with a faint smile.

" What are you going to do with yourself? "

" Oh, there's a good many things been waiting for this to happen. Garden, you know—and books to read—and—and hobbies——"

" That's right. Hobbies are the thing."

Henslip the Messenger tapped at the door and peeped in.

" Shall I do the clock up for you, Mr. Baldwin ? "

" Yes, do please—Henslip."

The Manager himself took the clock across to Henslip and Mr. Baldwin followed with the paper and string.

" I'll find a stronger bit of string than that," said Henslip.

The Manager turned back into the room and offered Mr. Baldwin a cigarette.

" Don't forget to look us up sometimes."

" Certainly," replied Mr. Baldwin, knowing quite well that retired members of the staff were a curse when they came wandering round, wasting people's time.

" Is your wife keeping well ? "

" Quite."

" That's good."

The Manager's eyes were upon a pile of letters waiting for his signature, and Mr. Baldwin held out his hand.

" Well, good-bye, Mr. Wilson. Thanks for the nice things you said in that speech."

Mr. Wilson smiled. " I meant it. Well, good-bye."

He met one of the Juniors as he went downstairs for his overcoat and hat: a pleasant lad who lived somewhere out in the country and had an hour's train journey to get home. He stopped, flashed a smile at Mr. Baldwin and said: " We're going to miss you a lot, sir—the way you always help us "—the boy played football on Saturday afternoons and Mr. Baldwin had sometimes helped him to get away sharp at one o'clock by taking a bundle of letters from him and doing them up himself—" we've just been saying so downstairs . . . how decent you've been to us ... thanks. . . ." The boy's library book slid from under his arm and clattered on the stairs, there was a dive for it ... a laugh ... a flustered handshake ... a cold hand, still damp from washing. " Don't be silly," said Mr. Baldwin. " I've never done anything."

" You've done lots and we're going to miss you. Don't forget to come in and sec us sometimes, sir." Another smile and the boy was gone. Something flew up and stung

Mr. Baldwin at the back of his nose and he hastened downstairs to the lavatories.

A little later, with a neat brown parcel under his arm, he rumbled the main door to and joined the broad stream of home-goers. The last moments in the office had seemed unreal to him, but everything was cool and normal here: the same brown, shining street—the same swinging of umbrellas and bobbing of white folded newspapers—the same giant buildings filled with light—the same deep murmur—the same narrow strips of remote, unnoticed sky.

CHAPTER II

WHEN A MAN RETIRES, and time is no longer a matter of urgent importance, his colleagues generally present him with a clock. But the unmeant irony is balanced by an equally unmeant appropriateness, for while a man in retirement is no longer governed by hours and minutes, he very frequently wants to know the time.

Mr. Baldwin felt unreasonably self-conscious standing on Broad Street platform with the clock under his arm. Although it was done up in brown paper and nobody could possibly guess what it was, he could not help feeling that a placard reading " RETIRED ! " hung round his neck.

The crowd around him, companions of a thousand journeys, seemed detached and remote from him now. The bond that had held him to them had snapped at four o'clock when the door of the office closed. His spirit was no longer with them, but his body would have to stand amongst them on the platform and sit amongst them in the train until a porter called out " Brondesbury Park ! " He was glad when the train came in, and the clock, with his hat on top of it, lay on the luggage rack above his head.

An elderly man in the far corner had also placed a parcel on the luggage rack, and Mr. Baldwin wondered whether he, too, had received a clock that afternoon. Then the man leant forward and began a vigorous

conversation with a friend. Mr. Baldwin caught the words "stocktaking next week . . . late evenings . . . more business in the spring," and he knew that the old man's parcel contained no clock: he could not make him a spiritual companion for the journey home. All these other passengers, the old man included, would go to the City to-morrow morning and be on this train to-morrow night. With a deepening loneliness he opened his evening paper.

The train drew out and side-stepped clumsily across the points. The chilly night had been observed by the railway authorities, and they had caused a stuffy, metallic smell to ooze in warm clouds from beneath the seat and up Mr. Baldwin's trouser legs. He watched the familiar electric signs pass by for his last inspection and began to realise how little he had prepared himself for what had happened this afternoon. Freedom—leisure: they were words for inspiration, and he was like an old canary with its cage door open, crouching on the furthest end of its perch. He had made no plans. If he had thought of it at all he had rarely planned anything beyond an extra half hour in bed and a morning in the garden, but mostly he had put the matter uneasily from his mind. Retirement, he had told himself, could take care of itself when it came. It meant decay: the beginning of the end and he had no desire to premeditate it.

But now he began to think as a marooned man might think as he calculates the time his food will last. There was his scrap-book with a good many cuttings waiting to be stuck in: a picture frame to repair and some drawers to clear out: there was the garden: an afternoon walk and books he had been waiting to read. He had been given his reward for forty years of work. He had yearned

a thousand times for freedom, and now that it had come he was afraid of it. It was the fear of a man who, having habitually enjoyed two apples a day, is suddenly called upon to eat six in the same period.

He was a man of method; he had planned his leisure in such a way that its whole span was comfortably filled—no part being overcrowded and no part empty. Home usually at six, there was a half-hour's rest and talk with Edith, a walk until dinner-time, his diary, business and books from then until bed, with a visit to the pictures once a week and an occasional theatre in the West End. For Saturday afternoons there was always a football match to watch in the Park and for Sundays there was the garden, tea with friends and some pleasant, aimless pottering. In the past, without a moment's boredom, he had comfortably enjoyed four hours of leisure each day: his problem was how to dispose of twelve. If he were an old man he could doze away the extra hours before the fire, but he was not an old man: he was only fifty-eight.

He decided to postpone the problem until after dinner and turned again to his paper. There was nothing of special interest on the first page and he was just about to fold it over to the centre when his eye caught a small headline and paragraph in the lower right-hand corner—

" TRAGEDY OF RETIREMENT "

It hit him in the stomach and dried his mouth. His eyes jerked away and strove to make a panic-stricken escape through the maze of print above: but they came to blind alleys: a morbid curiosity clutched at them and tried to draw them back. A devilish spirit broods over

newspapers at certain times: a spirit that records " Death from Gnat Bite " on the morning a man wakes up with a small red lump on his wrist—that tells of diphtheria epidemic in the village he is on his way to for his holiday. Mr. Baldwin fumbled the paper—tried to turn it over and lose himself in other news—but in his heart he knew that defeat was ahead: even if he kept his eyes from the paragraph he would never have the strength to throw the paper away: he might put it in a drawer at home and return to it like a murderer to his crime: he might torture himself for weeks but read it in the end. He accepted the inevitable, and lowered his eyes:

" An inquest was held this morning on the body of John Herbert Stoner, 63, a retired Civil Servant, of 97 Lincoln Road, Ruislip, who was found hanging to a beam in his garage last Friday. It was stated that the deceased was a strong, healthy man, but since his retirement two years ago had become very depressed, lost interest in things and worried over imaginary troubles. His wife stated that he had no hobbies. The coroner, in returning a verdict of suicide while temporarily insane, said that tragedies due to retirement were increasing. . . ."

Mr. Baldwin lowered the paper. He felt better for having faced it. In an unexpected way he felt happier. There was no madness in his family: in any case, he had no garage and no beam, and he would never dare abuse the gas-oven while Ada ruled the kitchen. He had read the ultimate, most pitiful thing that could happen from retirement, and gained strength from it. He pitied Mr. Stoner—and despised him. He had killed himself through not

knowing how to live: he had been picked out of eternity, given a tiny pinpoint of precious light and blotted it out with a rope over a' garage beam: a sordid, pitiful crime.

Near by, another paragraph that recalled memories:

" President Hindenburg to-day celebrated his 78th birthday by unveiling a Memorial to his famous victories at Tannenberg. A huge crowd stood bareheaded and silent as the aged President, erect and soldier-like, performed the simple dedication. It is interesting to recall that President Hindenburg took part in the War of 1870 as Adjutant to a battalion and retired from active service in 1911 at the age of 64. . . ."

Mr. Baldwin turned his face from the yellow atmosphere of the carriage to the cold, dark, fleeting things outside. Inspiration gripped him and overwhelmed him. Fate had shown him the first paragraph to test his courage; and now it had pointed to this other, and left him in silence to think. It pointed a way, threw open doors, and shafts of exultant light rushed in.

A splendid thing had happened: he was still a young man—well under sixty—fit and healthy—keen on things: keener than ever in his life—and he was gloriously free, with a pension and at least fifteen years of full activity before him.

An hour ago he was thinking of retirement as the first step into the grave: the leisure promised for forty years had turned to a mockery—had come too late—he had dreaded it, faced it and accepted it, and now he was filled with a fierce, defiant happiness.

The golden age for a man who had lived wisely lay between sixty and seventy-five. Men had climbed from

the valleys to the mountain tops in that time. There was Hindenburg, a retired soldier in 1914: world-famous at seventy—President of Germany at nearly eighty: Gladstone returned to power at seventy-six and was still a great Prime Minister at eighty-three—dozens of others—Shaw, at seventy, writing masterpieces, and here was he, coming home to retirement, thinking about one foot in the grave at fifty-eight !

It was the fashion to think of retired City clerks as finished and done with at sixty—fit for nothing but doddering into the Park and dozing over the fire. No more was expected of them: their pens were taken away: they were sent home and forgotten. He would show people that there was more to it than armchairs, slippers and memories.

In his rising excitement he crossed his legs, kicked the man opposite and apologised more heartily than he had ever apologised before. The train took wings and plunged through the night: his retirement was not going to be a hopeless chloroforming of time: instead of a " Tragedy of Retirement " he would supply the Press with a novel headline when his time came: " Man who achieved Fame after retirement from City."

He would take stock of himself: then make his plans. " I've a sound, clear brain: a tough, steady health, and no delusions. I know quite well that I am not a genius, but that is all to the good. If genius were to flame out at fifty-eight I would probably be certified.

" My course is quite clear: instead of dabbling in anaemic hobbies with the cheerless object of killing time I will select one aim: one intense purpose, concentrate my whole mind and every ounce of enthusiasm upon it and work my way to recognition.

" Anything against it?—Any reason why I shouldn't ? "

Why did not other retired City men of fifty-eight, with the bonds of an irksome job broken and a pension at their backs, adventure down the roads of burning inclination ? Because they never thought about it. Because they were too tired or lazy. Because they accepted the feeble tradition that retirement meant the end.

Nobody seemed to realise that the idea of sending men to retirement at fifty-eight or sixty was an antiquated tradition going back to the days when life ended ten years earlier than it did to-day. Retiring age had not been advanced to meet the times but men still accepted it in its old, worn out meaning, and merely used their additional span to fade away more slowly.

" I was the pioneer. I blazed the trail: I was the first man to show that in these great days of golfing grandmothers, men too can take advantage of the new meadows of fertile life that science has reclaimed from the marshes of disease ! "

That would be a good thing to say at one of his lectures, for one day he might be hailed as the man who invented a new grafting operation. One day it would become the normal thing for every man to graft a new and fascinating career upon the broken stump of his dull City life.

As the train left Camden Town he settled himself to the exciting business of selecting his new vocation. One or two people had got out, and he could stretch his legs and think better.

He ruled out at once the professions that demand a life's apprenticeship. Even if he wanted to be a lawyer, or a doctor or an architect it was too late, and he had no regrets. Men had gone into the Church at sixty, but the

Church demanded qualities he could not claim. Astronomy?—a short cut to fame was to discover a new star with a home-made telescope. It was an idea worth thinking about: he had read books of popular astronomy and been fascinated, but the practice demanded mathematics which he detested. He would not be an astronomer. Science? No. Literature? No. You had got to grow up with literature and have something you specially wanted to write about. Geology?—Browsing upon hillsides?—He was getting warm.

He had known all along what he was coming to but he wanted to test his choice by deliberately throwing other possibilities in the way. He wanted to whittle things down to the one fascinating thing that had always lurked in the backgrounds of his mind. He would become an Historian. Not merely a fireside one, but one who went out and explored and discovered. It offered a glorious fullness to winter evenings and sunlit days. There were a thousand fascinating books to study—a thousand earthworks on the downs of England, Roman fortresses and Norman castles. Very few of them had been properly explored. The whole pageant lay ready for him: he had but to give the signal for the trumpets to sound and the doors to fly open. In dark evenings by the fire he could study, make notes and draw conclusions: in the summer he would plan excursions with Edith to historical sites. He could begin with short articles that would throw new light upon obscure questions, bringing him into touch with men of his own enthusiasms—thence to more important work, full-sized books—lectures. It demanded no more than the qualities at his disposal: common sense, imagination, and a great desire.

He began to plan his time, no longer how to fill it, but how to fit everything in.

First came health. He could afford the extra half hour in bed that made all the difference between a sleep-clogged morning and a clear brain. He could allow an extra five minutes in dressing that enhanced the self-respect: the extra five minutes essential to the full enjoyment of a herring. Half an hour with the paper to keep abreast with the times, and then the garden.

He had clung to the garden until now as the one straw that would keep him floating above dark pools of terrifying leisure. Now the garden would take its place as a subsidiary thing: a hobby for health's sake, with great interest thrown in.

He would rejuvenate that bald, worn out patch behind the house: reorganise it, build a rockery, refertilise it with clean chemical manures—coax that sickly laurel hedge into a billowing green gift to privacy: dig, and plant and perspire in the open air, wash and lunch.

Edith would enjoy his retirement. Lunch together would be far pleasanter than her frugal little lunch alone. He had forgotten what a difference his retirement would make to Edith, for the brief companionship of week-ends and evenings had never been enough.

But it would be in the afternoons, and in the quietness of the nights when, free from the weariness of a day in the City, he would settle down to work on his new career. It would be for those long quiet hours to prove that a man is not finished and done with when he retires from a City office. The long quiet hours that would lay the foundations for fascinating summer days. . . . " Ladies and Gentlemen, I have much pleasure in introducing Mr. Thomas

Baldwin, who is going to tell us of his fascinating discoveries at Pevensey Castle. As you all know, Mr. Baldwin has "——" Brondesbury Park ! "

Brondesbury Park ? He started up, dazed and blinking. Only four passengers remained: poor devils who would have to get up in the dark to-morrow morning, drag themselves to the station and go to the City to another day of dreary work. In the evening they would travel back once more: sit wedged together in this stuffy metallic air, in this dull, yellow light, with musty advertisements twitching overhead. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards for years—poor fellow prisoners.

One or two glanced up at Mr. Baldwin as he rose. They did not realise that he was saying good-bye: that his sentence was over. An hour ago his release had seemed but the opening of a door that led to another, even drearier cell. Now he had discovered a different, secret way that led to sunlit horizons—to quivering fields of new, exciting life.

He reached for his hat—a parcel under it ?—of course, they had given him a clock !

Stars of frost glittered on the platform and crunched under foot. He trotted up the steps, said " Good night ! " to the ticket collector and turned down the dark, tree-lined road that led to his home.

CHAPTER III

THE WIND HAD FALLEN, and a gathering fog was rusting the lights in the avenue that led from the main road. The stream of passengers trickled away in different directions, and Mr. Baldwin and a solitary boy with a small bag were the only ones to turn off into Brondesbury Terrace. The boy disappeared into the second gate: Mr. Baldwin's house lay a hundred yards further on, with a lamp-post in front of it that gave a glow to its placid brown face.

" Grasmere " was his own freehold property, built in 1871 and purchased by him as the result of a legacy from his uncle in 1912. The price was £700 and Mr. Baldwin was in the habit of telling intimate friends that it was the best investment he had ever made—(his other being in the Bank of Paraceta, upon the advice of a cousin).

He estimated that the rise in the value of house property since the war had increased the value of " Grasmere " to something like £1,000. He had lived there as a tenant for fifteen years before he became its owner, so it had been his home for the greater part of his career. It was a nice, semi-detached house of brown brick, relieved in front by a few quiet lozenge patterns in red and blue: a tall, thin house with a slate roof and gothic chimneys. Ada, their servant for the past seventeen years, inhabited its two perpendicular extremities—the basement kitchen and the

attic bedroom. The dining-room, with bow windows upon the road, communicated by sliding doors with the drawing-room, and French windows opened from there on to the garden by way of an ironwork balcony and a few steps. An old-fashioned, uncomplaining house that had never been spurred to discontent by better things in its neighbourhood.

Mr. Baldwin hitched the clock firmly under his arm to open the gate. For some months past the front gate had been opening with increasing difficulty, with a resentful squeak that robbed the door-bell of all importance. He made a mental note of the gate as one of the things he would now have time to attend to. He could save a good deal by setting aside half an hour a day for minor repairs.

He heard his wife's familiar " All right, Ada ! " as he rang the bell. The basement stairs had begun to trouble Ada of recent years and they were in the habit of saving her the climb when they knew for certain who was at the door.

Edith stood under the hall light, and Mr. Baldwin gave her the traditional kiss. She gave no sign to suggest that this was not just another ordinary homecoming on a late autumn night.

" Was there much fog in the City ? It's been coming up here since tea-time." She looked out for a moment before she closed the door.

" Nothing to speak of," said Mr. Baldwin. " It began to look bad at lunch-time, but it cleared up. The late trains are going to catch it."

He hung up his hat, dropped his umbrella into the stand, and with the parcel under his arm went into the

dining-room without removing his overcoat. There was a faint perfume: a big fire was blazing, and a smell of warm leather came from the front of the armchair. The room was at its best in the winter warmth, for the sun had a way of pointing out things that the standard lamp forgave. The sun made the purple velvet mantelpiece cover look like a cloak at an open-air pageant: the lamp gave back its dignity.

Mr. Baldwin put the parcel on the table beside Edith's work-basket. He stood casually beside it and Edith came and peered at it over her glasses.

" Got your scissors handy ? "

" What is it, Tom ? "

" Just a little thing the staff gave me. You open it."

He went into the passage and took longer than usual to remove his overcoat. He wanted her to enjoy the surprise by herself. He heard the rustling of paper, judged his time, and returned.

" Isn't that awfully nice !—it's so neat and simple."

She put it on the table and stepped back to admire it. The old walnut-wood pendulum clock on the mantelpiece, with its round, keyhole eyes, stared in mild curiosity at the little quick-ticking newcomer—reassured itself and continued its placid beat without further interest. It was a doleful clock at the best of times, but it looked at its worst at twenty-five past six, when its hands gave it a dreary, drooping moustache.

" What an awfully nice thing to have done. Wasn't it a surprise ? Weren't you pleased ? "

" They all gave something towards it," said Mr. Baldwin. There was no point in telling her that everybody got a clock when they retired.

" We'll have to find a nice place for it. Where do you think ? "

" That's what I've been wondering," said Mr. Baldwin.
" We can't move that old chap up there."

" And the one in the drawing-room matches the other things."

It was a problem. The normal clock-space of the house was filled.

" What about the bedroom ? " he suggested.

" Yes. We could easily have it there. It's got a nice, quiet tick. I expect it's Swiss."

" It's the latest thing," returned Mr. Baldwin. He wondered what Edith was really thinking, for in his own heart he was disappointed. The price mattered nothing, but for a man in his position it might have been a little better: it was such a " local" affair, so obviously subscribed to by the people at his Branch alone. There were dozens of men now working at the Head Office and at other Branches who had at one time or another worked with him. It would not have cost much time or trouble to invite them to subscribe their small expression of regard. What was the clock worth ?—£3 ? He must have given fifty half-crowns in his time towards other men's retiring and wedding presents. He shook off the sordid thought and turned to the fire.

The room was warm, the curtains drawn—Edith's chair was drawn up as usual to the table so that she could do her work beneath the light. His armchair stood ready for him with his slippers beside it. Everything was the same: Edith was the same, for beyond speaking of the clock she had asked no questions. He was determined to tell her nothing for the time being of the plans he had made

in the train, for although she always encouraged him in the things he did, he knew that she did not share his fascination for the past. If, on a holiday, he pointed to a ruined castle she was only fascinated by its frame of nature: the noble trees and the sky beyond it. The ruins meant little to her in themselves: she did not share his gift of breathing life into the dead relics of endeavour, of conjuring clattering hoofs from the space where a draw-bridge once spanned a grass-grown moat. He would begin his work alone, and draw her gently into it as time went by. If success and recognition came to him, then her pride would be his chief reward.

He spread his knees to the warmth of the fire: the first fog signal of the evening crunched in the distance. It was very still and quiet outside. Through a chink in the curtain he could see the grizzled crown of the laurel hedge that he was going to rejuvenate. Edith, by the table, had put her work-basket on a chair beside her and was counting stitches in a low whisper, just loud enough to let him know that he need not talk unless he wished to. The old clock on the mantelpiece tocked sonorously with its pendulum: the new clock on the table ticked with the hurry and lightness of a sparrow's heart.

As a rule they talked freely during the half hour between Mr. Baldwin's arrival home and his walk before dinner. Edith would detail the domestic events of the day: he would tell her of incidents in the office and adventures in the train. He understood why Edith was silent now, for just as he had always avoided thinking about his retirement so it had become their habit never to allude to it. They had carried on during the past week as if his retirement had been thirty years away: the matter had not even

been mentioned at breakfast that morning, and Edith could have no idea what he was feeling now that it had happened. She might be expecting him to burst into song: she might equally expect a flood of tears. It was clearly up to him to say something, but the more he thought, the less there was to say—he had cleared up his desk: at four o'clock he had retired: they had given him a clock and he had come home. She knew that, and as far as he could see there was no point in telling her.

He gave an artificial yawn and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair.

" Well. It's all over."

Edith did not look up from her work. " It must have been a funny day."

He gave a short laugh and poked the fire. " It was rather. Quite ordinary, really. That was the funny part."

She lowered her work and drew the clock towards her. " It's nice to have this—to know they wanted to give you something."

He turned his head, and caught the soft, dark profile of her face beneath the lamp. Edith meant home, the City meant work, and he had thought of them as rigidly apart. But suddenly they wove themselves together: he knew that the office had been almost as much her life as his and that she would feel its loss. She had shared his thoughts, and hopes, and disappointments. The gossip he had brought home each night must have built a little Branch office in her mind, staffed by the men he talked about, buzzing with the incidents he told her of, furnished with a queer jumble of brass rails and mahogany pulpits and patches of mosaic floor: things distorted by memory, and by the shy, bewildered eyes that saw them.

For once or twice in the early days, Edith had called for him at the office before going on to a theatre. Of late years he had preferred her not to face the turmoil of the City alone, but he remembered her face as she used to sit waiting on the leather window seat, the awed, wondering eyes that roved round the brass fittings and polished partitions: the quick jerk of her head as one man called across to another: the furtive peepings at men whom she knew were his friends but whose names she did not know—he had tried to identify them afterwards—"that fat man with the big moustache—he's Burtenshaw"—"Who was the tall man sitting near the fire?"—"Oh, that was Watson—you know—the man I told you about who plays tennis well."—"Oh, *that's* Mr. Watson!—I pictured him quite different, somehow." He had never questioned her upon what she thought of the office itself. As they used to go out together her tapping heels would seem to press patterns of their dining-room carpet on the cold mosaic floor. He shifted his chair a little, and with his eyes on her needlework, began to talk.

"Funny how it was just like any other day. You know—the going up in the train—the getting there—hanging up my hat and coat and going to my desk. Couldn't somehow believe I was doing it for the last time—one or two agents who knew I was going dropped in to shake hands. Then there was lunch just the same——"

"What did you have?"

Such an ordinary, everyday Edith asked the question that Mr. Baldwin had to stop to collect himself. It was such a regular, nightly question of hers that it was necessary to reassure himself that he had not dozed and dreamt his retirement; that he was not sitting back in his

armchair at the end of an ordinary day—with an ordinary day ahead. It even made him forget what he had had for lunch.

" Let's see—what was it ? Oh—stewed steak, sprouts and baked potatoes."

" You're always having stewed steak lately."

" They do it very well at the Unicorn. Then cheese, and coffee."

Once started, there was plenty enough to say. He told her everything that had happened after lunch: from his stroll to London Bridge until the end. When he came to the clearing out of his desk he was reminded of something : he dived into his pocket and produced the fragment of anti-aircraft shell.

" That brings back memories ! " Edith looked at it in curiosity. It took her a little while to realise what it was.

He told her about the presentation so lightly and casually that he might have been an onlooker instead of the principal figure. The time flew by: Edith had turned her chair to the fire and so absorbed were they that neither noticed Ada come in to lay the dinner until a wheezy cough disturbed them.

" Where shall I put this ? " She was holding the new clock in her hands as though it were a box of spiders.

" Oh—on the sideboard, Ada. We're going to put it in our bedroom."

Anything new that came into the house was an irritant to Ada's ordered mind, and it remained an irritant until it had found a settled place. She indicated quite clearly by the way she carried it that she did not consider it had a decent shape for a clock. Ada herself looked rather like a plump but sombre Christmas cracker in her stiff,

billowy uniform and even stiffer starched apron: the bow that secured the apron behind looked the stiffest thing of all. She put the clock on the sideboard and eyed it defensively before she turned to lay the cloth, as though she half expected it to say something cheeky.

Her arrival to set dinner was the signal for Mr. Baldwin to go for his walk. As Edith went upstairs to tidy herself she paused at the landing window to watch her husband, with his hat at a jaunty angle, swing out of the gate, whistling a tune. He looked up and down, deciding upon his route: she saw him swish his walking stick and stride off into the fog-streaked night. She felt inexpressibly happy and relieved. He had behaved wonderfully and far beyond her wildest hopes: she had even been prepared that night to open the door to an old and broken man: instead had come a buoyant, youthful figure, ten years younger than the man who had gone for his morning train.

It delighted her, but puzzled her a little. He had told her everything as though he were describing something that had happened to some other man: he had not mentioned his plans for the future as though they, too, were no concern of his and belonged to someone else. But if she were certain of one thing it was that his mood was not artificial and forced: she knew that he was not just throwing a brave face upon an inward fear: she knew him well enough to know that he was genuinely happy and she wished now that she had bought the chicken that Sainsbury's had recommended, and made a celebration dinner of it. As it was she had played for safety with cutlets and stewed pears. But it was not too late to change into her velvet dress. She turned on the light, drew the blinds and

began her preparations for dinner with a thankful, jubilant heart.

When dinner was over, and Edith had gone up to bed, Mr. Baldwin settled himself by the fire and took a final wander round the past before he locked the door and threw away the key. It hardly seemed decent to allow the future to bubble so gaily and noisily before the past had received a proper, reverent burial, so he draped his mind in respectful sentiment and sent it quietly away to pay its homage.

Best were the early football days, lost almost in a mist as the ball was lost towards the end of a winter game: the hurry to be off on a Saturday morning: the sandwiches munched behind the lid of a desk: the journey out to fields—the mud, the dusk: the glow from washing off the mud and the drowsy, limb-stretched journey home. Winter billiards tournaments: the Lord Mayor's Show from the office window: cricket matches and sweepstakes. The office had returned his services in things besides money, for it had given him friends, and life with them outside the office doors. Even if there were no great moments to look back upon there were none to make him ashamed: he had never been in trouble through betting or other silly things that some men did. It would have been pleasant to have retired as a Manager, for besides the dignity it would have added an annual £50 to his pension. But it mattered less now than it might have done. The worry of Managership took a physical and mental toll: he was fresher and stronger than Wilson would be when he retired, and the compensation was coming to him now. He had not missed a Managership through

lack of brains: he had missed it because he had not been cut out for it—because he had really been cut out for something else. . . .

Something else. He rose from his chair and went to the bookcase. Behind the glass doors stood the great twelve-volume *History of England* that his fat Uncle Henry had given him, in the spirit of a balloon unloading ballast. He had never had time to do more than glance at them. He saw them now as the stout companions that would accompany him upon the first part of his journey. He would study them: every volume, every page, carefully and thoughtfully: to build the solid background he would need. With a tingle in his fingers he opened the doors and drew out Volume I. It was half-past ten, and out of the stillness came the plaintive hooting of a fogbound train. The sound no longer filled him with oppressive thoughts of a chilled platform wait in the morning: he peered out at the hazy, bitten road and drew the curtains tighter. The room was warm and the fire would last an hour. He drew a small table up to the armchair and got a pencil and some paper to jot down notes of his reading. It occurred to him with a slight pang that, having left the office, he would in future have to buy his own pencils, but that would be a trivial thing beside the compensating blessings.

CHAPTER I

Prehistoric Britain

(The South Downs—wiry turf—wind blowing through his hair—vague humps of an earthen fortress—buried flint arrowheads waiting for the spade. The very title of the Chapter stirred the blood.)

" There were still no Straits of Dover when the earliest

aborigines drifted in a westerly direction across Europe, into the tangle of marsh and forest that was to form the British Isles... . His rude weapons, of flint and stone, have been found in river drift and in the caves that were his dwelling-places . . . the greater part of the North Sea was a marshy plain . . . the worst of the ice age had passed away. . . ."

He sat up with a start: the big book, falling to the ground, awakened him. Twenty past eleven !—he had dozed for half an hour. It was silly to try and begin work like this: the stress of the day had tired him more than he had realised. To-morrow night would be different—he would be fresh and alert and could work for hours.

He picked up the book, retrieved the pencil that had disappeared down the cleft of the armchair, turned out the light and went up to bed.

Tired though he was, it took him some little while to settle down, for cheap clocks, like crickets, chirp stronger as the night wears on. First he had to get up to cover his new present with a towel. A little later he had to get up again to put the clock, towel and all, into the wardrobe cupboard.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN MR. BALDWIN AWOKE to his first morning of retirement he discovered that he did not really need the extra half hour in bed that he had planned. All that he needed was to hear the clock strike eight and to tell himself there was no necessity to get up. Having done that he had no further desire to stay in bed. But breakfast for the future was to be at nine o'clock: to rise at the old time would have meant a half-hour wait for breakfast in the dining-room, and Ada, who had accepted the alteration with very bad grace, would have taken a gloating delight in keeping them waiting. So they remained in bed and told each other how nice it was.

Edith could not hold out till the scheduled time, and got up at twenty-five minutes past eight, but Mr. Baldwin stuck it until the dining-room clock chimed the half hour. He ignored the strangled ticking in the wardrobe cupboard and, going to the bathroom, began his toilet in as leisurely a way as possible in order to take advantage of the extra ten minutes he had allowed himself.

But here again was a difficulty. An extra minute spent with his shaving brush in working up an extra special lather resulted in the quickest shave he had ever had. Deliberation with studs and cuff-links brought further undesired expedition and he was well ahead of time when a problem arose to delay him. He was automatically

pulling on his City trousers when he realised that he had given no consideration to the dress required for his rough mornings in the garden. City trousers were obviously wrong, and he began to search the wardrobe for something appropriate: he examined a pair of grey flannel trousers that he watched football matches in, but decided they were too good at present: his plus-fours were ; out of the question, and after turning everything out he decided upon a shiny pair of blue serge. He completed his gardening costume with an old woollen cardigan and when he came whistling downstairs, care-free and comfortable, at ten past nine, he found that an unpleasant incident had happened.

On the stroke of nine Ada had brought in the fried herrings. Edith could hear her husband rummaging about upstairs, but not wishing to hurry him on the first morning of his retirement, had told Ada to keep his herring hot for him until he came down. This simple request had startling consequences. Ada, already sizzling, blew up——

" How am I going to get cleared away and washed up and finished with the bedrooms before the tradesmen come ! How can I answer the kitchen door when I'm still making the beds upstairs ? "

Edith knew quite well that Ada was not a contortionist and had simply replied that now Mr. Baldwin had retired they would need to adjust one or two things.

" Adjust things ! " cried Ada—" turning 'em upside-down, that's what it is !—everything upside-down ! How am I going to make up the time I lose in cooking breakfast half an hour late—and then having it lying in the oven ? I suppose there'll be a big lunch to cook now as well."

Ada had gone out and slammed the door, and Mrs. Baldwin knew that this quivering bang was the first shot in what might prove a long and difficult guerilla war. She knew that Ada was a good servant, but like many good servants of mature years, she regarded the disturbance of settled habits as she would the desecration of an altar. She was apparently lying in wait for Mr. Baldwin and almost trod on his heels as she followed him into the dining-room with his herring.

"It's dried up," snapped Ada, and banged the door again. Mr. Baldwin looked round in surprise.

"Hullo !—what's up with Ada ? "

He laughed when Edith told him.

"She's right, you know ! If we hadn't got Ada we'd be coming down to breakfast at ten o'clock ! Nine o'clock sharp in future, and no messing about ! "

But Edith knew that this simple resolution would only smooth out one small detail.

"And it's not dried up at all," he added. "It's fine."

A herring on a hurried working day meant the consumption of the roe and the obvious portions only. This morning Mr. Baldwin explored the intricate, bone-ridden sections below: he took the fish to pieces as a craftsman would a delicate watch. He was in buoyant spirits: there was enormous satisfaction in seeing harassed, half-breakfasted men hurry by towards the station.

"Look !—there goes old Anderson !—he's only got five minutes: he's always late—comes dashing into the station as the gates close. He'll have a heart attack one of these days."

He reached for the marmalade and spread his toes in his slippers: he had half expected the call of a dying habit

when he saw his old travelling companions go by, but he was thinking too eagerly of the garden, and the settling down to Chapter I of the History in the afternoon. The fog had disappeared: it looked dull and rather cold outside, but a good morning for hard work.

"What do you think I ought to do first? The lawn—or the hedge out there?"

Edith suggested that he should begin by sweeping up the leaves, and he heartily agreed. Sweeping, he said, was an excellent exercise for the stomach muscles and would give him a ravenous appetite for lunch.

"I shan't be able to give the whole morning to the garden: it'll just have to be a quick look round to-day. There's a whole crowd of things to do."

He began ticking them off on his fingers—"I'll have to try and get up to Boots' to open that library subscription: I've got to write in to the Railway Company for the rebate on my season ticket—then I must get some gardening gloves—there's a whole lot of things——"

Edith said he might like to come up with her at half-past eleven, when she went shopping, but he waved this aside.

"It would mean we should both be hanging about wasting time, and after all, there's not a lot of daylight for the garden. I tell you what! Let's go up together after tea!"

That suited Edith better, too.

"What sort of lunch would you like?" she asked. "I suppose you'd like the same sort that you have in the City?"

"Good heavens, no!—I shall have exactly what you always have when you're alone."

Edith laughed. " I never have anything ! "

" What !—you don't have *anything* ? "

" Only a snack—sometimes a little salad, or bread and cheese. When I'm busy I just have a cake and some coffee at Lyons."

Mr. Baldwin was surprised and concerned.

" You ought to have more than that, Edie : you're looking thin, you know. Let's split the difference—just a chop or something, and cheese. It'll do you more good than salad."

" You always have coffee after lunch in town—I expect you'd like a cup ..."

" Certainly not ! It's easy in a restaurant. It's too much of a bother at home and I really don't want it. Order in a crate of beer."

He rose from the table and clapped his hands together: from the distance came the rattle of a train.

" I don't want you to alter anything, Edie." He stood behind her chair and squeezed her shoulders. " It's going to be fine, lunching together every day. I hated those stuffy dining-rooms in the City—that awful smell of food: other people sitting right on top of you, making noises with their mouths."

Edith laughed. She got up and gathered together the breakfast things to save Ada's time.

" Do I ever make a noise with mine ? "

" Never ! "

She rang the bell, and Ada came ostentatiously downstairs with a duster in her hand to show that she had been disturbed from doing the bedrooms.

Edith took the breakfast things into the passage and piled them on the table beside the kitchen stairs. She took

the cloth on to the garden steps and shook the crumbs out for the birds. When she returned to the dining-room, Mr. Baldwin was in the armchair by the fire, reading the picture paper.

They took two papers; one for the news, the other for the pictures. Mr. Baldwin took the newspaper with him to the train, and it was Edith's habit, after breakfast, to sit for a little while in the window seat and glance through the picture paper before beginning her morning's work.

It was a very little thing; just a habit—but it was the first gentle step in the ladder of her day's work. Now suddenly this step had given way, and she was not lissom enough, on the spur of the moment, to leap this unexpected space. She stood aimlessly by the table; she looked across at the window seat, and then at the picture paper in her husband's hands. His silver head just showed over the back of the chair, and the other paper, *his* paper, lay beside him. She felt as bad as Ada to allow such a small thing to disturb her. Quietly closing the door, she went down to the kitchen and filled a jug of water for the ferns in the drawing-room. It was funny how Tom seemed to think that because he had retired, she had retired, too.

Mr. Baldwin looked up at the clock and threw down the paper. This would never do: ten o'clock and nothing done. By this time the whole staff had arrived in the office, the post was opened and everybody had begun work. He put on the old shoes he had selected for gardening, went through the drawing-room and opened the French windows.

It was an occasion, this first entrance to the garden: it was the entrance of a new Manager—a live wire—come to pull together and inject new life into a neglected old concern.

It occurred to him how dismally the old Mr. Baldwin had neglected it. From October to March he had scarcely seen it in daylight except at week-ends, and week-ends gave no time to do anything important. In the spring and summer a man used to come in once a week, and the man had just done enough to prevent Mr. Baldwin from taking an interest himself. Edith had some rose trees and a pair of gloves for gathering occasional blossoms, and that was the sum total of the garden activities of the past. From now on things would change. He reviewed his property from the balcony before descending the steps.

Everything was dark, and threadbare, and asleep. A sparrow hurriedly gathered up the last breadcrumb from the shaken tablecloth and disappeared.

Despite his neglect of it, the possession of this land gave Mr. Baldwin more solid satisfaction than the house itself. His ownership extended far beyond the surface and the things that grew upon it: it extended down and down, for thousands of miles, a vast wedge that tapered slowly away, until as a minute pin-point it met everybody else's land at the centre of the earth. He owned grass and gravel, clay and rock, possibly a section of a subterranean river and any amount of volcanic fire. He could dig it, blast it, tunnel it if he chose: do anything with it except keep pigs, forbidden by the Council: he could have a dense wood or a sunken garden with statues, a pond, or a sugar-loafed hill. As it was he had a prematurely bald lawn surrounded by a gravel path; flower borders, some shrubs and a few fruit

trees in the broad strip at the bottom, the whole surrounded by a stout wall of brown brick.

His thoughts flew to this land whenever his morning paper foretold the collapse of civilisation. He reckoned, at a pinch, that he could grow enough to keep Edith and himself alive. He had tested this during the war when he had set two rows of potatoes and produced a number of pallid little globules that tasted of soap. Malnutrition had been the cause of this, for his pride in a great annual cluster of nasturtiums had been somewhat dampened when he read in his gardening book that nasturtiums flourished at their best in "any poor soil."

For some time past he had been studying a gardening book, and practically knew by heart "What To Do in October." But the doing of most of these things was dependent upon certain preparatory things that should have been done in the spring. Edith had struck the right note when she had suggested sweeping up the leaves. "Leaves," said his book, "should be swept from lawns and paths, being heaped up in an odd corner of the garden and left to decay."

The leaves that came from their own trees were negligible in quantity, but a walnut tree in a neighbour's garden overhung the Baldwins' land and presented them annually with a sodden, brandy-coloured carpet. Sometimes it threw them a few mildewed nuts in return for the nourishment that its roots sapped up from Mr. Baldwin's garden, but usually it only gave leaves. Mr. Baldwin went to the tool-shed to find a broom.

Piles of discarded newspapers, broken deck-chairs, empty paint tins and cardboard boxes creep into tool-sheds like rats into a granary. Mr. Baldwin could scarcely

get in: the shed presented a morning's work in itself, but he set this aside for-the first wet day. The tools were very rusty and needed a great deal of greasing to bring them back to efficiency. This also could wait.

He pulled out the besom broom, shook the cobwebs off it, and examined it. It was hopelessly worn out—nothing more than a toothpick—its few remaining strands had rested so long on the ground that they were turned stiffly up like an old-fashioned barber's quiff.

He decided to burn the broom later on and use its ashes to nourish the lawn. He threw it aside and began work with the rake. But most of the leaves got through the rake, and after a fruitless ten minutes he decided to go and see if there was an old broom he could borrow from the house.

He would gladly have used his fingers—even his shaving-brush—to sweep up the leaves had he foreseen the unhappy results of his endeavour to bring about a friendly alliance between the garden and the kitchen. He leant the rake against the tool-shed and went light-heartedly towards the house without the slightest conception of the packet of trouble he was putting his head into.

The whole enterprise seemed blighted from its beginning, for in the first place Mr. Baldwin, once in the garden, had the greatest difficulty in regaining an entrance to the house. He discovered that during his short absence the French windows had been closed and these windows, once closed, could only be reopened from the inside.

It seemed a little absurd to go round and knock at his own front door, so he took the easier and more reasonable course of going down the basement steps to the kitchen entrance.

The baker's boy was blocking the kitchen door with his basket, and Mr. Baldwin had to stand by and wait while the boy signed the book and searched for some change. This took an irritatingly long time, and Ada increased Mr. Baldwin's embarrassment by looking at him steadily over the boy's shoulder with a suspicious, hostile stare that made him feel like a pedlar waiting to be sent off with a flea in his ear.

But worse things were to follow. The boy having departed, Mr. Baldwin went into the doorway and said in a friendly, jocular voice: " I say, Ada—I wonder if you can let me have an old broom to get up some leaves ? Any old thing'll do."

There was nothing demanding in his manner, and a polite refusal from Ada would have ended the matter without the slightest difficulty. But the reception of his harmless, polite request was astounding: never before had Mr. Baldwin seen such an evil light gather in a woman's eyes.

" A broom—to sweep up leaves ! " she shouted—" *leaves* !—when there ain't a decent broom in the house for the carpets ! Here am I trying to get the bedrooms finished half an hour late—and tradesmen at the door every half-minute ! No !—there *airft* a broom—not for leaves there ain't ! "

She stooped down, picked up a small cake of mud that Mr. Baldwin had brought in on his heel and flung it out of the door with a hiss of disgust.

Mr. Baldwin was speechless: he had seen Ada sulky: he had heard her grumble occasionally when her rigid routine was upset—but he had never seen her like this. Her nose was white with anger: two vivid little patches of

colour had risen to her cheek-bones: demented little strands of hair fluttered over her forehead. She stood back from the table like a wounded animal at bay.

Then suddenly his own anger came: he was angry at Ada for her senseless behaviour and angry at himself for blundering into a humiliating situation. He saw clearly now that he should have gone to the dining-room, spoken first to Edith and ordered the broom to be sent up to him. By coming into the kitchen he had placed himself on the level of a tradesman's boy: Ada was playing on her own ground: even his costume was too shabby and ridiculous for a show of dignity.

But he knew that he could not draw back now. A stiff, long-handled broom was leaning in a corner by the kitchen range, beside a dust-pan. He crossed to it, picked it up and said in a light, easy voice—"This'll do. We'll get a new one for the house."

He felt better with the broom in his hand: he had spoken as if Ada had never given vent to her outburst at all: he began to feel that he might still come out of it with dignity, but when he turned, Ada was facing him again: she was blocking his retreat: for a horrible moment he pictured himself struggling with his servant for a broom—dreadful newspaper headlines flashed before him—"Brondesbury man charged with assaulting elderly servant. . . ."

Then Ada blazed up more fiercely than before:

"That's my broom!—put it down!" she shouted.

"It happens to be *my* broom," he said—and shame rushed over him. It was not his broom—every inch of it was Ada's—two dark patches on the handle worn by Ada's hands—the bristles worn diagonally across from the
Do

patient motion of her arms: it was steeped in her personality as his old, favourite razor was steeped in his. What would he feel if Ada came to his bedroom and took his favourite razor to peel potatoes ?

He would still have laid it down if Ada had given him a chance, but suddenly she stood away, flung the loaf of bread on the table and burst into a high-pitched, cackling laugh.

" All right !—go on !—take it ! I don't care if the house turns into a pig-sty !—It's nothing to do with me !—I'm only a servant ! " And she gave the dust-pan a kick that sent it, by a fluke, straight into the cupboard and back into its place.

He paused in the doorway with the broom under his arm.

" I ought to give you notice for this, Ada."

" I take my notice from the mistress."

There was a queer, husky dignity in her voice that made him glance back in surprise. As he had turned to the steps leading up to the garden a pale shaft of sunlight had flashed in his eyes and when he looked back the kitchen was filled with brooding shadows. He could see little else beyond the bright yellow square of fire in the kitchen range and a row of moon-like plates that took the reflection and shone like faded amber lanterns. Ada was almost lost in the shadows by the cupboard door: she was standing quite still: it might have been a solitary, discarded waxwork of Mrs. Noah, set aside and forgotten in a twilit store-room.

As Mr. Baldwin went up the steps towards the garden he noticed another tradesman's boy, standing with his mouth wide open, beside the coal-cellar door. He had

probably witnessed the whole sordid affair and would pass it round Brondesbury.

He no longer wanted the broom: it humiliated him to hold it, but he had got to use it now. He ostentatiously flicked some leaves from the crevices of the flower border: its handle was smooth and warm from the heat of the kitchen and it seemed almost cruel to let the frail old thing grow cold. After a little while he leant it against the wall and used the rake again. Ada's shrill voice was upstairs now, in one of the bedrooms, and through the open window he could hear Edith quietly and patiently making reply. The altercation was a long one, then finally a door slammed and there was silence.

It was pitiful to have this happen upon the first morning of his new life. He wanted peace, and dignity, and happiness, and Ada had destroyed them all. She had made him feel like a naughty little boy—then a senseless bully who had forced a broom from a defenceless old woman and threatened her with dismissal because she was in his power and too old to find another place.

The sun took Ada's part, and disappeared behind a misty cloud to show its contempt for him: the morning grew suddenly cold and dank: the leaves, too, stood up for Ada and clung to the path, to show that, even if they also were small and defenceless, they were not going to give in to a bully.

He plodded on, but his heart was no longer in his work: he took up a little pile of defeated leaves and stacked them in a corner behind the apple trees. He was stooping over them, flattening them down, as a quiet step came behind him and he turned to find Edith standing by.

She was dressed to go out shopping, in a neat brown

costume and white gloves, and he felt ashamed when he saw her troubled, unhappy face. She had borne the whole brunt of this silly incident and he knew that, whatever she had felt, she had stoutly taken his part. He brushed his hair aside with a grimy hand and smiled.

"Hullo, dear—off to the shops?"

"Yes. I'll have to be getting along." She nodded towards the little pile of leaves. "That's going to be fine for the garden next spring. You'll have to let me have some for my rose trees."

"I think it'll buck things up," he said, and he saw Edith glance towards the broom. "Did I hear Ada shouting about upstairs?"

Edith began buttoning her gloves.

"Tom, dear—I know Ada's silly—but it is hard on her. You see, she's only got that one broom, and she keeps wanting it all the morning."

Mr. Baldwin gave a careless laugh.

"Such a fuss about nothing!—I haven't hurt the thing—look at it! Any body'd think I was going to smash it to bits!"

"It's not that, Tom. Ada wants it, you see."

She looked at him with her shy, level grey eyes. It was like her to take his part with Ada, and Ada's part with him.

"Surely we can afford another!"

"Of course we can—if I'd known you wanted one, dear."

He leant on his rake and took one of Edith's gloved hands. "I'm sorry, Edie. I don't *want* the broom! If only Ada had explained like a reasonable human being. She was *abominably* rude. We can't allow it: if it happens again she must go."

Edith gave a little laugh.

" We'd never get another like her. You know that, Tom. They simply won't come nowadays, where there's a basement. We must try and be patient with her, and leave her alone. She is a good worker."

He knew that perfectly well. No servant had stayed with them as long as Ada. Even her crotchiness was a disguised quality, for it rarely occurred except when her routine was threatened. But no power on earth would persuade him to creep back to the kitchen with the broom. He nodded carelessly towards it and began raking the path.

" I've finished with it now, if she wants it." He paused, and went on with a return of his old enthusiasm. " You know, Edie, that gardener fellow used to burn all the leaves and grass cuttings. Just shows what gardeners are: don't care a rap when it's not their own garden. We'll stack everything here and dig it all in along the borders next spring."

" You've made a wonderful difference already," said Edith. " Don't overdo it to start with or you'll be stiff to-morrow. I'll be back just before one."

" You might leave those French windows open when you go in, Edie."

As she went down the basement steps with the broom, she saw him leaning on his rake, gazing over the lower wall, towards the houses in Alma Road.

CHAPTER V

SOON AFTER TWELVE O'CLOCK Mr. Baldwin decided to act upon his wife's suggestion and shorten his first morning's gardening to avoid excessive stiffness next day. He pulled a few obstinate leaves out of the prongs of his rake, added them to the neat pile he had made against the wall and looked at the cleared space under the walnut tree with satisfaction. The leaves, when stacked, had yielded so obediently to the pressure of his foot that he was confident they would begin decaying without delay.

He carefully scraped his shoes and went up the iron steps into the drawing-room. He could hear Ada moving about in the kitchen, so he went upstairs with confidence, washed his hands and came down to rest by the dining-room fire.

To sit by the fire at twelve o'clock on a week-day morning was so definitely associated with a bilious attack or a cold that he had to assure himself more than once that he was in normal health. It was very pleasant to feel the soft breath of leisure round his elbows, but he was not entirely at his ease. On the previous night he had closed the door on the past and set his face to the future, but this morning he was beginning to discover that the door was warping badly, and things he had meant to shut away were drifting through the cracks. When he had gone to the

tool-shed for the rake the sudden twilight had twisted the shed into the shape of the dim-lit office safe from which, at that hour of the morning, it was his custom to collect the money deposited on the previous night. For a moment his hands had passed the rake and groped automatically for more familiar things—a canvas bag of coin—a bundle of notes in an elastic band—a wad of postal orders and a pile of multi-coloured cheques. And now, as the clock chimed half-past twelve he glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to see Mason and Palmer pass him on their way to lunch. He was disturbed, and rose abruptly from his chair: it was no part of his plan to let this happen. He had intended to work in the garden until the moment lunch was ready: his programme was upset, and he was unprepared for a sudden, empty space of time. The quietness of the room and the emptiness of the road made him feel that everyone in the world was at work but him: that he had slept, and been forgotten when an army had moved on.

He picked up the morning paper and crossed to the window seat: he had a sudden aversion from settling himself slackly by the fire. Having read most of the news after breakfast he turned to the gardening notes: " Dahlia tubers must now be lifted and stored. ..." He flicked the paper impatiently to the financial columns—advice of that kind irritated a man who had no dahlia tubers. The ordinary papers never quoted his shares in the Bank of Paraceta, but he occasionally bought the *Financial Times* to find that the stock he had bought as a bargain at 75 was steady at 2}. News that Gilt-edged were soaring left him cold. He laid the paper down and glanced round the room. He had no desire to begin his

reading until he could settle down, according to plan, in the afternoon.

He decided to begin turning out one of the drawers in his bureau. It was a job he had set aside for a wet day and he began with an uncomfortable feeling that he was breaking into his emergency ration.

The drawer was chock full of papers: old envelopes, unfamiliar looking with Edwardian stamps—an ancient Book of Rules of the Acacia Tennis Club, long defunct—a complete set of receipted Gas bills, 1905-1924. . . .

Ada came in to lay lunch. His back was towards her and he did not look round, but he could tell by her quietness that her evil mood had passed: he could feel that her eyes were upon the swollen waste-paper basket, but she closed the door so quietly that he scarcely heard it.

From his seat at the bureau he had a clear view down the road and he found himself growing amused and interested in things that he had never had opportunity of observing before. Towards one o'clock the road had come to life: and he could watch the eddying of life in a back-water unseen by the City man who passed each day by the main stream. One or two tradesmen's boys cycled up to houses and took parcels in with a hurry suggesting belated orders for lunch. Then came a thin, erratic stream of school children: quick, tapping heels: two small girls bouncing a ball. A woman came to a gate, bundled one of them in and shooed the other off to a nearby house—two boys in green caps came by and lingered at another gate while they looked at some foreign stamps. Then one went in and the other went on.

Hard on the heels of the returning school children came the mothers with parcels and shopping baskets, and Mr.

Baldwin suddenly realised that he was watching something to which his own wife belonged: he began to look out for her, and grew impatient to see so many other women return ahead of her. At last she came—he waved to her from the window: she looked surprised, as though, lost in thought, she had momentarily forgotten that he was at home: then she smiled, waved back, and hurried in, frowning and shaking her head in comic despair at the squeaking gate.

To sit lunching in his own home, with Edith opposite him and the fire gently fluttering behind, was a great improvement upon the noisy Coffee Room at the Unicorn with its smoky ceiling and perpetual smell of soup and beer. A drizzling rain had come on: it darkened the room, threw up the glow of the fire and set the stage invitingly for his first afternoon's work upon his history books.

He was in no great hurry to begin: he was content for the moment to anticipate the pleasure of settling down to his new studies. He wanted to sit back in his chair, smoke a cigarette and enjoy a placid, rambling talk with Edith for half an hour. But Edith was not good at conversation after lunch, it was her habit to rise directly her meal was over so that Ada could clear the table and leave her undisturbed for her afternoon's nap by the fire.

Mr. Baldwin began discussing improvements to the garden, but Edith was restless. She tried to respond but her remarks were dull and pointless, and after a little while she rose and began collecting the plates and glasses together. He looked up in surprise and disappointment, then rose himself and went to the windows.

" Lucky I got those leaves stacked before the rain set in," he said. " It'll soak into them and help them rot."

Edith heartily agreed, and helped Ada to clear the lunch away. When she returned to the dining-room she found that Tom had settled down in her favourite armchair by the fire with a thick, musty-looking volume from the bookcase resting on his chest.

There were two armchairs in the dining-room. One faced the light from the windows and was narrow, hard and shiny: the other had its back to the windows and was broad, well worn and comfortable. For many years, on week-days when Tom was at the office, it had been Mrs. Baldwin's habit to draw the curtains, settle down in the broad, comfortable chair with her eyes from the windows and doze for half an hour in the twilight by the fire. She looked forward to it, not only for the relaxation, but because it completely refreshed her for the rest of the day: it had become both a luxury and a vital need: the pleasantest of all combinations.

Now Tom was in her chair, and for the second time within a few hours she found herself the slave to a habit that showed its teeth when it was disturbed. It demanded to know what her husband would have done if he had returned one day from lunch in the City to find her calmly sitting at his desk: it angrily pointed to a selfish, sprawling man depriving her of her one hard-earned indulgence.

He had worked for forty years to earn the pleasure of sitting by his fire on a week-day afternoon: he had gone to work in the dawn of winter days: through snow, and blinding rain—he had sat for hours in bitter, fogbound trains—for six months at a stretch he had scarcely seen his home by the light of day. He had earned his retirement a hundred times and now she was resenting his first day's

rest because it upset her forty winks in her favourite chair. She got her needlework and tried to settle down in the narrow, slippery chair opposite him.

" That's a nice fat book you've got there," she said.

" M'm," murmured Mr. Baldwin—and she accepted the signal for silence.

She knew quite well that if she explained things to him he would immediately jump up and give her the chair—but what could he do ? The chair she was sitting in was too far from the window to give sufficient light to read on a dull day, and unless she drew the curtains the pleasure of her siesta was destroyed. He might take his book into the drawing-room, but she could not think of him sitting in that cheerless place without a fire in order that she could sleep comfortably in the warmth.

Normally she sat up to the table with her needlework when Tom came home in the evenings: this hard, slippery chair was good enough for sitting in after dinner: but for relaxing in—dozing in, it was impossible. The seat was so high that she could see straight out into the wet, dreary road.

A laundry van drew up at the house opposite: two children in mackintoshes trotted past on their way to afternoon school—a nondescript man was going in and out of the gates along the opposite side distributing pamphlets—afternoon things that Mrs. Baldwin would not have seen in the ordinary way, with the curtains drawn and her face away from the windows. She hitched herself up on the slippery leather seat and tried to concentrate upon her needlework. Despite her discomfort habit brought on a drowsiness, but the light from the tall, gaunt windows dug through her eyelids, and when her

head nodded she slipped down the seat. The chair was like a bathing chute'

Tom was breathing heavily through his nose. She began to think he had fallen asleep, until he turned a page so unexpectedly that it made her jump. His deep breathing came from concentration. She began to wonder why he was reading an old thing that had stood neglected in the bookcase for years and years.

From her unaccustomed seat the light from the window revealed the room in a disconcerting way. It showed her how faded the covering to the mantelpiece had become: it disclosed a thin, meandering crack in the wallpaper. The room had never pleased her: it had always been too crowded with furniture, and the windows were too big to take the kind of curtains she would like to hang. She had often made plans to improve things but even with her husband's full salary there had never been quite sufficient: from now on there would be less.

Tom was really dozing now: the big book lay on his chest: his lips were parted but his new teeth had failed to respond and were set in an uncanny grin. She liked him better in his smart City clothes than in the shiny blue trousers and old brown cardigan he had put on for gardening: he had taken pride in his clothes and she hoped that his retirement would not lead him into slovenly habits. It was hard to believe that his working days were over: he would pass for fifty anywhere, with his slight figure and thick silver hair. He looked more like a lawyer, or a clergyman, with his thin, clean-shaven face and deep-set eyes.

She rose from the hopeless chair, tiptoed out of the room and went up to the spare bedroom to try the curtains she

was working on. They were not ready to try yet but she felt that she must move about—do something, do anything to ward off the panic that began to grip her.

She held the curtains to the windows but scarcely noticed how they were progressing. She lowered them, and stood looking down the deserted road. The cool air of the bedroom seemed to clear her mind: it gave her the chance she needed, to collect her thoughts and put them in some kind of order.

For months she had known that her husband's retirement was coming and yet her preparations had only been for him: how would he respond to it?—What would he do? She had thought of him individually all the time, and for some unconceivable reason had never considered it as a dual problem that would profoundly affect them both. She had thought her own life would go on exactly the same: that all her long-set plans and habits would remain serenely undisturbed; she had looked forward to devoting herself to the happiness of her husband in his retirement, and now, before a single day had passed, some trivial incidents had come to throw a cruel, revealing light upon the fragile ground that had supported their past happiness.

Happily as they had always lived together, she knew to-day more clearly than ever before that this happiness depended upon a regular, daily period of absence from each other. Given this, their companionship was perfect, and it was the realisation that this vital bulwark was destroyed that brought Edith to the verge of panic. She knew that they had no deep well from which to draw their mutual interests. Their evenings were made pleasant by an exchange of anecdotes: of incidents that had

occurred in the other's absence. His were of things that had happened in the City—rumours he had heard—ideas he had got from talking with men in the train. Hers were of conversations with people she had met during shopping—of new shops discovered—a dozen things that had happened during his absence from the house.

Their supply of conversation, like a battery that quickly exhausts itself, needed a long period of daily rest for re-charging. There would be a desperate squeezing of the battery in the long, winter nights ahead.

She saw now how futile had been her vision of a cheerful, resourceful woman, encouraging a husband to face the demoralising fears of retirement. She had foreseen Tom's battle, but she had not foreseen her own; and while his battles were clear to understand and easier to grapple with, hers were obscure—the more difficult because she must fight on lonely fields in secret. If he chose to discuss his difficulties she might still be able to help him, but she could never discuss hers: the very mention of them would come as a blow in his face. How could she say that his constant presence in the house was making her life unhappy? That his only way of helping her would be to go out, and stay out, for eight hours a day?

The happiness of their married life; their contentment in each other's company, had been the breeding-ground of the difficulties they were now to face, for the result had been that they had never sought for mutual friends. She had her own friends at the Bridge Club and another circle at the Welfare Centre where she spent one afternoon a week: his friends had mostly been colleagues of his office and companions of the train—as remote from her as her friends were from him. Now his were cut away from him,

and he had apparently made no plans to seek others: already—for nearly twenty-four hours, he had spoken to no one but Ada and herself. The Ada conversation had not been inspiring and she herself had run dry after lunch and had come up to a cold spare bedroom to seek things to talk about at tea.

Week-ends came to mind, when the weather had kept them indoors, inactive and together for hours at a stretch: she remembered how perilously close they had come to a dead end: moments when both felt themselves groping for something else within each other's minds—never finding it—and wondering whether anything else was there to find.

She knew that he was interested in other things and she had tried to respond, but there was an impatience in his nature that prevented him from lingering behind with her to explain elementary points. Sometimes, on holiday, he would surprise her by stopping dead before some old building or ruined castle: he would stand in rapt silence for minutes on end, then say, " Isn't that magnificent ! " She had always agreed, but had never discovered magnificence in decay. Mustiness, beetles and long-dead bones never stimulated her as would a field of corn or a roadside of spring flowers, but these he would pass with his eyes fixed on a crumbling, decayed tooth of stone ahead.

When he said, " Can't you picture knights in armour riding over that moat ? " she had to detach her mind from a heap of rusty cans in a weed-grown ditch. She admired him for his visions but was faithful to her own.

Sometimes he tried to interest her in finance, but money was bewildering unless you had it: money was only real

in a purse, or divided into neat piles upon tradesmen's books on the kitchen table.

She resolved to try harder to join him in his interests: she determined to work tactfully at finding friends who would mutually satisfy them. For the time being she could think of nothing else. Gone for ever were those refreshing comings together in the evenings—that cheerful "What havej0M been doing to-day?" She tried to stifle the dread of a man eternally sprawling in the dining-room armchair—pottering in the garden—coming in, going out—looking out of the windows with his hands in his pockets—knowing minute by minute what she was doing—with nothing new to talk about—nothing to say—from now on—right on—until the end.

He had worked for his retirement and had given her a home and leisure while he worked. Now he must have the leisure, and she in her turn must work for his retirement—work desperately to give him the happiness he deserved.

The clock downstairs struck three: another hour before tea would be ready. It was extraordinary how the afternoons had always slipped by in the past without thought of time. She held up the curtains again and saw that in their present state they were at least an inch too long.

Mr. Baldwin did not hear the clock strike three: the mist and drizzle were things of the past: a blue, unrufHed sea stretched before him and the cliffs of Dover trembled in an August haze. He was at Caesar's elbow in the prow of a galley and behind them lay eighty squat transports with eight thousand silent, armoured men. They had left Boulogne with the midnight tide and now, against the

skyline, they could see a horde of painted Britons following them along the cliffs. They could hear their distant shouting as they clambered up and down the gulleys—their chiefs in chariots—some ardent warriors stumbling along the bouldered shore. Caesar had decided to wait until the tide had turned, and then run eastwards to where his scouts had told him there were no cliffs to scale. The wind and tide, remarked Caesar, would bear them faster than their enemies could follow over the rough downs. They would probably land in the evening, unopposed.

Mr. Baldwin laid the book down and sat gazing into the fire: on a day like this he had seen those unaltered downs—and sea—and sky. He could picture every detail of that great adventure of two thousand years ago: the Gallic cavalry gripping their frightened horses in the flat-bottomed transports—the Britons sweating across the stiff, chalky turf—the blue sky and the blue sea—England's history beginning at two o'clock on an August afternoon.

His ability to visualise these things so clearly was proof beyond doubt that his instinct had guided him to his true vocation. He was glad that he had not been an Historian all his life, for that would have robbed him of the pleasures before him now. Page 35: he slipped a pipe-cleaner in to mark the place. Before he went to bed he would have left Caesar and the Druids behind; to-morrow he would probably lend the first William a hand in compiling his Domesday Book.

No one, the book remarked, had ever discovered what language those ancient Britons spoke, or whether they had any form of writing. What a chance for somebody I. Supposing, in his explorations, he were to discover a stone,

covered in hieroglyphics—a key to the first tongue spoken in Britain ? His name would then join history itself. He decided that he would make his first Field Excursion very soon: Edith and he would make a day's pilgrimage to the site of one of the earliest monuments . . . Stonehenge, or Avebury, or if it rained, the British Museum. . . .

" Tea ready, Ada ?—Why, goodness !—it's four o'clock ! "

" I expect you've been having a nap, sir." Ada was her old self again: the broom incident was apparently forgotten and forgiven, and he was very thankful.

" Nap !—I should think not !—I've had a quiet couple of hours with a fine book. All about Ancient Britain, Ada."

" Ah—those were the days, sir." She put a plate of toast in the fireplace and went out as Edith came in.

" What have you been up to, Edie ? "

" Just fitting curtains to that spare room."

" You're always busy on something. You never seem to rest."

He got up briskly and came to the table.

" Now that we'll always be having tea together we ought to get a little table and have it by the fire."

She was glad to find him in such buoyant spirits. They decided to make an evening journey to the shops. There was his subscription to open at Boots' Library—a letter to post to the Railway Company, applying for a rebate on his season ticket, and a pair of gardening gloves to buy.

" There's more to do now than when I was at the office," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE DOMESTIC DISTURBANCES arising from Mr. Baldwin's retirement began to settle down in the course of a week or two, and things seemed to adjust themselves to a new routine.

Ada discovered that the later rising and later breakfast of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin gave her, too, an extra half hour in bed, and at sixty-seven that was no small comfort on a frosty morning. There was now a more elaborate meal to prepare for lunch: a very muddy pair of gardening shoes to clean each morning and a certain amount of additional clearing up to do after Mr. Baldwin. Beyond that, things were very much the same as they used to be.

For the master was a considerate man on the whole, and never intentionally gave additional work. He occasionally asked her for a jam jar, or some other small thing for the garden, but he always applied through the proper channel : asking Mrs. Baldwin in the dining-room and allowing the request to be conveyed through her. He never came into the kitchen again, and by means of a slight adjustment to the latch of the drawing-room window he was able to go out and come in from the garden without leaving the window open and allowing the house to get cold.

He was always out in the garden soon after breakfast: he dug all the borders and raked the lawn until it looked as if somebody had played football on it: he bought a pair

of clippers and pruned the shrubs until they looked almost indecently naked: he did this, she suspected, to provide material for bonfires of which he never tired: he said the ashes contained potash salts invaluable to all shrubs and trees, but the scheme appeared to lose its purpose when you had to burn the trees and shrubs to secure the ash to fertilise them. When he had burnt everything he could find in the garden, he cleared out the tool-shed and burnt most of its contents, including the handle of his rake that fell into the fire one day while he was having lunch. He asked her, through Mrs. Baldwin, to let him have all inflammable rubbish from the house—such as cardboard boxes, straw packing and newspapers. When those supplies failed he went up and routed about in the boxroom and burnt some discarded curtain poles and an old Venetian blind. He told her that hard-wood ashes were particularly rich in potash salts and Ada had to keep a wary eye on her washhand-stand.

When rain prevented bonfires he would bring old furniture down from the boxroom and paint it in the tool-shed. He suspected mice in the shed, and bought a trap and a quarter of cheese. One day he caught one, and the house was upset for a whole morning while it was decided how they should do away with it. They had no cat, so Mr. Baldwin had a bucket of water brought out to drown it in. He stood for a long time over the bucket and pointed out to Mrs. Baldwin what pretty little things mice were, when you really looked at them—what bright eyes they had and what beautiful little coats they possessed. When Mrs. Baldwin remembered that mice could swim he seemed relieved: he began to suggest tying a stone to the trap and submerging it, trap and all—but as

he elaborated on the scheme he suddenly felt like Borgia and stopped. It was a problem. One could not hang a mouse, or cut its throat: to bury it alive would merely assist its natural instinct. Eventually he put the mouse, trap and all, into a fruit bag and, smuggling it up to the Park, waited until no keepers were in sight and let it out into a shrubbery. He came home looking very pleased.

But after a week or two Ada began to feel that things were not going quite as they should. Mr. Baldwin took to coming in from the garden for a rest at eleven o'clock and would often finish up at twelve. This she could understand, for the garden was not a catch on a cold damp morning for a man past middle age. But his doings in the afternoons puzzled her. For the first few days he settled down by the fire directly after lunch and read a book till tea-time: but after the first week or so he no longer remained concentrated for the whole afternoon, and she would often hear him roaming about, poking the fire, opening the window a little, or closing it. She would hear the sharp snick of the curtain rings as he jerked the curtains back: she would hear him in the hall—drawing his stick out of the metal stand: he would go for a walk and return so soon that he could scarcely have gone beyond the end of the road. She would hear his stick plunk back into the stand and his chair draw up to the fire again.

Sometimes she found slips of paper that he had left lying about—scribbled all over with stuff he had copied out of his books. One day she accidentally tore some of these up with an old sale catalogue: she prepared for trouble but it never came: he didn't seem to miss the notes, and never enquired about them.

Sometimes, when she came in to lay tea, she would

catch him standing at the window, chinking some coins in his pockets, staring down the road. When he saw her he would turn round almost guiltily, pick up his book and start to read again.

One day he talked about turning the spare bedroom into a study and they tried to get an old table from the boxroom through the door. But it would not go, and after a half-hearted struggle he gave it up. He said it didn't really matter, and in any case it would mean an extra fire, coals to bring upstairs and more clearing up. So they took the table back and forgot about it. He knocked his pipe out into the dining-room fender a good deal nowadays and Ada was relieved that the spare room was not going to be his study.

He would often clear out drawers after tea and put a pile of old stuff aside to throw away. Then he would change his mind and put it all back, which was all to the good because he could clear it out again later on. One day he bought a scrap book and began sticking in old photographs, bits cut from newspapers and all manner of things that were never made to be stuck anywhere. This made the dining-room table sticky and she had to mention it to Mrs. Baldwin.

It was worse one day when he went out and bought some sticks of glue. He melted them in an old enamel cup over the dining-room fire and mended the leg of a chair. But the glue boiled over and stank the house out, and they had to open all the windows and let a cold east wind blow through the house.

Ada was puzzled, and worried. She understood that retired men played golf, but Mr. Baldwin did nothing but potter in the garden and read his book—and these things

grew patchier and more erratic as the days passed by. He neither had friends nor sought them, and this too seemed queer to Ada.

But if Mr. Baldwin puzzled her, she understood and pitied her mistress with all her heart. Few things passed Ada's notice and it had been a genuine shock to her, on the first afternoon of the master's retirement, to see him sitting in Mrs. Baldwin's chair, and Mrs. Baldwin perched unhappily in the hard one opposite him. She respected her mistress's hour of rest in the darkened dining-room and moved and worked quietly in the kitchen below: her work had been disturbed that afternoon as she thought of her mistress sitting up there, wide-eyed in a room full of cheerless light. •

She pitied the patient quietness with which her mistress faced the breaking up of her old habits and ways of life: Mrs. Baldwin treated her husband with the tender indulgence of an invalid, and it was a new shock to Ada when, on the night of the glue incident, she heard voices raised in anger, speaking one over each other—almost shouting—she heard him say: " How *can* I melt a tin of glue in the tool-shed without a fire !—don't you *want* the furniture mended? " And Mrs. Baldwin had cried out: " Oh, don't *nag* I Leave me alone ! "

It was a new thing for them to quarrel violently like this, but it happened again in the same week. Mrs. Baldwin had given up trying to have her rest in the dining-room, and had taken to going up to her bedroom, cold though it was, and resting in the chair with a quilt over her knees. One very cold afternoon she had asked Ada to light the fire up there, and she had sat by it between tea and dinner, alone.

After dinner, from the top of the basement stairs, Ada heard raised, angered voices again—and the closed doors muffled them into sounds that were almost like cries of pain.

"You seem to think," shouted Mr. Baldwin, "that we've got as much money as we had before I retired ! What's the matter with the dining-room ? Isn't there room for the two of us in here ! "

Mrs. Baldwin did not have a fire in the bedroom next day, but although it was very cold, she went up a long time before dinner and sorted out the things in her wardrobe.

Then came the morning when Mrs. Baldwin came into the kitchen and asked Ada if they could have a little talk.

Ada, disturbed but flattered, pulled up a chair for her mistress and the two sat opposite one another at the kitchen table—a thing that had never happened before.

It may have been the peculiar light in the basement, but Ada suddenly thought how much older her mistress looked. There were deep shadows under her eyes and she looked pale and tired.

" I'm a bit worried over expenses, Ada, and I'm wondering if there's any way we can cut things down." She looked frankly into Ada's face and spoke as if she were reciting something she had long rehearsed.

" You see, Mr. Baldwin's income has been reduced by nearly three pounds a week, and now that he has lunch at home it naturally adds about ten shillings to the housekeeping."

" But surely," exclaimed Ada, " the master saves a lot more than ten shillings by not going to London every day!"

Mrs. Baldwin glanced away, and did not meet Ada's eyes when she replied.

" I know—but Mr. Baldwin wants to put a little aside. He thinks I ought to be able to carry on the same—and we must try, Ada."

" You never had scarcely any lunch at all, m'am—and the master wants meat, and pudding, and cheese."

" I know. But we must try and give him a good lunch after his gardening."

Ada's father had been a proper gardener: he had worked from eight o'clock till one—and lunched on bread and cheese, but she did not mention this. They had a long talk and decided there were no definite things they could do without. They would be a bit more careful all round: Ada said she would wash everything except the sheets and table-cloths and they would save a good part of the laundry bill.

Mrs. Baldwin rose with a grateful smile.

" I don't know what I'd do without you, Ada."

And as the door closed, Ada's bosom swelled with pride. A few weeks ago she had felt sorry for herself. She had believed herself to be the solitary, unappreciated victim of Mr. Baldwin's retirement, left to suffer alone. Now she realised that she was the mainstay of the house: that she was sorry for *them*: mostly for the mistress—but a little more than previously for the master since she had had this talk.

She had never realised how much money went in rates and taxes, in insurance and other things until her mistress had so frankly told her: to drop three pounds a week was a lot when these big expenses went on the same, and she understood now why Mr. Baldwin did not play golf or have parties in to dinner.

But she still thought they ought to find some people and ask them to tea. They used to have lots of friends, but these had gradually left the neighbourhood and they had never troubled to replace them. They had been sufficient to each other while they only had a few hours together each day—but now ? ... it was a great pity.

They had taken to going to the pictures in the afternoons instead of the evenings, as they used to, but that meant every evening of the week was spent at home. The mistress had her Tuesday afternoons at the Bridge Club and Fridays at the Welfare Centre, but the master seemed to resent her doing even that and always said, " You're late," when she came in. As for him, he never seemed to meet anybody at all. They ought to take retired men in hand and teach them to do things, like they did blind people.

The trouble was that it was not just an awkward period that would come to an end—as if he were temporarily out of a job—it was something that must go on, for always. It was the end.

But Ada was going to play her part. She would do all she could. She found an error of sixpence in the baker's book—sixpence, naturally, on the wrong side. She put the book grimly aside to await the baker's arrival. She would give him something to think about for quite a long time.

CHAPTER VII

OCTOBER DARKENED INTO WINTER; a winter that broke no records for excessive mildness or excessive cold: leaden mornings—shrouded afternoons that stole away into the darkness with fog signals as their minute guns—a high wind one night that unravelled Mr. Baldwin's leaf heap and restacked it against the kitchen door.

Mr. Baldwin never missed his morning in the garden, but as the novelty wore off and his concentration lessened, he would often fall to brooding over things that were continually happening to irritate and worry him nowadays. When he had gone out one morning to prune the laurel hedge in the front garden a man had come along and tried to sell him a roll of linoleum. The man had stood at Mr. Baldwin's elbow as he had worked outside his gate, and begged and pestered until Mr. Baldwin had been forced to return to his back garden.

For days afterwards, as he dug the shrubbery, he found himself repeating under his breath the cutting things he should have said to the shameless beggar: he would work himself up into a sullen anger that would smoulder on until it was time for lunch. He would forget about it then, but it would come back next morning and he would work himself up all over again.

And frequently, as he worked, or read by the fire, or went for his walk in the Park, he would worry about

Edith. She was so different these days. Whenever he settled down opposite her for a good long talk she would begin to fidget and look round the room like a caged animal: she would make pointless, absent-minded replies and finally make a feeble excuse to get away and sit alone in her bedroom. On the other hand, when he wanted to settle down to read quietly, she would suddenly try and start a conversation, and would look unreasonably upset when he gently reminded her that he wanted quiet.

She had discovered that he was reading history, and would frequently disturb him with some absurd remark about castles or something—or ask an idiotic question.

At first he had been patient, and replied as clearly and as briefly as possible: later on it angered him because her interruptions sounded like attempts to humour an invalid or encourage a dilatory child. She had changed in an extraordinary way.

But more serious was her hopeless inability to adjust herself to their lower income. While he economised in the smallest detail she persisted in going to an absurdly expensive hairdresser in Maida Vale to have her hair waved. He liked her to look smart, but to have her hair done once a fortnight, at her age, was not playing the game in their present circumstances. He had reduced his own hairdressing expenses to the extent of ninepence a visit by confining himself to a hair-cut, and shampooing his hair himself when he got home.

But while he saved, she squandered. She bought new things for the house that they could no longer afford. When he protested against the expensive stuff she had bought for the dining-room mantelpiece she had asked whether he wanted the house to fall into rack and ruin !

It infuriated him to see her posing as the heroic protector of the house, making him feel a fool who was attempting to destroy it. They had got to face a few faded things around them now that his income had shrunk from ten pounds a week to seven pounds. It needed courage and she had not revealed it.

Sometimes when he was pondering on these unpleasant things during his walk, he would suddenly pull himself up and try to remember if he had actually been round the Park ten minutes previously: he had been thinking so deeply that everything surrounding him had sunk away. He began to fear that his memory was failing, and never left home without a card in his pocket containing his name and address.

But there were times when he was sorry for Edith, and ashamed at himself for losing his temper with her: it was not her fault that she failed to grasp the big things of life: that she could not discuss politics, or finance, or history. When she tried, her attempts were so futile that his annoyance often turned to pity. But he admired her hatred of cheap and tawdry things. When he had persuaded her that they could no longer afford luxury seats at the Cinema, she had replied that she would rather go once a fortnight in the best seats than every week downstairs.

But what annoyed him most of all was her constant suggestion that he was lonely, and ought to find more friends.

It was such an easy suggestion to make: anyone would have thought he could walk out into the street and pick up friends like cigarette ends. Once upon a time there had been plenty of nice people in the neighbourhood, but they had gradually drifted away, and those who had come

to take their places were not up to the standard he desired. To tolerate commonplace bores for the sake of talking was a nauseating business and he was happy enough in solitude if Edith would only stop worrying him about it.

This came to a climax one afternoon when Edith took the matter into her own hands and brought two women from the Welfare Club back to tea. He was amazed and humiliated when she brought them into the dining-room without a word of warning. He was reading by the fire in his gardening clothes—in an old woollen jersey. He had kicked his shoes off and there was a hole in the toe of one sock. Despite this: despite the ruination of his afternoon's work, he had done his best for Edith's sake to join in the inane tea-table chatter. But he had swallowed his cup of tea as quickly as possible and asked to be excused. He had taken his book and gone to sit in the cold drawing-room. When he had heard the front door close on the two women and had returned to the dining-room he was astonished to find Edith in tears.

"How could you be so rude, Tom? It made me feel terrible."

"Rude? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Walking out of the room like that. I didn't know how to face them. Mrs. Wheeler's the wife of a Bank Manager."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"It isn't as though they were common."

"Who said they were?"

"The way you treated them—and I only brought them back because I thought you'd like to . . ."

He lost his temper.

"What about *me* I . . . What d'you think /felt. . . when

you come crashing in with a couple of inane women without even . . ."

He had never finished. She had risen, escaped from the room and hastened upstairs. As she went out she had turned her face from him as though she were ashamed.

He sat by the fire, dejected and miserable. He understood why she had invited the women back: he pictured her planning it—selecting the women whom she thought he would most like to meet. He groped for his book and tried to read. What right had Edith to think him lonely? His mind was stored beyond the famines of loneliness.

But the incident had its effect. A few evenings later, while they were at dinner, Mr. Baldwin suddenly said:

"D'you remember the Tarrants, who lived next door?"

"Yes, of course," said Edith.

"They weren't bad people at all. They're living in Wembley now. I think we might ask them to dinner one evening and have a game of bridge."

In due course the Tarrants came. It was a big occasion to have people to dinner. Edith began planning the dinner days ahead: if a couple of soles in the North Sea felt their ears burning a night before they were caught it was because of a long discussion between Ada and Edith as to the manner of their cooking. Mr. Baldwin went down to Kensington to buy some new cards and scoring tablets: Edith bought flowers, some paper serviettes and a bottle of claret.

Their guests arrived in a small but noisy car and the quietness of "Grasmere" was soon broken by Mr. Tarrant's boisterous voice. He had got on well of recent years: a bit better, in fact, than Mr. Baldwin had bargained for. He was rather inclined to talk of the "old

days " and poke fun at Brondesbury Terrace as though the Baldwins, too, were no longer living there.

But it was a cheerful evening: Ada rose to the occasion with a delicious dinner and Mr. Tarrant had two helpings of everything. The Baldwins, however, lost five shillings and sixpence between them at bridge and Mr. Tarrant drank nearly half a bottle of whisky. When the buzz of the little car died away and the door slammed and quietness reigned again, the Baldwins returned to the dining-room and opened the windows to let out the smoke. There were a few crumbs on the carpet: on the table were scattered cards and scoring tablets, an ashtray heaped with cigarette ends, an empty syphon and a shallow whisky bottle. Mr. Baldwin's throat ached with so much unusual talking, and after Edith had gone to bed he reckoned the evening had cost nearly two pounds: over half of their week's housekeeping money gone up in smoke in three hours. They could not entertain sufficiently often to make it worth while.

He was too tired to read: he followed Edith to bed before his usual time but something was disturbing him and he could not sleep. It was something unconnected with the Tarrants' visit, something that kept whispering about a veil of make-belief that grew thinner every day—and that he was powerless to do anything to repair its worn-out fabric.

It was on a morning in mid-December that the veil gave way and fell aside. It happened suddenly: he had been digging for half an hour with scarcely a glance above the shoulder of his spade: telling himself that every spadeful turned would bring its reward in the spring. Then he had straightened himself: the sudden change of

position dazed him for a moment—his head cleared, and for the first time he saw the garden for what it really was. He faced the reality that for weeks he had struggled to drive away.

It was no good. This sour, worn-out soil was beyond human aid and chemical manure: he might as well give massage and tonic to a starving man. He had tried to believe that it was merely neglect that prevented flowers from blossoming in past years—that gave a scraggy dismalness to the shrubbery and a barrenness to his fruit trees.

But it was more than that. It was the suffocation of these gaunt, brown brick walls. He looked with revulsion at the discoloured patches of brickwork where years ago some kind of sheds must have stood behind the shrubbery. Every ounce of nourishment had been sucked out of this dark, crusty soil. It was not a garden—it was a life prison for a few pallid things that had been taken from fertile homes to linger in a seasonless, wallcd-in obscurity. The aged apple tree with its branches trained against the brickwork looked like some gnarled old man with outstretched arms manacled to a dungeon wall. The garden was old and tired, and wanted to be left alone: he might as well try to coax sap to flow up the dead limb of a tree. He would toil through the winter, and the spring would pass this garden without a smile.

He put his spade in the tool-shed, and went into the house to rest by the fire. The corner stone had fallen and he knew that it was only a matter of time for the rest of his splendid plans to crumble away. He had expected everything around him to remain fresh and young out of respect for his pretence at remaining young himself. The

dining-room was old and dull because the young man and girl who had furnished it were old themselves. If he resented the worn leather of the armchairs and the heavy, faded curtains they could equally resent the puckered hands that pulled them about.

After a while he was surprised to feel an urge to return: he wanted to go on working in the garden and he went out of the French windows of the drawing-room and down the iron steps with a new desire: no longer the lusty champion who had come to rescue it, but a fellow prisoner to keep it company in its patient bondage.

It was Edith's habit to retire early and leave her husband to read alone for an hour before following her to bed. It happened one night that she had left her library book in the dining-room, but desiring not to disturb him, had tried to make do with a magazine. But towards eleven, still feeling wide awake, she slipped on her dressing-gown and went softly downstairs to get her book.

He did not hear her come into the dining-room, and the sight of him made her cry out in dismay. He was not reading: he was sitting huddled in his chair, his book sprawled on the floor beside him, his face buried in his hands. Her first thought was of sudden illness, but when he turned towards her she could see far more than physical pain—there was a misery that she had never seen in his face before—a despairing appeal that broke all the barriers that weeks of petty squabbling had built between them.

Her library book was forgotten: she went over to him and put her hand on his bent shoulder.

" What is it, dear ?—has anything happened ? "

He poked the fire and coaxed up a little tongue of flame. He made her sit down, and he told her everything. Of the garden she knew, for she had watched, day after day, his work grow more listless and mechanical, but of the hope locked in his dusty history books she did not know until this moment: she had never guessed the fantastic heights to which they had beckoned him and how terribly they had failed him when he had held out his hands to them for help.

" But I can help you, dear ! You know I'm interested in everything you do."

He shook his head.

" You know you can't, Edie. No more than I could help you make a curtain or bake a cake. To do any good I want to talk about it with people who know *more* than me !—Don't you see?—it's—it's a sort of loneliness, just to go on reading and reading—passing over things I don't understand because there's no one to explain. It doesn't lead anywhere—and—oh—it's not only that, Edie—it's everything. When you're always in a house with lots of time you see so many things that want doing—it gets on your nerves—and worries you. Everything's so old and shabby, dear. . . . No !—it's not your fault: you do wonders with it—it's—it's beautifully clean: it's just old—and you know it makes me feel old . . . and—and finished."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that the old castles he liked so much were much older and shabbier, and hadn't even got roofs, but something told her not to say it. She remained silent and he went on: he was calmer now.

" I meant to start all over again when I left the office—a sort of new life—with new interests—but it's just like the garden, Edie—you can't set wonderful new things in worn out soil and expect them to grow. We've been set here so long, Edie, we've taken root, and I might as well try and change the colour and shape of the leaves on an old tree—if you see what I mean."

Edith did not altogether understand, but she was overwhelmingly grateful that such a small thing as a forgotten library book should have given them the chance of drawing together again.

The little tongue of flame had disappeared: she pulled her dressing-gown round her knees.

" I'm so glad you told me, Tom. We can see everything together now, and it'll be so different. We've lots to be thankful for—we're both well—and we're not really poor. We can think out lots of ways of passing the time."

He quivered at that. " It's terrible to think of it like that, Edie—it's terrible to think of just 'passing the time' when there's not much left and it's so terribly precious."

" But there *are* things to do, Tom !—we can do all sorts of useful things !—things to make the house better, too. We'll both start making mats to-morrow—you know, those big woollen ones—they're easy and it's quite fascinating work—yours can go down here by the fire in place of this thin thing—and mine'll go in the hall."

Mats ! He smiled for the first time and Edith was delighted to see that he was pleased. Mats !—he thought—the man who was to emerge as an inspired historian—sitting by the fire making mats.

" We could do up some pf the rooms ourselves—lots of

people do nowadays—all the inside painting and everything—and I can help in your reading ! I'll read, too—the same books after you and then we can talk about them. Perhaps we could both join some society and go to meetings and things."

They rose and went up to bed. They were silent, but neither slept. Both heard the whirr and strike of the dining-room clock long into the small hours of the morning.

To confess to failure, thought Mr. Baldwin, might in itself be claimed as a minor success: but to admit that one is facing a blind alley does not flatten walls and produce a distant horizon.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BALDWIN had wondered why pensioned business men never did anything really important with their retirement. He had argued, with every appearance of reason, that a man's brain is fully matured and at its best between sixty and seventy: that the highest positions in politics, the law and the Church are rarely given to men before they reach this age, and that a man retiring at sixty from a City office, with an alert mind and a sound body, ought to be fit for something more than a slow vegetation into obscurity.

He had wondered why so few of them used their freedom to do anything big, and a grim three months' struggle had shown him the reason. A brain that has been hungrily aware of life for sixty years is stored to its capacity: a man may draw from it lavishly and refill it with the kind of goods that he has fashioned it to hold, but he cannot clear it out and fill it with new stock of a different shape and size. The old fittings are simply not made to take them: they either reject them or collapse under the strain.

But like the vast majority of people Mr. Baldwin thought he was different from the rest, and while fate, in its normal, plodding way tried its utmost to make him realise that he was the same, he stubbornly refused to believe it. Ambition had stirred him to rebellion, but now a consuming dread was fighting desperately in alliance. A man can

face his declining years with equanimity if satisfying achievements lie behind him, but Mr. Baldwin was not prepared to lie back and admire a cashier's box as the monument upon the peak of his career.

And there was a deeper and more frightening spectre in the background. The past three months had given him a sample of what lay ahead if he lost courage and gave in. Sometimes, in unguarded moments, his mind had sunk into a dark vision of hopeless, endless, terrible days, suffocated by a drooping pair of faded velvet curtains—a nauseating brown carpet patterned with clusters of bloated grapes and pergolas—a tool-shed—grinning walls—scraps of paper blowing down a desolate road—the eternal tock of a pendulum—the rustle of settling coal and the click of a neighbour's gate. When these thoughts gripped him he would struggle back, grope for his history book and hold it tight—or hurry into the garden and grip the handle of his spade until strength and calmness returned. He would emerge with a dogged resolution that even if ambition failed he must go on because he dared not face the alternative, for deep in these chasms of despondency lay the memory of an evening paper—with something about a beam in a garage and a piece of rope.

The night of his confession to Edith had come as a heaven-sent relief. Even if it had humiliated him, the broad gates of sympathy that Edith had thrown open had given outlet to his pent-up, brooding disillusionment. He felt a happiness that he had not known since the night of his retirement: he was able to call a truce with himself: gather his demoralised forces: reorganise them and prepare for a new campaign in a short season of rest. He realised how ridiculous it had been to imagine himself the

only man who had ever visualised inspiring things to be done after retirement from an office. Every ambitious man had plans like his: he was one of thousands and not a solitary adventurer after all. But the knowledge that the vast majority of these thousands were defeated by circumstances did not discourage him: it hardened his resolution to succeed.

His original plans had been based upon a wrong foundation. Sensational achievement needed more than he was prepared to risk. It would mean a gamble—the selling of everything he possessed, the making of a hazardous journey into the wilds and a return with unique discoveries. Only then could he write books and gain the authority to lecture. For Edith's sake these wild dreams would have to go. Too many men, all more experienced than he, were engaged upon the research work he had planned to do in England, and to persist in this would be a vain and futile waste of time. For a little while he was content to rest, confident that with calm and reasoned reflection a new horizon of endeavour would reveal itself.

Edith wasted no time in playing her own part. On the day after her husband's confession she returned from her morning's shopping with an unwieldy parcel containing the necessary ingredients for two large mats of tasteful design. There were two threading hooks, a box of gaily-coloured wool and two broad pieces of canvas upon which the designs of the mats were traced.

The whole thing was a great success. Although Mr. Baldwin scoffed at it and said it was an old woman's job and a waste of time, he soon got fascinated by it. To sit opposite each other for hours in the evening and try to

draw conversation from dry reservoirs was courting disaster, but for each to sit with the beginnings of a useful mat upon their knees, to dip into a common basket for stubby lengths of wool and to thread them deftly into their allotted spaces was to spend a pleasant hour with long periods of unnoticed, sympathetic silence, and dinner was frequently upon them before it was expected.

And then one day came the inspiration that Mr. Baldwin had been waiting for. It came, in fact, from Edith. She had been trying to read his history books in order to discuss them with him but she soon realised its futility. She understood little of the hopelessly dull tomes he was trying to digest and she frankly confessed that the ecclesiastical troubles of the fourteenth century were Greek to her. He did not tell her that they were Greek to him as well, but it pleased him to know of her failure. There had been too much suggestion of late that Edith, still with her normal occupations around her, and capable of doing them successfully, was the strong protecting partner—but by chance her confession of failure contained the inspiration.

"Why don't they write the stuff in an interesting, human way that ordinary people can understand? There's nothing between children's books and these great, dull things that aren't written for ordinary people at all."

He did not say much in reply, but he went for a long walk that night, impelled by a new, restless excitement. He knew exactly what Edith meant and there must be thousands like her. Thousands would enjoy a new interest in history if it were given to them in an interesting, intelligent way. The books he had been trying to read had

defeated him because they were written by a man without a glimmer of humour or humanity: his failure had demoralised him and suddenly he began to thank his stars that he had failed. Gradually the mists cleared, and he saw the colossal mistake that had nearly broken his heart. He had been trying to become a dry-as-dust historian like the author of his books: he had tried to follow him when he was totally unsuited for that kind of thing. He was a normal intelligent man in close sympathy with worldly people: he delighted in history for its romance and humanity—not for its intricate technicalities of religion and politics. The murder of Becket was exciting but the reasons for it were dull: what they had to eat on the Field of the Cloth of Gold was infinitely more interesting than what they talked about. Action: sweating, swearing, marching men—grand processions—banquets and tattered banners were the things that stirred him: and those were the things that he would rescue from these musty books, bring to life, sharpen and light up for the thousands who had no patience for ten-volume slabs of dullness.

After dinner that night he began an essay upon the Roman Invasion. He called it "Enter Caesar" and when it was finished he gave it to Edith to read. She was entranced.

"It's wonderful, Tom !—It's twice as good as all those stodgy old books put together !—I never knew you could write like that !"

"Did you feel it—held you ?" he asked; "did you feel you wanted to go on ?"

"Wanted to go on !—I was disappointed when it was over ! It was a lovely bit where the Ancient Britons picked

up big stones off the beach and threw them at the Romans when they'd used all their arrows ! "

He laughed self-consciously.

" That's only imagination, of course—but I expect they did."

" It's imagination that the man who wrote those books never had. That's why you've made it worth reading about and he didn't."

She pressed him to send it to a publisher. They selected one from their Sunday paper who was advertising a book about the Emancipation of Crete, and first thing Monday morning Mr. Baldwin went out to get an envelope big enough to take his manuscript flat. He enclosed a letter suggesting he should write, say, a dozen such episodes in the same style and have them published in one volume.

Christmas came with a shy flutter of snow, and Mrs. Baldwin's sister from Beaconsfield brought her husband to spend the day. The year turned with a week of black frost and all the while Mr. Baldwin's cars were developing an acute sense for the snick of the gate-latch and the heavy boots of the postman. Every night now, after Edith had gone to bed, he sat at the dining-room table surrounded by paper and pencils and open books: he wrote *The Landing of the Conqueror* and *Runnymede: England Asserts her Freedom*. He even toyed with a flight of fancy—of King John losing the Crown Jewels in the Wash—but he finally decided to stick to fact. Edith read each as it was written and declared them perfect.

The arrival of the Christmas Sales catalogues brought many cruel false alarms. Mr. Baldwin had discovered in the past that when you deliberately wait for a letter and watch every post for its arrival, the letter never comes.

So he would lie in bed towards the postman's time and say to himself again and again, " I don't expect a letter to-day: of course there won't be a letter to-day." But that did not work either—because sure enough there wasn't a letter.

But it came at last: by the unusual post at eleven o'clock. Edith was on the point of going shopping and Mr. Baldwin had just come in for his break in the morning's gardening.

Edith collected the letter from the mat: she knew it immediately by the name on the back of it. She took it to her husband and left him to open it alone, but she could not bear the suspense of waiting until she had returned from shopping: she stood in the hall, slowly putting on her gloves. The silence in the dining-room seemed interminable: then she heard him moving about, and the rattle of the brass curtain rings as he flicked back the curtains in his old habit. Her heart fell, for the sound was ominous.

He came out of the dining-room and said, " D'you want to see it ? "

The envelope, carefully slit, lay on the table, and beside it lay the essay. He held the letter out to her. The publisher regretted that there was no demand.

Mr. Baldwin was surprised by the vehemence of his wife's outburst. What did publishers know about what people wanted ? Look at the stuff they published !—and why couldn't they have written sooner instead of keeping them in suspense ?

" I suppose they get lots of things to read," said Mr. Baldwin. He was quite calm: he seemed scarcely to mind. He was putting on his gardening gloves as he spoke, and

went almost at once through the drawing-room and back to the garden.

Edith read the letter again, and looked at the essay, beautifully written in Tom's clear round hand. It seemed strange and unfamiliar after its long absence. She glanced through the drawing-room windows before she left, and saw him kneeling on an old cushion, weeding the path.

To observant people in Brondesbury Terrace Mr. Baldwin became a "character"—to some rather a tragic one, to others a figure of fun, according to the way they thought about such things. They would see him potter out in his overcoat and new brown-kid gloves, potter down the road and potter back. Sometimes he would disappear in the direction of the Park and not be seen for an hour: at other times he would merely go the length of the road. As the days drew out, the darkness no longer shrouded his departure with his wife for their evening's shopping—in March they went by twilight, by April in broad daylight, and often the Harrington family, who lived opposite, got some free amusement out of the way the old man and lady returned, the old man walking a few paces in front: impatiently swinging round and waiting at the gate for the old lady. "They've had another row!" said the Harrington family. "Poor old thing—the way he nags her." They often noticed the old lady sitting at her bedroom window the whole afternoon: sometimes for a part of the evening: they would see her open the dining-room window, and laugh when the old man slammed it again a few minutes later.

"There he goes again! Isn't he getting old!"

" They must be on good terms to-day, he's been to get a bag of cakes."

" Sort of old boy who'll drown himself one day," said Mr. Potter from the large corner house. " There was a case in the paper yesterday. Fellows like that with nothing to do ought to be put into a Home."

But even the most observant neighbours failed to attach any significance to the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin on Saturday the 28th October at two o'clock in the afternoon. " Off to the Pictures," thought Miss Freeland next door.

But they were not off to the Pictures. Neither Miss Freeland nor anyone else in Brondesbury Terrace who saw them go out so normally had the faintest notion of the star that was guiding the footsteps of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin that afternoon.

CHAPTER IX

SATURDAY, THE 8TH OCTOBER: a date that Tom and Edith Baldwin were to remember with feelings close to reverence: a date of deliverance.

Towards the end of the first winter of her husband's retirement Mrs. Baldwin began to lose all confidence in her power to help him. It became impossible when every word was taken as a rebuke or an accusation of laziness to be angrily denied: she began to feel towards him as one would to an old, sick animal—to be fed, occasionally soothed, but for the most part to be left alone. She persuaded him to send his essays to several other publishers, but his faith in them had gone, and it was difficult to endure his gloating "I told you so," when they were returned.

It was hard to understand why the failure of these essays should have so broken his spirit. He had undertaken them so light-heartedly that failure seemed scarcely a matter for tragic concern.

But beyond doubt their failure had marked the beginning of a terrible change in him. One by one his interests faded, and all that came to replace them was a morbid concern for his health. He would put on two woollen jerseys before venturing into the garden, then button his overcoat to his neck and return in half an hour with fear in his face and the news that he was dripping with

perspiration and would catch a chill. On her return from shopping Mrs. Baldwin would often find the thermometer lying out of its case on their bedroom dressing-table. His history books had given place to a Medical Dictionary that he would study in fearful silence, set aside with sudden resolution and timidly return to again and again. When she tried to persuade him to come away to a hotel at the seaside he had fiercely enquired where the money was to come from.

The lengthening days brought a measure of relief to Edith. It ended for a while the dreaded hours of sitting opposite one another over the fire. She could sit for long evenings by her sunlit bedroom window or take her work into the Park, but always the sight of her in a hat would bring the eternal "Where are you going?" and the closing of the front door the maddening, "Where have you been?"

There were times when he was pitifully anxious to please her. One evening he went out alone and returned with a small jade brooch that she had admired while shopping on the previous evening; at other times he would return with a bag of cakes for tea. But these were tiny oases in a desert of petty quarrels—nagging over money—futile arguments that would die away; fester and break out again and drag on for days—rising at times to terrible bursts of temper: "Why don't you read the papers properly and find something sensible to talk about!"

And sometimes her own patience would collapse under the strain and she would feel her voice rising to a shrill cry:

"Go out!—join a Club or something!—get some friends! For heaven's sake *do* something!"

" What the devil can I join ! "

" The Bowling Club in the Park: I see them enjoying themselves every night ! "

" Those idiotic old bores !—I'm not dead yet ! "

And once, in an agony of spirit she cried out: " Go to a Public House and get drunk !—anything !—anything ! "

She had never seen such a wild look come into his eyes. " By God, I will ! " He crushed on a hat—went out into the twilight without his stick or overcoat and slammed the door.

It frightened her, and she was ashamed. An hour passed, and she was terrified: she pictured him lying helpless in the Park with a bottle clenched in his hand: then the gate squeaked and he came in quite normally with a pound of eating apples.

Worst of all were the long silences after a quarrel: sometimes a whole day without a word: a half-hour of silent torture at lunch—another at dinner, while Edith wondered whether he or she, or both of them, were going mad. She hated him: despised him, and pitied him. His eyes never met hers except when he was carried away by anger, and then for a horrid moment she would see the eyes of a hostile stranger.

And this was to go on now till the end—until they died. The days began to draw in, and with the gathering darkness came the nameless dread of another winter.

There was a golden autumn evening, and Edith was sitting at work by her bedroom window. Through the gap between the houses opposite she had a glimpse of the Park—of two elms that met and intertwined their branches,
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and the dusky sunset behind them brought the memory of a walk that she and Tom had been very fond of in the years before the war—a walk particularly suited to an autumn afternoon. It began unexpectedly in a right of way through a farmyard into unfrequented fields—three miles of woods and meadows that rose gently to a crest that looked down upon the little village of Welden in its valley of gorse and elms. They would reach the crest in the dusk, and the twinkling lights below would summon them forward to an old-fashioned cake shop in the village—to a glowing wood fire and an alcove, hot muffins and a generous pot of tea. An hour of drowsy rest: a stroll through the night to the rural station and home in time for dinner: a walk for the autumn, when the fading light would shade each stage of their progress with a quality that lingered in the memory.

It occurred to Edith that she might persuade Tom to take this walk again. It was a forlorn hope, but to do it once and enjoy it might lead to a weekly habit that would draw him out of his desperate stagnation and bring new scenes and thoughts to stimulate him.

It was time for dinner: she put her work aside, tidied herself and went downstairs. There was a mustiness in the dining-room, for Tom insisted upon closed windows now that the autumn was coming. The room was in twilight and he was sitting by the window reading the evening paper in the scanty light. His latest fad was to save the electricity by sitting in the darkness.

He glanced up as she came in and switched on the light.

" Well ? " he said, " what have you been doing ? "

" Odds and ends/" she said.

There was silence until Ada had brought the dinner in.

He was in a quiet, friendly mood, and Edith decided to seize the opportunity before the inevitable squabble began.

"I was thinking just now about those walks we used to go on Saturday afternoons before the war. D'you remember how you used to hurry home for lunch—and how we used to take the bus out to Stanmore—and that tea-shop in Welden ? "

" Those were good days," he said.

" Let's go next Saturday—over the same ground—exactly as we used to——"

He looked at her as though she had said, " Let's drown ourselves," but before he could reply she hurried on with a desperate eagerness: shy wings of memory went fluttering through the tips of the larch woods, over bramble hedges and rutted fields: they descended abruptly and breathlessly to anticipate one of the objections he was certain to make——

" Tea about one and six—fares half a crown—it wouldn't cost much compared with the fun we'd get."

He listened with the sidelong, impatient glance that was his habit nowadays when she talked too much.

" D'you realise that walk's a three mile climb uphill ? "

" Well—what of it ? " she demanded.

" What of it !—you used to get tired out when we did it fifteen years ago."

" I don't mind."

" You mightn't—but what about me ? I suppose you've forgotten I've had lumbago for nearly a month."

" Exercise is good for lumbago."

He snorted, and helped himself to potatoes: she saw her plan tottering to extinction and gave a final, despairing puff to the dying spark.

" You might come for my sake, Tom. I feel I want a good walk. I can't read a map like you can: I'd lose my way if I went alone."

" Why didn't you think of it in the summer instead of waiting for this treacherous east wind ? "

" Because it's an autumn walk,"—and she thrust in a glowing picture of the tea-shop—so eagerly that his supercilious smile began to give place to surprise. But all he said was:

" Getting hot and sitting in a cold train. Are you going to answer for that ? "

" But we shall cool down at tea ! "

" And then go out of a hot tea-shop into the night air."

" For heaven's sake, Tom !—we're not invalids ! "

He looked down at his plate, and she saw him flush. She expected a burst of temper, but he said quite quietly:

" /can do it, if you can."

" Of course I can."

The battle was won. When he rose from dinner he went to his bureau, searched in a drawer and produced a tattered Ordnance Map that had served them on many a past adventure into unknown fields. With a good deal of argument they traced the route of the walk that Edith had spoken of: they pored over it—their heads came nearer together than for many a weary day, and when at last they folded the map Mr. Baldwin went upstairs and routed out his old walking boots.

He took them for a trial in the Park next morning and pronounced them in good running order, and when, at two o'clock on the following Saturday afternoon Miss Freeland thought her dull old neighbours were going to the Pictures, she was quite wrong.

CHAPTER X

" SEPTEMBER 1914?—as long ago as that!"

" It must be," said Mrs. Baldwin, " because you joined the Specials in October and naturally we gave up the walks then."

" And never began them again. I wonder why ? "

The bus was beyond Hendon, and the discussion as to when they had last come out this way had arisen from the changed appearance of the country bordering the main road. To the best of their recollection it had opened out into green fields when Hendon had been left behind, but now there was little to be seen but rows of small new houses with an occasional sports ground in the distance.

But there was nothing depressing about the change: the long road was buzzing with the light-hearted business of Saturday afternoon: people were working in almost every garden: little groups of young men hurried by with small bags and dangling football boots: a party of excited girls with hockey sticks travelled with them for a mile: then clattered off and disappeared up a lane towards some distant goal-posts.

" *That* was there ! I remember it," said Mr. Baldwin, pointing to a tall, sad house lying a little back from the road. He looked at it in silence, as if drawing some memory from it, he followed it round with his head as the bus drew away then turned suddenly to Edith and said:

" What have we been doing these last ten years ?—I mean—it seems extraordinary we've never been out here since."

" Four of the years were the war," said Mrs. Baldwin.

" The last six, then ? "

She knew what had happened in the last *one*—but five years had passed between the end of the war and her husband's retirement.

" You used to do a lot of overtime work after the war: that took most evenings."

" Yes, of course—but Saturday afternoons—and Sundays ? "

Edith gave a little laugh. " I don't know. You just—get out of doing things."

They had the two front seats of the bus: he lowered his eyes from the road in front of him and looked across at her with an earnest smile.

" You know, Edie, I think we were letting ourselves run to seed. Fancy forgetting the country was only half an hour away ! "

Edith dared not rejoice too soon. Too often, in the past hopeless year she had known brief moments when he had pulled himself together and been as eager and as happy as this. And yet his present mood was more genuine than anything she had seen since the first days of his retirement: it was building up, and she scarcely dared say a word that might destroy it.

He was sitting well forward on his seat, tapping the floor impatiently with his walking stick—pointing out old landmarks—deploring the appearance of new ones, but fretting all the time to be off, and walking. He seemed to have forgotten all about his lumbago.

At least the beginning of their favourite walk had not been disturbed: they saw to their joy the battered old signboard: "FOOTPATH TO WELDEN." It seemed to have shrunk back into the trees to avoid the greedy paws of London. The same old smelly farmyard with a heap of steaming manure—the same big, ramshackle gate that had to be heaved up before it could be opened, the same broad, rutted track beside the stubble field—in ten minutes there was not a soul in sight.

" It looks as if they *knew* this was our walk," said Mr. Baldwin, " and left it for us ! "

" It's lovely," said Edith.

They came to the first wood, and some young rabbits went bouncing away into the undergrowth: they picked some blackberries, and took a rest upon a stile.

" Before the war," mused Mr. Baldwin, " think of all the things that have happened since we got over this stile last time." He fumbled for his tobacco pouch, filled his pipe and lit it. He sat looking into the wood—slowly swinging his stick—puffing little clouds of smoke into the quiet, frosty air.

" You know, Edie—I often wish I'd gone in for Natural History. I don't know what any of these trees are called."

" Those are just thorn trees," began Edith, " and of course those are silver . . . ," but he broke in as though he had not heard.

" If only we'd got a bit of land like this at home—something to clear and really work in—you know—sort of virgin soil—with tough things growing in it. There's nothing in our garden that's got enough spirit to catch hold of your trouser legs and tear them."

There was a nip in the air, and they rose to go on. Far away to the left, behind a group of trees, some tiny red and white specks were eddying to and fro at football, but ahead of them the path wound slowly upwards in solitude. In her eagerness to encourage her husband Edith had not questioned her own ability to cover three rough, uphill miles, but half the distance was behind them before she began to feel fatigue. The walk was turning out a wonderful success and tiring feet were nothing to the exhilaration she was feeling. If they could do this every week ! It would lift the dread clouds of winter: it might bring him new interests. His birthday was in a fortnight's time and she decided to get him a Natural History book and possibly something about country rambles.

They frequently paused to recollect small incidents that had happened in the past: a spot where Mrs. Baldwin's shoe-lace had once broken and the bank they had rested on to make repairs: the wild corner of a meadow where on two succeeding walks they had discovered a hedgehog in exactly the same place, and the evergreen oak that once sheltered them from a sudden shower. In half an hour they found more to say than in the past two months.

It was half-past four as they climbed the last gentle slope towards the crest that concealed the village of Weldcn in its valley. The sun was beginning to set behind them, there would be a mist, a trail of wood smoke—a few flickering lights beckoning them down the slope to the log fire, toast and tea. The last half mile down-hill was the best part of the whole walk, with its great solitary

elms and clumps of gorse—a lovely little valley that marked the twilit, peaceful end of their journey.

"Thank goodness nobody's tried to spoil it," said Mr. Baldwin as he reached the summit a little ahead of his wife.

And then he stopped dead. She saw his jaw drop and heard his exclamation of astonishment.

In a moment she was beside him, and they stood together in speechless dismay. There below them lay the valley: the sun was sinking beneath a dark strip of cloud, and as they looked it sent a long pale stream of light across the land as though to say: "Look what's happened while you've been away ! "

The desolate charm of it—the wild, fragrant peace—had gone for ever: through the soft gorse field stretched broad, hideous gashes of naked yellow clay, and clustering along them, like evil fungus to a fallen tree were hideous new houses—stacks of bricks—pyramids of sewage pipes—piles of white timber—mud-stained lorries and sheets of hunched tarpaulin—a nightmare of perverted progress.

Aloof and unchanged lay their footpath and the hedge that skirted it, for it lay some little distance from the ghastly mess—unchanged, from this distance, lay Welden Village, but a new road had buried itself in its very heart. Untouched, for the moment, were the solitary elms, brooding over the desecration beneath them—silently awaiting their fate.

"We might have known," whispered Mr. Baldwin.

Edith could not reply, for suddenly a leaden weariness had fallen on her. A three mile walk over rough, uphill ground was no light undertaking, but she had faced it stubbornly and joyfully because of the things it had promised them. And now, at the moment of its climax, when

it seemed as if nothing could prevent the success of the adventure, the whole thing was shattered by the view before them. She knew that they could never repeat this walk with the knowledge that the destruction of their favourite valley awaited them at its ends. Their tea-shop had probably been swept away by now: they would drag themselves to the station—there would be a cold, hungry journey home—the same sordid squabbling would begin again—it would all begin again for another hopeless, pitiless winter.

They walked on in silence, their eyes averted from the houses as from something naked and unclean. All that they wanted now was to pass it by and forget it if they could. Even the path was theirs no longer: it had been churned by the hobnailed boots of workmen—paper bags hung suspended in the gorse bushes—bottles lay in the ditch—a filthy rag of a waistcoat assaulted them.

At one point the footpath led them within a few yards of the new road, and they could not avoid a repugnant glance at the houses beside it. Three appeared to be finished: two more were completed except for their roofs, and another half dozen stood in various stages of stark, skeletoned ugliness.

But new built, empty houses have an attraction for human beings that new haystacks have for cows, and despite their disgust and indignation, Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin could not resist a moment's pause.

In different circumstances they might have admitted them quite pleasant. The first was square built and snug looking—cream walled and green shuttered, with a sturdy green front door. The house beside it was entirely different but not incongruous: it had the irregular, inconsequential

charm of a Tudor cottage, with oak beams and gables. And each stood comfortably in its own land.

" They'll be falling to bits in five years," said Mr. Baldwin. " The first big storm'll wash them away. Jerry built—all show and no strength. I pity the people who live in them. Come on."

" May I show you round ? " came a pleasant voice that startled them with its unexpectedness. When he had recovered from his surprise, Mr. Baldwin discovered a young man beside them—a pleasant looking young man in a sports coat and grey flannel trousers. He wore no hat, and a big, unruly tuft of light brown hair lay across his forehead. He looked more like a tall schoolboy than a young man. Where he had sprung from was a mystery, for a moment ago, Mr. Baldwin and his wife seemed the only living souls in the twilit valley.

The young man appeared to understand their surprise, and began to explain.

" We've only just started this Estate and we're going to make it our best. It's a lovely spot, isn't it ? We've just opened a Show House across here. I thought perhaps if you were looking for a nice house. ..."

" We're *not* looking for a house," said Mr. Baldwin rather curtly.

" Oh, I'm sorry."

The young man took the snub so pleasantly that Mr. Baldwin felt ashamed of his rudeness.

" I mean," he said, " we should only be wasting your time."

The young man brushed the hair off his forehead and laughed.

" You won't do that because I shall waste it in any case.

I'm here to show people round and nobody's turned up this afternoon at all. We've hardly begun advertising it yet, you see. I'm new to the job, too. If you've got five minutes to spare I can practise on you. It would do me good."

Despite his annoyance Mr. Baldwin could not help a smile. There was something attractive and disarming about the boy. Although the afternoon was cold he was not even wearing a waistcoat: his tweed jacket was open and a striped, coloured tie swayed carelessly across his chest. He looked as if he ought to be playing football somewhere instead of standing about in this desolate place on a Saturday afternoon. He was one of the new kind of boys one saw about these days—rather like Musgrave at the office. They looked so much as if they ought to be playing games that people took it for granted that they would be no good at work—and yet they tackled their jobs with an inspiring sort of eagerness to get on and succeed. Mr. Baldwin glanced at the boy, then across at the little cream-painted house that gleamed in the dusk.

" Well," he said, " if you're sure you don't mind . . . would you like to look over it, Edie ? "

" Very much indeed," said Mrs. Baldwin.

They followed the boy across the maze of yellow ruts that would one day be a road: they crossed a deep trench of glistening pipes and through the oak gate of the Show House.

" I must apologise for all this," said their guide, pointing to the rubble-strewn front garden. " It's too late to put down grass this year, but we shall do all that in the spring. It's awfully good, light soil—with lots of gravel underneath." He swung round on Mr. Baldwin with a

broad, mischievous smile, " That's the way to begin, isn't it ? Tell people about the soil ! "

" That's the way," said Mr. Baldwin, with an artful smile back.

He was beginning to enter into the fun. It was a good joke to go round a house like this: to be one of the actors in a sort of dress rehearsal. He nearly said: " I knew this valley before you were born, my boy," but checked himself for fear of putting the young man off his stride.

The front door stood invitingly open and their guide switched on the light in the entrance hall. He patted a strange flat metal affair let into the wall.

" Central heating, you sec. This radiator keeps the hall nice and warm: there are radiators in all the rooms, of course."

" Is it hot now ? " asked Mrs. Baldwin in surprise.

" Oh, yes. Feel it. The house still wants a bit of drying. It was only finished last week."

Even with the front door open and the frosty air curling in there was a delightful warmth in the house—a clean, fresh warmth flavoured with wood shavings, fresh paint and new furniture.

" The radiators are heated directly from the kitchen boiler. There's no extra expense at all."

" Very convenient," murmured Mrs. Baldwin. Her eyes were roving curiously round the entrance hall. At home there was nothing but a high-ceilinged, narrow passage, crowded with the coat-stand and umbrella-rack, with doors leading stiffly off from it. But this hall was far more spacious: almost a room in itself, with the stairs leading up at an attractive angle and a long, interesting window on the first landing. She noticed that the carpet

covered the whole floor, and there were no ugly borders of bare, stained boards. It was a warm, generous carpet, a simple powder blue with no tedious design to grow tired of.

" There's plenty of room for coats and things in here/' said the young man, throwing open a spacious cupboard that completely lacked the stale stuffiness of their cupboards at home. It had the freshness of pine needles in it.

The first big surprise was the downstairs cloak-room, with wash-basin and lavatory. All their lives Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin had associated the act of washing with going upstairs: they did this, on an average, six times a day, making an annual ascent equivalent to the conquest of Mount Everest. " Saves lots of time," said Mr. Baldwin, peering into the compact little closet.

" And here's the dining-room."

A bit plain, thought Mr. Baldwin. A funny-looking table and set of chairs that did not look quite finished.

" Weathered oak," said their guide, " the latest thing. Don't you think it's rather attractive ? "

It grew on one, certainly. Clean and healthy looking. Perhaps it was because this vigorous young man approved it, but Mr. Baldwin could not imagine feeling bilious after eating a meal from such a table.

But the whole room was so gloriously clean and airy. Its very plainness and simplicity captured the imagination and gave one the feeling of being on a ship bound for some high spirited adventure. One could never feel depressed or old in such a room, with such generous windows and bright cream walls.

" Service hatch to kitchen," said the young man, opening a little door beside the fireplace.

And the kitchen itself! Nothing in it, of course—but Edith could picture glistening rows of saucepans on its spotless shelves. It was more like a scientist's laboratory than a kitchen. . . .

" You see how the corners of the floor and ceiling are rounded to make sweeping easy. There's nowhere for dust to collect. Electric stove. . . ."

" Very expensive," said Mr. Baldwin, feeling it high time to put in a little criticism.

" On the contrary," said the young man, " far less expensive than the old fashioned range."

" But you've got to have a coal fire as well to heat those radiators."

The young man's eyes lit up in triumph:

" No, sir !—this boiler scarcely needs any coal at all: it burns up all the kitchen rubbish. You make your rubbish warm your house and give you hot baths ! Now let me show you the lounge."

The kitchen and dining-room had already taken most of Mrs. Baldwin's breath away, and the lounge removed the little that remained. She saw it first in semi-darkness, with a panel of sunset upon one wall and a twilit stretch of the valley through the broad windows that opened boldly upon the garden. Then the young man switched on the light and the room was floating in a soft amber glow. It took in the full breadth of the house, with deep bow windows upon the road, but there was nothing gaunt about it: there seemed to be nooks and crannies—unexpected little alcoves and recesses—an intriguing little oval window like a ship's porthole high up in the wall. The settee drawn up to the fireplace looked almost too comfortable to be real, and the armchairs opened their

arms to her when she looked at them. The fireplace itself was of small, mellowed bricks: it looked like the arched gateway to a miniature Tudor mansion and made one think of crackling logs and moorland peat. The colour scheme was impossible to define at a glance: all kinds of colours sang out from the cushions and curtains, and seemed to blend themselves into a bold, light-hearted melody. There were no odds and ends—no knick-knacks or protruding furniture to bruise the thighs. There was a friendliness, a simplicity—a clean freshness—a gaiety about this room. It thrilled Edith and saddened her, for it was no more than a dream. In a few minutes they would be on the road to the village and the magic of this little house would be a memory: a dwindling, dark patch in a darkening valley. Twice, it seemed, she heard the word "bedrooms"—and then a quiet laugh brought her to a consciousness of other things: her husband had gone, but the young man was standing by the door.

"Would you like to see the bedrooms?"

She followed him, wishing very much that there might have been some means of keeping the bedrooms for another day: her mind was buzzing with a score of little things that were searching for places to settle in her memory: she would have preferred to give them time to sort themselves out before opening the doors to new ones.

Tom was standing motionless in the window recess of the chief bedroom as she entered: he was obviously impressed, for he had removed his hat. He turned his head and said: "Come here."

"Funny to see our old footpath from the window of a house," he said.

It was certainly a queer experience. From this window they could trace the footpath up the side of the valley until it disappeared over the crest. They could see the point from which a few minutes ago they had looked down in such astonishment and disgust, and Edith wondered what her husband was thinking now.

The young man looked surprised at Mr. Baldwin's remark.

" You're not strangers then, sir ? "

" No," said Mr. Baldwin, with an attempt at truculence, " we've come down that footpath many a time: we used to come miles to enjoy the view of Welden Valley and now you've—you've done this to it. . . "

The young man seemed at a loss for a reply. Then he said:

" I'm afraid somebody would have built sooner or later. We shan't spoil it: we're leaving a lot of open spaces: every house'll be in its own ground. Somebody might have packed it with horrible rows of cheap things and ruined it. Besides, nobody can touch your footpath."

" No, but——It's a pity, you know." Mr. Baldwin felt he had fizzled out rather lamely. He turned and inspected the bedrooms. There were four altogether—two were very small, and although the light distempered walls made up for it, Mr. Baldwin felt it was high time to assert himself in earnest.

" Our bedrooms at home are much bigger than this. It must be rather depressing, sleeping in such small places."

" Of course," said the young man, " they *are* small, but lots of people prefer them small nowadays. You see there are lavatory basins in all of them—hot and cold

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water night and day—and you see the furniture's almost all built in." He opened an unexpectedly big cupboard that was fitted like a wardrobe.

The lavatory basins were a revelation: the Baldwins had heard about them, but had never actually seen them. They had imagined them to be rather disgusting, and insanitary—but Mr. Baldwin could not help picturing himself getting out of the sturdy, weathered oak bed, strolling to the basin, turning a tap and shaving in luxury. He thought of the little can of hot water that Ada brought up—the rickety washhand-stand and ungainly jug and basin—the eternal search for a match to light the geyser.

The young man treated the bathroom with a casualness that must have been artificial. It was impossible to be calm and blase in the face of that final, glistening wonder. The walls were covered to the height of four feet with shining white tiles and above the tiles lay an azure sea, with sailing ships heeling to the wind: the bath itself was partly sunk into the floor and might have come from the palace of a Roman Emperor: there were glistening taps: recesses in the wall for soap and flannels—a bell you could press while in the bath—and a shower. . . .

" We're much obliged," said Mr. Baldwin at the gate: " very interesting." They had been in the house far longer than they had realised, for stars were shining overhead and a frosty crust was gathering upon the clay ruts of the road.

" Pity we don't want a new house," he added in a weak voice.

" I suppose that's a lot of money," said Mrs. Baldwin.

" More than 7 could afford," replied the young man with a wistful laugh: "but it's extraordinarily cheap considering the way it's built. You see, when you put up a number of houses on the same Estate you naturally cut down costs all round."

" How much is that one ? " asked Mr. Baldwin

" Well, the one you've seen is £1,175. We're not building anything to spoil the value of the place. Prices range from £1,950 to £1,050 according to size. Furnishing's cheap because so much is built in: you don't need wash-hand-stands or wardrobes or old fashioned stuff like that. That house was furnished complete for £350."

" Really ? " said Mrs. Baldwin. She could scarcely believe it. She would have said a thousand. " £350 ? "

" That's all." A little white card gleamed in the darkness. " If you know of anyone looking for a house—will you give them my card ? It'd do me a lot of good if you *did* happen to put someone my way."

" Certainly," said Mr. Baldwin. " Certainly I will. Good evening—and thank you."

He wondered for a moment if a tip were expected, but the way the young man smiled and turned away was quite sufficient to show that everything was all right.

" I must go and turn those lights off," he said. " Good night."

" Nice young chap," said Mr. Baldwin, as they picked their way back to the footpath. " Ought to do well."

After a silence he said, " I think it was the way he showed us the house that made it seem so attractive."

" Perhaps so," replied Edith after a thoughtful pause.

Lights had been shining from every window when they left the house. When Mrs. Baldwin glanced back she saw

one solitary panel glowing through the darkness. Even as she looked it disappeared, and the house was swallowed in the night.

The moon was rising as they reached the village, and when the bye lane joined the old world High Street they were delighted to see their cake shop as brilliantly lit—as resplendent with fancy cakes and doughnuts as of old. Even the buxom woman—(whom they had always assumed, from the name over the door, to be Mrs. Chambers)—was still there, as rosy and as buxom as ever.

" Well, this is a surprise ! " exclaimed Mrs. Chambers. " It's just about this time of a Saturday afternoon you used to arrive in the old days. Toasted scones ?—some nice assorted cakes ?—will that fire be too hot ?—it's certainly coming over chilly."

They confirmed that their train left at 6.24 and settled down comfortably for an hour's rest. Mrs. Baldwin was ready for it: a three mile walk in untried shoes had tired her more than she cared to admit, but their interesting visit to the Show House had compensated in a curious way for the ruination of their favourite walk. She was even beginning to wonder whether the houses had ruined it after all. It might possibly add interest to the walk, for every time they came over the crest and down the hill there would be something new to see. Having actually been inside one of the houses made all the difference. They would not be strangers: they might even meet their pleasant young friend again and have a joke with him about the number of houses he had sold. One by one they would see the houses springing up and the gardens coming to life. With all her heart she envied the lucky people who were to live in Wclden Valley, for to them

would come the romance of pioneers, and however old they might be in years they would have youth in spirit, for no one could feel age in such a house as the one they had just seen.

Tom was very silent after tea, but not morosely silent. He sat puffing his pipe—his feet up on the window seat—the wood fire flickering in his face. The walk had brought a healthy colour to his cheeks and had obviously dispersed his lumbago. When he caught her looking at him he pulled out his map and began to study it.

Edith closed her eyes and tried to doze, but all kinds of odds and ends kept passing beneath her closed lids. One thing that kept pushing itself forward was the wonderful built-in dresser in the Show House kitchen, with an ironing board and pastry board that drew out like drawers.

The wind had risen while they were resting in the tea-shop: a few dark rags of cloud were scurrying across the moon and the lane to the station was pregnant with power and danger from the massive, straining trunks of the elms. Some pigs were squealing in a farmyard: a man with a bucket came out of the gate and said, " Good evening."

" Good evening," said Mr. Baldwin, feeling like the village squire. Then he said to Edith: " You know, you might easily be a hundred miles from London here."

They said very little to one another during the journey home. They had a compartment to themselves and Mrs. Baldwin was able to sit with her legs resting along the seat. She had a pain like toothache in her shin bones and the small of her back was so stiff that she resolved upon a hot mustard bath before going to bed. It would be a

poor business if the walk cured Tom's lumbago and gave her an attack in exchange.

Mr. Baldwin stretched his legs along the opposite scat, but after a while he grew tired of looking into the carriage: he brought his feet down and sat for a long while in silence with his eyes upon the moonlit, ghostly fields.

A circular in a halfpenny envelope lay on the hall mat when they opened the door. How cold and ill-lit and clammy the passage seemed—how badly the damp-stains showed up on the wallpaper above the coat rack. Edith, on her way home, had begun to scheme and plan. She had wondered whether they could possibly save up a little and gradually transform their house into something like the one they had seen in the valley: they could easily have the depressing wallpaper taken off and a bright cream distemper in its place: central heating—lavatory basins—she had resolved to make secret enquiries in Maida Vale—but the first cold whiff of stagnant air in the passage dispersed her dreams—the whole house would need pulling down and re-shaping, for nothing could brighten this narrow, hopeless passage and the steep cramped stairs. She began to wish they had not accepted the young man's invitation to see the new house—for though the memories might fade she would never be able to quench the sadness and discontent that they would leave behind.

But although the shabbiness of the old house destroyed her plans it did not depress her spirit, for the walk had splendidly justified its purpose. They both felt bigger and stronger: their hands and faces tingled. The long uphill

climb had given both of them a new pride in themselves: they had both been through a gruelling test and emerged with flying colours. Despite the new houses in Welden Valley she was confident that Tom would want to go again.

She went to her bedroom and changed her stockings: there was a blister under one toe but otherwise her feet appeared all right. And because she felt well and happy she put on the black velvet dress that was reserved for special occasions. Tom's cheerful whistling in the bathroom drew her thoughts away from the drabness of the bedroom, and she went happily downstairs.

She picked up the evening paper that Tom had been reading in the train and stood by the fire with it, waiting for him to come down to dinner. She could not avoid a glance at the heavy old fashioned mantelpiece, and the big, cumbersome mirror above it: she tried to concentrate upon the news, but she was thinking all the time of a sturdy, simple fireplace in mellowed brick, and a romantic little oval window high up in the wall, framing the evening sky and the swaying tips of an elm.

Her eyes wandered to the Stop Press column of the paper: there were a few football results and a blank space below—but in this space were some faint, pencilled figures. She wondered what they were, and fumbled for her reading glasses on the mantelpiece. She could see at once, by their neatness, that the figures were in Tom's handwriting, and first of all was written—£1,175. Something gripped her weary shin bones: it seemed to gather and race through her body until it touched her heart and sent it wildly throbbing. £1,175 •—the figures that had been buzzing in her brain for the past three hours—

since the boy had casually mentioned them in the valley. So Tom had been thinking about it, too. She had thought that he had put the house from his mind in the first steps away from it towards the tea-shop, for he had avoided all mention of it on the journey home. There were more figures underneath—uncertain and difficult to decipher: it was a small sum—£1,000, £200, £37 *los. od.*—added up to £1,237 10s. underneath were a few unmeaning little squares and criss-crossed lines—a kind of futuristic picture of his thoughts. . . .

She dropped the paper as he came in, briskly rubbing his hands: there was a glow in his cheeks and he looked at her with steady smiling eyes.

"How d'you feel, Edie? Tired?"

"Legs ache a bit—but not tired."

"Mine ache, too."

"But the lumbago's gone," she said with a mischievous smile.

He was guarded about that. "I don't know yet. I'll tell you in the morning. It was a risk."

"You're looking awfully well, though."

"I feel it, Edie. It was a good idea of yours—that walk."

Ada brought dinner in, and he lifted the lid of the casserole. "Irish stew, eh! Just the thing for hungry tramps like us! I oughtn't to want any after that big tea—but I do!"

They talked mainly of the walk as they had their dinner: of the woods, and the tea-shop, and the village, and although Tom grew indignant at the way the bus route had been disfigured by new factories, he did not mention the houses in Welden Valley.

When dinner was over, he rose and stood lighting his pipe by the fire.

" I bet you aren't going out for a walk to-night!" said Edith.

He made no answer for a moment. He was just about to say something as Ada came in to clear away, and he turned abruptly and went to the windows.

By force of habit he looked between the curtains to see if the windows were closed. He usually muttered something about a dangerous draught as he did this, but to-night he said nothing. He gave the curtains an extra pull as if to ensure secrecy and when Ada had made her final departure with the table-cloth, he came and stood by the fire again.

" Edie," he said, " why shouldn't we have one of those houses in Welden Valley ? "

She looked up breathlessly from her needlework. She did not want to interrupt by saying anything. Her own mind had taken her as yet no further than the question he had asked, but she felt that his must have probed the dark, exciting spaces beyond. A pointless remark from her might destroy everything—she wanted to sit in silence, and listen—but all he said was:

" Why *shouldn't* we ? "

" D'you mean it, Tom ? *Could* we ? "

He nodded. " I'd have laughed at the idea a couple of days ago. People like us get timid, you know—fixed down—afraid to move. As we get older we get more and more afraid until at last we think we'd die if anything happened to disturb us." He turned away and stood looking into the fire. " You know, Edie—we've had a rotten year, haven't we ? Nothing wrong with us—enough to eat—

plenty of comfort—but, oh, you know—hopeless: it's all so old and dingy here. Nothing to—to keep us young. Think of that—that lovely house ..."

"That lovely house," whispered Edith.

He swung round eagerly: "You liked it?"

"Liked it?—what a question!"

He was at the table now—he drew up a chair beside her—a sheet of paper before him and a pencil in his hand. He looked like a General planning a battle.

"Look here. This house is ours. It's worth £1,000—say £900 at the lowest. We could sell it quite easily. Then I've got £200 in the Bank and £37 *los.* in the Post Office. I've put that by since I retired. You've often thought I've been mean and stingy."

"I've never!"

"Oh, yes, you have—or you ought to have anyway—but—but—/ don't know—money's got on my nerves and I've put by when there's really no need. Anyway—it'll stand in good stead now." He threw his pencil down.

"There you are, Edie! £1,137 *los.* and the new house is only £1,175!"

She hated throwing even a thimbleful of cold water.

"But there'd be lots of extras, Tom—fittings—lamp-shades—and the garden. . . ."

"The garden!" His eyes lit up with a new light—"perhaps we'd get a piece with one of those big elms!"

He could sit still no longer: he rose and paced the room: he stood in odd corners where he had never stood before: his eyes took in the walls, the floor, the ceiling: they were measuring the height of the bookcase—the breadth of the sideboard—the shape of the carpet.

" I'd say all this furniture would go in, wouldn't you ? This ceiling's higher, of course, but there's a good clear foot above the bookcase there. It'd all go in, wouldn't it, Edie ? "

His excitement suddenly seemed to fade into uneasiness and doubt: his last words were more like an appeal for help than a direct question, and she understood what had suddenly come to trouble him.

Her own heart, too, had fallen when she glanced round at the ponderous furniture surrounding them. It was so terribly ugly and depressing in the light of what they had seen that afternoon. She pictured their enormous mahogany sideboard, with its ancient scars and musty, unwholesome drawers, wedged against the delicate cream walls of that fragrant little dining-room: the sullen, carved oak bookcase, almost black with age, squeezing out the sunlight, hopelessly out of place—would be like a resentful, stooping giant in a fairy house. Most of the stuff had come from Tom's family home in Colchester, and the drawing-room furniture from her father's vicarage. The bedstead upstairs, with its loose brass knobs, had been bought secondhand when they had married, together with the yellow pine wardrobe and dressing-table. The rest had come at odd times, from here and there. Nothing really matched, and although it had never pleased her, it had never brought such revulsion as it did now: each room of the Show House was furnished with an entrancing little suite of uniform design.

Their first frantic enthusiasm had been far too wonderful to last: Tom's calculation far too plausible to bear the test of hard reasoning: even as she listened she felt there must be a snag somewhere, and sure enough there was.

She saw her husband's splendid new dream about to crumble away like all his others. They would need every penny to buy the new house and to think of a new set of furniture was out of the question. And yet it would be a mockery to move and be followed by all this faded, depressing furniture: it did not look so bad in a faded house, but in a new house it would look ghastly. It would carry the seeds of the misery they had suffered in the past year, and in a little while it would all spring up again.

Mr. Baldwin still stood by the table, but he was no longer sizing up the furniture with eager, critical eyes: he was looking at it sadly and hopelessly: his hands were twitching, and she saw the little droop return to the corners of his mouth. In a moment he would give way, and she knew what the reaction would mean. She knew instinctively that a chance such as this would never in their lives come again. They would never recapture the reckless spirit of adventure that had swept them for one glorious moment beyond the timid reasoning of middle age. If the devil had appeared in this moment of need she would gladly have given him her soul for the money to buy that new furniture and sweep this hopeless stuff away. And in answer to her thought came an idea that frightened her: that she fearfully repulsed: that gathered and flashed up again.

Upon the death of her mother, Edith had received some legacies that she had treasured as a sacred trust. There were several rings and two small diamond brooches, hallowed by memories and locked away in a small box in her bedroom cupboard. There was also a mysterious gift described by the lawyer as London Chatham & Dover Railway 5 per cent Debentures: she had never

seen them and had never quite understood what Debentures were. They sounded like some kind of office furniture. They had always been locked up in the vaults of the Midland Bank and twice a year a remittance of £10 arrived like a fairy gift which never failed. Tom refused to allow her to spend it on the house, so it went upon new clothing and a few small luxuries, including birthday and Christmas presents. She had been given to understand that these Debentures were worth £400, but she no more thought of disturbing them than she would have pawned her mother's jewellery. She guarded them as her mother before her had guarded them—as a perpetual monument to the self-sacrificing determination of her grandfather that the women of his blood should never be quite penniless.

But something had happened this night that had never happened before: to clench her teeth—to abuse her trust and to sell those Debentures might mean the raising of two struggling souls from a living purgatory.

She hardly recognised her voice: it sounded loud and hollow—like someone else's when one is half asleep.

" Tom !—we're not going to take a stick of this old stuff with us !—we're going to sweep it all away and start all over again !—absolutely afresh—with lovely new things from beginning to end ! We can do it, Tom ! "

He looked at her in astonishment: she was bouncing up and down in her chair as she jerked out the words, and he suddenly felt afraid: Edith had never fainted or had hysterics, but this appeared to be the onset of something very queer. He wondered what he ought to do.

" Why, Edith ?—what d'you mean, dear ? "

Breathlessly she explained: she was out of her depth when she tried to talk about simple finance, and Debentures were even worse—but one thing she knew: they were worth money : £400 : and they weren't going to lie asleep in the Bank for another day—they were coming out to buy glorious new furniture : gleaming pots and pans for the kitchen: powder blue carpets : bright chintz curtains—suites of weathered oak—everything—everything they needed for their new home in Welden Valley!

He listened in silence—then shook his head.

" No, Edie, dear. It's—it's awfully—good of you—but those Debentures are yours. This is my responsibility."

" They're not mine ! " she cried, " they're ours !—everything's ours ! "

He began to pace the room again. He had never tried pacing the dining-room before and it made him realise for the first time how hopelessly big and cumbersome everything was: the old leather chairs were clutching at his knees, imploring to be spared, but he had no time for sentiment. It was a magnificent idea of Edith's: the fresh, healthy furniture of the Show House danced before his eyes: it beckoned and sang to him. He stopped abruptly, sat down beside Edith and lay a hand upon her arm.

" Listen, dear ! Even if we buy everything new we shall never need *all* that money. We'll sell all this: it's good sound stuff and some people like old furniture. We might get enough to buy everything new without touching your money at all ! "

" We might," said Edith, looking at the brown stain behind the mirror.

" But it's magnificent to have that money in reserve !

—it makes it all possible"—his hand closed tightly upon her arm—"it's wonderful, Edie, isn't it?"

He looked up at the clock and then at his watch. He got up and went on apologetically—like a small boy who expects a scolding.

"You know Martins—the furniture shop at the corner of Edgware Road? There's a light in the window all night. I'll—I'll just pop down and see if I can get an idea of prices—it'll be interesting."

"Why not let's go together in the morning?"

"To-morrow's Sunday."

"But we could look in the window."

"It won't take half an hour. You go up to bed, dear. I'll come up and tell you directly I get back."

He was gone for more than half an hour. When he came up to the bedroom he explained that he had gone for a walk round to have a good think. He sat on the foot of the bed, fingering one of the loose brass knobs.

"Edie—there's a lovely bedroom suite—the whole thing—bed—dressing-table—everything—guess?"

She had not the slightest idea without seeing it, but made a most fortunate attempt:

"Twenty pounds?"

"Eighteen pound fifteen shillings!" he said triumphantly. "We'll do it, Edie!—we'll do it easily—the whole thing!"

Edith laughed and hitched herself up a little stiffly in bed.

"Tom—I meant to have a hot bath and get rid of this stiffness—and I forgot all about it!"

He threw up his head and laughed so loudly that she had to remind him that Ada was asleep upstairs.

" What about Ada ? " he said, " shall we take her ? I suppose we must." Then he bent forward and said in a low, impressive voice:

" In the new house you are going to have a hot bath every night and no wretched wheezing old geyser to wait for ! "

He got up. " I've just got to work out a few more figures downstairs."

" Don't stay up too late. It's been a tiring day."

" No—only half an hour."

She heard him run downstairs. She heard the dining-room door close and a chair being drawn up to the table.

CHAPTER XI

EDITH woke to the thud of a fog signal and cold rims to her nostrils. The first white frost of the winter was upon them, and it brought back to her the first days of her husband's retirement a year ago.

He was still heavily asleep beside her. He had come up far later than he had promised, and it must have been past midnight when she half awakened to hear him stealthily undressing in the dark.

He had risen on his first morning of retirement with such brave hopes for his new life and the fine things it promised him: in a little while he would be rising to meet the new hope that had come to take the place of what had so painfully and pitifully died.

She lay watching the faint, slow trail of mist creep through the curtains and she felt the muffled stillness of the fog-bound Sunday morning. Would this new endeavour fade out as the past one had? Would they wake to the first fog signals of next year's winter in this bedroom, a little more worn and shabby, themselves a little more tired? There was a man and his wife whom they had once known and extracted secret amusement from: they were people who always had some wonderful plan in mind, who were always on the verge of doing something remarkable but never quite did it. One really never knew oneself: perhaps she and Tom were like that without

realising it. It had all sounded so easy and magnificent last night, but it was a little too easy and magnificent to believe in the cold light of a frosty, fog-bound morning.

She prepared herself with all her philosophy to meet her husband's awakening. She could picture him turning over and looking at her with dull, shamed eyes—and saying—"Edie, I thought it all over last night—and I don't *think* we can do it. You see, dear . . ."

She did not want him to wake until he had slept his fill. She decided to go down and tell Ada to hold up breakfast for half an hour, but when she moved to get out of bed she let out such a gasp of surprise and pain that Tom turned over and opened his eyes.

He was a slow waker, and for a little while he stared at her. She was sitting bolt upright in bed as if she had seen a ghost.

"What's the matter ? " he asked.

She gave an uneasy laugh.

"What is it, Edie ? "

"I don't know—I can't move. My—my back and legs—they're_____"

"Poor old Edie !—it was that walk." He raised himself and cried out: "Ooh !—mine're the same."

It was a huge relief: for a moment she had had visions of crippling rheumatism.

"My legs . . . they're like bits of board."

"Bound to be after a walk like that. You ought to have had that hot bath last night. I tell you what. I'll go and turn on the geyser and tell Ada we'll have breakfast in bed."

Edith protested. "Ada with a tray on those stairs ? "

"Do her good," said Mr. Baldwin lightly. He climbed

gingerly out of bed and put on his slippers and dressing-gown. He paused at the door and said:

" I'm glad we're feeling stiff, Edie. It shows we didn't dream what happened yesterday."

" You're still keen ? "

" Keen ? Don't be silly ! "

She heard the husky pop of the geyser and lay back thoughtfully in bed: she knew that she ought to be relieved and delighted at his buoyant mood—but the very ease and casualness of his confidence disturbed her a little: she would have felt happier if he had awakened with some tough problem to grapple with but he seemed to have swept all problems aside. She wished with all her heart that she could feel as he did—but to her it was still too easy—too magnificent to be free from hidden danger.

He returned with the Sunday paper and climbed back into bed more easily than he got out.

" Healthy stiffness soon wears off," he said. " We'll have an easy morning and get down to things in the afternoon."

" What did Ada say ? "

Mr. Baldwin laughed. " Not much. Too surprised. We've got bigger things to face than Ada now." He began to turn the paper and suddenly sat up in excitement.

" Look here !—a whole page advertising new Estates ! Funny we've never noticed this before."

Edith had vaguely glanced at the Estate page on many a Sunday morning and passed it by without a thought. It was now as fascinating as in the past it had been dull. The broad page was filled with announcements of different shapes and sizes: Estates jostled each other and pushed their attractions eagerly and frantically before the reader's eye. The Meadow Hall Estate was exquisitely

situated in a centuries old garden: the Pitberry Hill Estate offered a glorious view over three of nature's most favoured Counties: the Chawley Down Estate invited one to enjoy a breeze that blew one's cares away: a lovely reach of the noble Thames was at one's feet for 18s. yd. weekly : "£10 down and no legal charges" : £5 secured possession of a home to be proud of. Houses at £699 sounded suspiciously more expensive than those at £700 : there were solitary aristocrats standing amidst pines at £1,875, but nothing, in the final opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin, to rival the Show House in Welden Valley.

It was good to have before them every kind of alternative and slowly whittle them away until their valley remained supreme. The banks of the Thames meant dampness and fog—the Downs would rattle windows too boisterously and keep one awake: a house in a centuries old garden offered no crisp virgin soil to break and tame. " It's all right,' he said, " all these are nice—but there's nothing quite so good." He lay the paper down and gazed at the ceiling with his hands behind his head.

When Edith returned from her bath the breakfast tray lay on the bed and Mr. Baldwin was industriously at work with a writing pad.

" Young Mr. Morrison's going to have a pleasant surprise in the morning," he said.

" Who's Mr. Morrison ? "

He began to tease her. " Ronald Morrison *I—you* know Mr. Ronald Morrison ! "

" I've never heard of him," said Edith.

" But you said you liked him ? "

" What are you talking about ? " she began, and then she said, " Oh ! " and laughed. He was holding up a card which she recognised as the one their young friend in the valley had given them the night before. " Oh—is that his name ? Ronald Morrison ? " She took the card and read with interest:

MR. RONALD MORRISON

Welden Valley Estate,
Welden,
Middlesex.

Phone: Welden 801.

" How does this sound ? " said Mr. Baldwin. He picked up the sheet of paper and began to read:

" DEAR MR. MORRISON,—When we met you yesterday we had no intention whatever of buying a new house. Thanks, however, to the interesting manner in which you explained your Estate, we are persuaded that, subject to the satisfactory arrangement of terms, we should like you to build us a nice house somewhat after the style of the one you showed us.

" We are free on Wednesday afternoon and shall be pleased to meet you upon the Estate at 3 p.m. to discuss the matter further."

" Yours sincerely, etc. . . "

" That's awfully nice," said Edith.

" No harm in giving the boy a lift up. He'll naturally show it to his boss and it ought to do him a lot of good. Some people would write a formal business letter direct to the Estate, but it's the personal touch I like. You'll find that boy'll be useful to us over lots of little things."³

" Can't you picture his face when he reads it ! " said Edith, as she carefully sat up and poured out the tea. " His hair'll flop over his face and he'll probably start singing."

" He'll probably get married on the strength of it."

" I hope he does," said Edith. " Mind how you eat that egg ! "

They stayed in bed for an hour after breakfast and calculated how much they would get for the bedroom furniture. They agreed it conservatively at £15, although Mr. Baldwin thought the tallboy in the corner, which came from his father's house in Colchester, was probably an antique and might fetch almost anything. " You never know," he said.

A shroud of steel grey, motionless fog wrapped Brondesbury Terrace when they drew the curtains. Towards midday the sun appeared: a flavourless pink ball that groped for an hour then packed up in despair and moved on to more responsive lands. But the weather mattered little to the Baldwins now. After lunch they went all over the house making an inventory of the furniture and placing estimated values against everything. It reached the satisfactory figure of £400.

" If all goes well," said Mr. Baldwin, " we shall scarcely have to touch those Debentures of yours."

They had both secretly feared that the old house might hold a subtle power to shame their light-hearted plans. Once or twice, as they went from room to room, some little, unexpected thing would stir a memory and arouse a pang, but as the day drew on the old place slowly

released its feeble grip and by the evening it scarcely seemed their home any longer. As they drew the curtains and turned on the lamp they felt as if they were settled for a night's lodging in some old Harbour-side hotel: that a ship nearby was waiting for the morning, when it would take them aboard and sail for mystic far-off lands.

Mr. Baldwin made a fair copy of his letter to the young man of Welden Valley and went down to catch the early evening post to ensure its delivery in the morning. He added a short postscript:

" P.S. Perhaps you would see if you can arrange a piece of land for us that includes one of the big elm trees that are such a pleasant feature of Welden Valley."

" To-morrow morning we start in earnest," he said when he got back. " First of all we must go to an Estate Agent about selling this house." He threw himself into an armchair by the fire.

" By Jove ! I'm stiffer than I thought ! "

" We oughtn't to have walked so far," said Edith.

Mr. Baldwin sat up and stared at her across the fire.

" Supposing we hadn't !—supposing we'd turned back before we got to the crest of that hill ?—and had never seen the valley—and those houses ?—I wonder .. ."

" I wonder," murmured Edith.

CHAPTER XII

THE OFFICES of Timbrell & Dove, Auctioneers and Estate Agents, were situated in Station Approach. Mr. Baldwin had passed the place thousands of times on his way to catch his train, but nothing until now had given him reason to go inside. His first view of the interior was a little disappointing: he had pictured a spacious office buzzing with officials managing Estates and people buying and selling houses: he discovered a small dingy room: half office, half shop, and nobody to be seen.

But voices came from an inner room, and presently a pale, weedy young man appeared and looked at Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin in surprise. He had a boil on the back of his neck which made it look as if he were peering over the top of a pair of invisible spectacles. It was obvious at a glance that he was neither Timbrell nor Dove.

"Yes, sir?"

Mr. Baldwin approached the counter. "We want to sell a house," he announced.

The flutter he had expected failed to materialise: whatever interest the youth had shown immediately disappeared. He picked up a grubby looking piece of paper, handed it to Mr. Baldwin, nodded stiffly towards a rickety little table in a corner and said:

"Fill in this form, please."

Mr. Baldwin was so surprised that he felt it was up to

him to do something unexpected, but as nothing occurred to him he took the form and sat down. It was an insult to his house and an insult to him to have the matter treated as if he were registering for a housemaid. What he had expected he could not, perhaps, explain: vaguely he had hoped to find kindred spirits in this office who would enter into his own enthusiasm about it all: keen business men who would jump at the prospect of selling a sound, well built house so near the station, shops and Park, who would applaud the bold step that he and his wife were taking. Their visit to the Estate Agent was the first move into the open: Sunday had been packed with secret discussions: they had worked until midnight in a fever heat of suppressed excitement, and it was depressing that the first outside person to know about it should be an insipid young man with a boil on his neck.

It occurred to Mr. Baldwin that he should have asked at once to see one of the partners, but that was too late now. He drew the form towards him and picked up the pen he was expected to use. The nib was so bloated with clotted ink that it looked more like a prune than a writing instrument. He drew out his fountain pen and began:

Address of Property:	Grasmere, 14 Brondesbury Terrace.
Freehold or Leasehold:	Freehold.
Sitting Rooms:	2
Bedrooms:	4
Bathroom:	Yes.
Garage:	No.
Telephone:	No.

It was a little disturbing to sit at this drab rickety table and fill in poor old " Grasmere's " death warrant: he had an uncomfortable feeling that he was playing the old house a dirty trick behind its back. It was waiting for them to return, patiently and trustingly, like an old, devoted dog that they were planning to have destroyed.

The form itself was so unattractive that " Grasmere " seemed to shrivel up and decay as he filled up the bare, commonplace particulars. "Sitting rooms: 2" was a travesty of fact: he wanted to add: " large folding doors between drawing- and dining-room opening upon wrought-iron balcony and steps to spacious garden," but something told him that it would mean nothing to the dreary minds of Timbrell & Dove. He left blank the space after " Price demanded " because it looked like a trap. He rose and pushed the form across to the waiting clerk, who glanced at it, blotted it and disappeared with it into the back room.

Mr. Baldwin winked at Edith to show that he was feeling all right about everything: but inwardly he had never felt less like winking. Until this moment he had not doubted that a ready and eager purchaser would appear. The difficulty had not been connected with the selling: it had been in the mustering of courage to burn their boats and sell. They had done that triumphantly: they had left home upon the wings of adventure, determined not to hesitate or falter, and now something in this drab, cheerless office had made him feel horribly different about it all. Supposing nobody would buy " Grasmere ? "—that would mean . . . he dared not face what it would mean. . . . As he stood waiting, he watched the heads of passers-by. They did not glance at the office: none of

them looked as if they would dream of buying "Grasmere." . . .

"Would you come through, please?"

The clerk was standing at the inner door. Mr. Baldwin made way for Edith with an encouraging smile, but a heavy, anxious heart.

"Good morning!" said a fat man with a large tobacco stained moustache. "Sit down, madam. Sit down, sir."

It was a small office, smothered, like the rest of the place with large, flimsy notices. How it would burn, thought Edith.

The fat man sat down at his desk and pushed aside some papers to make room for Mr. Baldwin's form.

"'Grasmere'—Brondesbury Terrace," he read. (He might, thought Mr. Baldwin, have added: "Of course—I know the house.")

"We are moving into the country," said Mr. Baldwin.

The Estate Agent looked up in sudden interest.

"The country? Have you decided upon the district? We represent several very charming new Estates—no doubt we . . ."

"That's all decided," said Mr. Baldwin, somewhat irritated, and he noticed a distinct cooling off in the fat man's interest.

"Quite. I only mentioned it because we have special facilities for purchase, etc. When—er—do you wish to move?"

"Not until our new house is ready, of course."

"Is it near completion?"

"It isn't started yet."

"Oh. That means at least six months. It'll give us more chance of doing something with this."

He raised the form containing the particulars of "Grasmere" as though it were contaminated.

"I'm afraid there's not much demand for houses in Brondesbury Terrace."

"No demand!" exclaimed Mr. Baldwin—"there hasn't been a house for sale there all this year!"

The Estate Agent looked at him with a weary smile.

"Quite. But you know, some people object to notices being stuck up."

Mr. Baldwin felt cold, and slightly sick. The egg he had eaten so hastily for breakfast in his hurry to call at this dreary place had formed into a hard lump in his stomach. "Some people object to notices being stuck up,"—that meant presumably that everybody in Brondesbury Terrace was secretly and hopelessly trying to sell their house.

The man had a genius for stirring up annoyance: he sat back, stuck his thumbs into his waistcoat and said: "Basement?"

"All the houses round here have got basements," snapped Mr. Baldwin.

"That's the trouble," replied the fat man. "Basements are the curse of our business." He peered at the form and added: "No garage, I see."

"'Grasmere's' near the station—five minutes from the shops and Park—it's ..."

"Oh, I know—but, you see—it's the wrong *side* of the station: it's not a district people are looking for in these days."

Mr. Baldwin curtly rose and Edith looked up in surprise. His face was pinched and pale, and his hand was quivering as he reached for his hat. He was staring over

the Estate Agent's head—through the bleak uncurtained window that faced the Railway. But there was a halting dignity about the way he said:

" You mean you would prefer not to act as our agent ? "

This time the man behind the desk looked surprised. There was a little note of respect when he answered.

" Not at all, sir ! I shall be delighted to act for you. Only you know, sir—I find my clients frequently think it's easier to sell than to—er——"

" Buy ? " enquired Mr. Baldwin.

The man laughed. " You've got it, sir ! "

" Of course I realise there's not a queue of people waiting outside to buy my house."

The Estate Agent laughed again. He pulled out a tarnished case, straightened the cigarettes in it with a fat, stained finger and offered it to Mr. Baldwin.

" I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, sir. I don't often fail to sell when I get busy on a house. I only wanted you not to expect anything too—er—exceptional. Let me come up and see it. Will you be in at"—(he opened an appointment book and quickly covered the blank page with his hand)—" three o'clock? Very good, sir."

" And, by the way," said Mr. Baldwin at the door—" we intend to sell *all* our present furniture and buy everything completely new for our new house. I shall want to auction it."

" Certainly, sir. Thank you. My partner Mr. Dove attends to valuations: he's away to-day, but I'll ask him to make an inventory. Good morning, sir. Good morning, madam. Three o'clock, then."

" I didn't like him at first," said Mr. Baldwin.

" I don't like him much now," replied Edith. She had not said a word during the interview, but she had seen a good deal. " I think we might do better, Tom. There's a much nicer looking place in the High Street."

" Give him a trial," said Mr. Baldwin. " After all, he's on the spot. He'll give us more personal attention than you'd get from a big place."

They turned into Brondesbury Terrace and walked down towards their house. Both were wondering, as they returned, whether half-burned boats could ever be patched and launched again if the worst came to the worst.

Mr. Timbrell turned up promptly at three o'clock and seemed much more interested in the furniture than the house. He took the house in at a glance—as much as to say—" I know the type "—but he spent a long time in the drawing-room examining the furniture and china in the bureau.

Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin showed him everything: pointing out good features and stressing the fact that a good deal came from old country houses. " Yes," said the Estate Agent—then " Yes," again. He looked thoughtful and interested, and Mr. Baldwin's spirits began to rise. It looked as if the man had spotted something really good. " You're going to sell *everything* ? "

" Everything," chorused Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin.

Mr. Timbrell nodded approval. " It's an original idea: an excellent one if you ask me. You ought to see the old junk some people cart about with them."

The last remark detracted a little from the first. There was an unpleasant flavour about " old junk " that Mr. Baldwin did not like.

" Now, sir ! " said Mr. Timbrell, drawing up a chair to the table. It *would* be the one with the split leather, thought Edith, and the man would naturally put his fingers into the grey, dirty-looking stuffing.

" Now, sir. The house. We ought to agree upon a limit price. You can depend upon me to get the highest figure, of course, but we must fix a limit."

Mr. Baldwin's heart began to thump. The time for pleasant speculation was over and they were to face hard facts at last.

" I paid £750 in 1913 and I've made a good many improvements since then, of course." He kept his eyes from the ceiling, where above the electric light bowl lay the brown tinge from the gas-lit days. " I imagine all property has risen in value a good deal since 1913. It's freehold, of course, and not mortgaged in any way."

" Quite," said the Agent. He sat silent for a while, drumming the table with his fingers. A greasy bowler hat lay beside him and his open overcoat hung almost to the floor. Mr. Baldwin watched him steadily, and suddenly remembered another point.

" I'm certain there's never anything empty in this road: people never seem to go."

Mr. Timbrell glanced up quickly. " Quite. I know—but—but you see, they're mostly the kind of people who—who stay—if you know what I mean——"

" Because it's a good neighbourhood," suggested Mr. Baldwin with a smile.

" I didn't mean it like that," put in the Estate Agent.

"Don't think I'm trying to run the house down: it's sound enough—but it's old fashioned: that basement kitchen, you know——"

" Our servant never complains," said Edith—but Mr. Timbrell appeared not to hear.

" It's a wrong impression to believe that house property of this kind has risen in value—the trouble is that such a lot of new houses are going up nowadays and people naturally go for modern places."

Mr. Baldwin felt his irritation rising again. They had been through all this once.

" Well," he said, " what price are we going to fix ? "

Mr. Timbrell drummed with his fingers again.

" We shall be very lucky if we get the price you paid."

" The—the price—I paid ? . . . £750 ? "

The man nodded, and there was a grim finality in his nod.

" But, my dear sir, you're—you're not serious ? I paid £750 before the war—when a sovereign was made of gold. I consider it worth at least £900 now."

" But, think, Mr. Baldwin—why *should* we get more ? You've had years of wear and tear out of the place ! You wouldn't expect to sell a suit of clothes for the price you gave for it, would you ? "

" That's different."

" Wear and tear's the same with everything, though: there's a going out of fashion. I assure you, Mr. Baldwin, I've been an Estate Agent for twenty-five years. . . ."

Mr. Baldwin glanced up. His eagerness had gone: he looked tired and listless.

" We—we must consider it," he said in a low voice.

" We—we didn't realise_____ "

At the door he remembered something that had been tremendously important a little while ago.

"The furniture ?—what would you think we ought to—er...?"

" I'd put it round about £90," said the Estate Agent, " but I'll send Mr. Dove to make an inventory. Then you'll let me know, sir ? Good day. Good day, madam."

That evening Mr. Baldwin drew up a little statement, and Edith and he sat looking at it in silence for a long time.

DEBIT	£	s.d.	CREDIT	£	s. d.
New house	M75	0 0	Old house	750	0 0
Additional			Sale of furniture	90	0 0
Fittings, say	50	0 0	In Bank	200	0 0
New Furniture	400	0 0	Post Office	18	15 0
Extras unpro-			Edith's Deben-		
vided for, say	25	0 0	tures	400	0 0
	£1,650	0 0		£1,458	15 0

CHAPTER XIII

A HOUSE proudly valued at £1,000 battered by an expert to £750 : its furniture carefully calculated to £400 shrunk to a fantastic £90: every penny of the reserve Debentures swallowed up and a crushing debt of £200 remaining with no earthly prospect of repayment.

Mr. Baldwin lay in bed, weary and heavy eyed from a sleepless night, wrapped in the misery of his return from a fool's paradise. A move to Welden Valley would carry the torments of financial suicide that none but a lunatic would bring upon himself. He should have known from the beginning that it was too good and easy looking to be true: that the beaten track, with all its dullness, remained the only secure path for the man no longer young. He should have known the ominous reason for the lack of footprints upon tall green grass and glistening, undrying sands. If it were easy to slip out of one's threadbare envelope of existence then every dreary road within call of London would be a desert of empty houses.

A year ago he had thought that he alone of all the thousands who retired had found the secret door to a new life: he had wondered why others had never used it, and as the months passed he had found out why. It needed younger, stronger arms than those of a man of sixty to lift the latch. And now—a year later, when another door had revealed itself and enticed him to its entrance, a single day had proved it too narrow for the

lorry load of cares that follow a man in middle age.

The crushing little statement of figures, with a pencil beside it, lay on the bedside table. He had brought it to bed with him in the fruitless hope that some revelation might come in the night. He picked it up and lay staring at it in the curtained dimness of the autumn morning; he added it up again and put it aside. Forty years in a profession that glutted itself upon caution had taught him one thing at least: that figures, to be properly digested, must be taken cold and raw. He was a fool who tried to boil them into different shape and dry them before a radiant imagination. As he had climbed into bed at the end of the dreary Monday of disillusionment, Edith had turned with a wan smile and said: "Whatever happens—nobody can say we haven't tried."

He heard the gate squeak, and the heavy clump of the postman up the steps. It should have set his heart thudding with anticipation but it meant nothing now.

Two letters came up when Ada brought the morning tea: both bore Wcldcn postmarks—one was addressed in typescript, the other on private paper in a round, schoolboyish hand.

WELDEN VALLEY ESTATES LTD.

<i>Directors.</i>	Welden,
W. N. Turnbull.	Middlesex.,
R. Sovretti.	24th October, 1924.
T. S. Sotherby.	

" DEAR SIR,—We beg to acknowledge with thanks receipt of your letter of the 22nd inst., addressed to our Mr. Morrison.

" We are very pleased to learn of your desire to have us build you a house on our new Estate. One or two very delightful positions remain available and our Manager, Mr. Watkinson, will meet you at our Estate Office on Wednesday afternoon at 3 p.m.

" A car will be waiting for you at Welden Station and a convenient train is that arriving at 2.48 p.m."

The other, in the round, boyish hand:

" DEAR MR. BALDWIN,—I don't suppose it's the proper thing to write like this, but I really must tell you how grateful and delighted I was to get your charming letter. You can't think what it means to me. It's my first big success, and. . . ."

Mr. Baldwin lowered the letter to the crumpled counterpane. He could not read the rest, for a hot, smarting mist had filled his eyes. Poor boy—his first big success—his first big disillusionment. Fools that they were to have written and sent those youthful hopes bounding before they had made certain that the move could be made. What could he write in reply?—altered plans?—a weak lie about postponement? Whatever he wrote and whatever he did the boy would remember him as one of the type that fed a cheap vanity upon deference extracted by big talk and false promises.

He picked up the typewritten letter and glanced at it again: " one or two delightful positions are still available." Through the mist he saw the span of meadowland: turf rolled up and set aside: the outline of a house drawn in broad strips of naked soil: walls rising: window-frames settling in place: dark tiles and chimneys and the first

shy wisp of smoke. Welden Valley would spring to life and soften to maturity and they would not be there.

Edith was sipping her tea. She had seen the letters but had not asked to read them. But to her at least an idea had come during the night:

" Tom. What about all the money you've paid into the Life Insurance ? Couldn't you borrow that ? "

He shook his head. If anything were to happen to him there would be just enough from the insurance, together with her widow's pension, to keep her from need.

" No, Edie. We can't touch that."

But even as he spoke an inspiration jerked him up in bed.

He often wondered afterwards why the idea had not come to him before: why he should have spent a day of misery with the way out staring him clearly in the face. Probably because the word " mortgage " was a funereal way of saying " loan," because a loan meant financial failure—moral collapse and every other disturbing thing that his laborious but honourable creed had stiffly turned its back upon. When he had left home to come to London his father had given him a piece of valuable advice: " Never borrow—and never lend."

It was particularly good advice in Mr. Baldwin's case, because while he had never had any cause to borrow, men in the office had frequently invited him to lend.

But he had no false ideas about these things: to live within one's income without a call upon one's self-restraint was nothing to be proud of. It showed, on the contrary, an anaemic grip of life. All the really attractive and vigorous men he had known were chronically in want of money and usually in debt and he admired them because

their embarrassment came from vigour, imagination and a fierce desire for the things that money could buy.

He admired them because they showed contempt for the things he feared: moneylenders—sleepless nights and the losing of his job. To raise a mortgage upon his house to cover overspending in other directions would have been in his eyes the first step to a midnight seat on the Thames Embankment. But several old shibboleths had gone overboard in this memorable week-end and suddenly the one about mortgagers went over with a smooth slip and scarcely a struggle. It was no longer an ominous word of failure. To raise a mortgage of £200 upon a house worth £400 more than "Grasmere" was a step forward rather than a step back and the word took upon itself a sweet sounding note of honourable rescue: a march from a fallen city with flying flags and undelivered swords. He swallowed a mouthful of tea and said to Edith:

"What would you think if I were to say that whatever we have to do—whatever the risks we have to take—we shall have that house in Welden Valley?"

Two round eyes looked at him over the tea cup: the sip that Edith was on the point of taking was indefinitely postponed, and in fact never taken. Half an hour later Ada discovered a half cup of cold, forgotten tea upon the dressing-table.

"I'd say," said Edith, "that whatever it means—whatever we have to do—even if I have to go out and do dressmaking—I'm with you, Tom."

He felt quite moved and had to recover himself before he began to explain.

"You see, dear, a mortgage doesn't mean you've really *borrowed* money. It simply means we exchange a

small part of the house for what we need to pay for it."

Edith did not quite understand—nor did Mr. Baldwin, exactly—and he tried to make it clearer.

" If you were to borrow money and spend it on a holiday that you can't afford—then that's a different thing altogether, because you've spent the holiday *and* the money. All we do is to sell a house worth £750 and get one worth £1,175—we are £425 better off but £200 worth of the new house still belongs to the Estate. We are £225 to the good, you see. The little piece of the house that belongs to the Estate is always *there*; we haven't spent it and we gradually pay it back until one day the whole house is ours. We pay £10 a year interest, but we save that by growing our own vegetables. We'll easily do it, Edie. We shan't want to spend much on ourselves in the new house because it'll be so fine just to live in and work in. So it's all right, Edie—it's absolutely all right after all !"

And Edith, in her joy, did an embarrassing thing. She pressed his hand, quickly kissed him, and said: " Bravo ! " She used to do things like that when she was young, and it had always made him feel a bit awkward. It made him wriggle somewhat hastily out of bed, but he was too happy to feel irritated. He understood how Edith was feeling: he could have run all over the house shouting, " Bravo ! " himself, at the top of his voice. The dark clouds of failure that had closed upon them the previous evening had lifted now without possibility of return, and their lifting had set the fires of excitement blazing more fiercely than ever before. They knew the worst and they knew that the worst could not stop them: if " Grasmere " only sold for £600 instead of £750, they could still go on: it would only mean an extra £150 mortgage—£7 10*s.* *od.* a year

in extra interest. Edith had inspired him more than she knew when she had said that about doing dressmaking : he would do anything : go out gardening—address envelopes at a thousand a shilling—anything would be joy with the house in Welden Valley.

Plans they had made for the day and sadly set aside, sprang to life again: they had arranged to go to London, to call at the Bank and arrange about Edith's Debentures, and spend the afternoon at a big furniture store in the West End. In the course of a hurried shave Mr. Baldwin decided that while he was in the City he would pay a visit to the old office. He had not been near the office since his retirement: he had shrunk from joining the ranks of the decrepit old dodderers who went in to waste the time and patience of the active staff. But he could go with a purpose now, and chuckled at the surprise he would give them all. . . .

They called at the Estate Office on their way to the station and told Mr. Timbrell to go ahead as quickly as possible with the sale of " Grasmere." Mr. Timbrell looked as if he had not expected to see the Baldwins again and was both pleased and surprised to receive such prompt instructions. He promised to get busy at once and the Baldwins said they had no objection whatever to a " FOR SALE " board being put up in their front garden.

Mr. Timbrell introduced them to Mr. Dove, his partner, who was to value their furniture for the auction. Mr. Dove was inclined to be patronising, and after

reference to his engagement book, informed them that he would call at three o'clock that afternoon.

But Mr. Baldwin shook his head.

"I'm sorry—we're absolutely full up all day—we haven't a moment."

Mr. Dove began suggesting Wednesday.

"I'm afraid Wednesday's no good either. We've got an important engagement in the country."

It was clear that he was building up a good impression, and after a discussion, Saturday morning at ten o'clock was settled.

It was pleasant to walk the old City streets again: to breathe that old familiar smell of wine vaults and stability: to cross at old familiar places with Edith on his arm. The Bank Manager was polite but obviously surprised: he was very pleased to meet a lady whose Debentures he had protected for so many years. They were no longer called "London Chatham and Dover Debentures," owing to the big Railway Merger, but they were just as good—if not better. Yes, certainly: they could be sold at any time. He consulted the *Financial Times* and stated that the Debentures stood slightly over par, at $102\frac{3}{8}$. That meant that after deducting brokerage they would receive a clear £400, and as Mr. Baldwin heard this he gave a sigh of relief. The tide had turned at last: at last something was worth what they had estimated. It was arranged that the sale should be effected when the money was needed in the spring: the Manager personally accompanied them to the door and they were able to bask for an extra half minute in the flattering deference paid to Capitalists.

" Now," said Mr. Baldwin, as they stood outside, " we'll look in at the old office."

He stepped out confidently, but an overpowering shyness crept over him as he approached the familiar doors. It was going to be a big ordeal to walk in after such a long, unexplained absence. He had promised to look them up quite frequently and his failure to appear must have caused some speculation amongst his old friends. Had he broken up ?—he was just the kind that would: the eyes of the whole staff would be upon him: upon his face, upon his clothes, upon Edith. It was not like entering a drawing-room and being at once surrounded: the staff, during office hours, would have to remain more or less in their places, and it would mean long distant, embarrassed smiles and nods to most of them across the tops of desks and around brass railings and stone columns. His courage almost failed, and he was on the point of turning aside when Henslip the old Messenger, in his seedy top hat and brass-buttoned tail coat appeared, approaching the door from the other direction. Mr. Baldwin joyfully hurried forward and called out to the Messenger as he was about to go in.

" Hi, there ! Henslip !—how are you ? "

It took the Messenger a moment or two to realise w^ho it was, then a broad smile and a firm handshake broke the ice.

" Why, if it isn't Mr. Baldwin !—You're a nice one, sir ! You promised to come in and see us months ago."

" I know. I've been so terribly busy—haven't had a moment—but here I am, and this is my wife."

" You're looking five years younger than when you left, sir!"

" And I feel ten years younger," beamed Mr. Baldwin in reply. " I want to see Mr. Wilson. Take me in, Henslip. I'm feeling shy ! "

His entrance was impressive, beyond all his expectations : he made his way down the broad marble flagged aisle in earnest conversation with Henslip, glancing up now and then to wave friendly but brief acknowledgment to his old friends. He caught sight of several new, boyish faces as he went along, but in all other respects everything was absurdly the same—except, perhaps, the little glassed-in cubicle where he had spent his last years of active service. That somehow looked remote and strange.

Wilson, the Manager, looked absurdly the same, too. He might easily have just sat down after delivering his speech and handing Mr. Baldwin the clock. Mr. Baldwin half expected to see the shavings from the parcel still lying on the desk.

" Well, this *is* a surprise ! We thought we were never going to see you again ! How do you do, Mrs. Baldwin. Sit down."

He produced a box of cigarettes, and Mr. Baldwin felt agreeably surprised and happy. He realised what a very wise thing it was to be elusive, and to make rare appearances.

" You're looking extremely well, Baldwin."

" I feel it."

" Enjoying yourself? "

" I'm enjoying every minute of it. There's so much to do, you see. And now we're just going to start building a new house in the country. You can realise what that means: new furniture—new everything."

He had meant to keep this back for a bit, but he could

not resist firing off all his artillery at once. Wilson, a younger man, had passed over his head to the Managership and had never been able to conceal a little touch of tolerance that Mr. Baldwin had resented. It was a pleasant experience to sit back balancing his hat on his umbrella handle, puffing Wilson's cigarette and telling him about his new house. " We're off to Harrod's this afternoon to see about furnishing."

Wilson looked at him incredulously.

" Why—have you—have you had some luck, or something ? "

Mr. Baldwin enjoyed a silent chuckle and shot a furtive wink at Edith. How true to type this fellow was ! He took it for granted that a retired Insurance Clerk should potter out the rest of his days in obscurity, thinking in humble little ways, doing humble little things—clutching his little pension in humble gratitude and warming his toes gratefully beside his humble little fire.

" Luck ? " he said. " No. No special luck. We just happen to be tired of the old house, so we're selling it and buying a new one, that's all. We're tired of our old furniture, so we're selling that, too, and buying new, modern stuff. We're going to rather a delightful spot in Welden Valley, beyond Stanmore. After all, the whole point of retiring is to get out of the rut and start afresh, isn't it?"

Mr. Wilson gave it up. It beat him. Baldwin of all people. He shifted a little in his chair, for he was feeling vaguely irritated. Baldwin's eyes were upon him with a clear, amused steadiness: Baldwin reached forward and casually flicked his cigarette ash into the wastepaper basket. He was behaving like an important client

when he should behave diffidently and gratefully like the retired clerk he was. He ought to be sitting with awkward embarrassment, not knowing what to do with the long grey ash on his cigarette and dreading lest it fell on the Managerial carpet until he, the Manager, lightly pushed forward the ashtray on his desk to the accompaniment of grateful thanks. He felt irritated.

" I just came along to say I'd like to insure the new house in the old office: I'll drop a line and tell you when it's ready. It'll be for £1,175—probably £1,250 with fittings, and £400 on furniture."

" And a Rolls-Royce car ? " enquired Mr. Wilson with a hint of malice.

" Not yet," smiled Mr. Baldwin, " I'll try and get the new owner of ' Grasmere ' to keep the insurance of it in the old office, too."

" Splendid ! " said Mr. Wilson, without much conviction. He turned to Mrs. Baldwin with a gracious smile.

" I expect you're enjoying the excitement, Mrs. Baldwin ? "

" Very much, thank you," said Edith.

That was better. She was timid, in any case, she was a retired clerk's wife, even if the husband were a bit above himself. " I wish I could ask you to lunch with me, but I'm lunching with Mr. Addison Cotter, who's just back from America. You remember the Addison Cotter Estate, Baldwin ? "

Mr. Baldwin certainly did. An awe-inspiring list of properties that filled six ledger pages. He had a feeling that the Addison Cotter Estate had been fired at him in retaliation.

" Well," said the Manager, " come in and see us again.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well. Good-bye, Mrs. Baldwin."

Edith went out and sat on the leather seat beneath the window while Mr. Baldwin strolled round to shake a number of hands in the main office. She heard the words "Welden Valley" several times, and each time she heard it the sound of larks and the sigh of the wind seemed to rise above the dull roar of the City traffic. She heard someone say, "Are you going to keep a cow?" and she saw Tom join heartily in the laughter. How different he looked—what a miracle had been wrought in the past four days!—only four days! She had swelled with pride in the Manager's office. Tom looked ten years the younger of the two—bright eyed—healthy cheeked—keen and alert—nicely dressed—a country gentleman. The Manager had looked tired and dusty—there were dark shadows under his eyes and some grey, crumby-looking fallen hairs on his coat collar.

She was thinking of the wonderful change in her husband: she had no mirror to reveal how she, too, had changed. She only knew that never in her life, until this moment, had she felt the happiness and excitement that life was ready to give to those who did not fear its shadows and uncertainties.

It was chance rather than design that carried them home in the very train that Mr. Baldwin used to catch on his homeward journey in his office days, and chance that placed Mr. Baldwin in the same corner that had been his on the night when the clock in its parcel lay above his head. It was a queer, uncanny experience to

look round the crowded carriage and see once again the kind of people he had known so well—two girls deep in library books—an office lad with a paper backed thriller—men with pipes and newspapers—a youth with a text-book and a man with nothing to read but a whisky advertisement on the panel opposite him. The same atmosphere: the same rattle: the same electric signs. Mr. Baldwin sat thinking of his last journey; a year ago but as clear as yesterday. He thought with a sad wistfulness of the fantastic plans that had carried him home on the last evening of his working days—how futile and unsubstantial they had been; how splendidly real were the things that lay ahead this time.

He leant forward, touched Edith on the knee and whispered through the rattle of the train:

" To-morrow we go to Wcldcn Valley and pick our piece of land."

Edith leant back again, nodded several times, and smiled.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TREES were waving excited branches over the lane that led from Welden Village to the station: they tossed up little handfuls of russet leaves and bent over the road to watch them fall. They grew much too near the road, thought the chauffeur of a large saloon car. One day one of those enormous elms would lose its balance and turn a good car into scrap iron and a good chauffeur into pulp. They seemed to grow straight out of the farmyards, a mere yard or two from the low grey walls that girded the lane.

The chauffeur was a sensitive man, and each time a great gust boomed overhead he thought he could hear giant branches cracking, and ducked towards the driving wheel of his car. It sounded like the sea. An eddy of leaves smacked the window, chased each other round to the back of the car and followed like demented little boys.

A lovely day: a clean October sky: a clear cut landscape and a smell of wood smoke and pigs. It was certainly rural, this Welden Valley. For himself he preferred the Hampstead Estate that the Governor had just finished. You could see the whole of London from there and you could be in the heart of it in twenty minutes. Down here in Welden Valley you felt like a beetle in a basin.

There was time for a cigarette before the 2.48 arrived: he pulled up in the station yard and smoked inside the

car, for the wind outside gave him a headache and red eyelids.

It was quiet enough for anybody down here: a man breaking coal on a truck in a siding seemed to begin and complete the whole sum of human endeavour. A solitary porter appeared and gazed up the line as though somebody had told him a train was coming and he thought he was having his leg pulled.

Still, the Governor would wake things up a bit. Five hundred houses he talked about building—each in its own land and separated from the others, and when the Governor planned a thing he usually completed it. He glanced back at the sleepy village and wondered how it would take the strain. A funny man, the Governor: he really did seem to try and make his Estates worth living in: he gave up good bits of land simply to turn into green verges, and what he called "Closes."

He climbed out of the car, opened the windows to let the smoke out and stood by the barrier as the train came in. Doors crept furtively open and pale hands held them an inch apart until the brakes had squeaked into silence. Only about half a dozen people got out: a workman—a schoolgirl—a traveller with a bag of samples: the chauffeur's practised eye quickly singled out his quarry—he could not mistake them as they climbed out of the middle of the train. An alert, slightly built man of about fifty—looked like a solicitor—grey hair—jaunty tweed cap, grey flannel trousers and immaculate brown shoes. Plenty of money, decided the chauffeur. He carried a burberry and a stout walking-stick: obviously a town gentleman out for a country house: he had all the symptoms, even to the way he carried his burberry carelessly over one shoulder.

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The lady had lost something: she was fumbling hastily with her bag and umbrella: a plump, pleasant little lady with grey hair and a brown coat and skirt: she was searching the platform rather short-sightedly. The husband darted forward just in time to retrieve a small suede glove that was on the point of beginning a precarious journey to St. Albans on the footboard of the train.

The chauffeur saluted. " Mr. Baldwin, sir ? "

" Yes. That's right." ~

" I've come to drive you to the Estate, sir."

" This is business efficiency and no mistake ! " said Mr. Baldwin.

" It is indeed," murmured Edith.

She turned in her deep, bouncing leather seat, put her arm through the leather rest and peered up at the trees as they waved their boisterous welcome. " Isn't it lovely ! "

Mr. Baldwin was pretending as hard as possible that he was not entirely a stranger to luxurious Daimlers. He was also thinking, a little uneasily, that the Welden Valley Estates Ltd., must make quite a good profit out of their houses to afford this sort of thing.

" D'you realise," said Edith, " that this is the first time we've seen Welden Valley in broad daylight ? It's always been dark by the time we've had tea and come along here to the station."

" Yes. Funny, isn't it ? " Mr. Baldwin would have preferred the new Estate to have come upon them gradually in a leisurely walk from the station: he would have enjoyed drawing out this period of rare anticipation. He looked through the window at the village that was soon

to be their home—at an old brown church lying back amongst the trees, at a snug village street to stroll along in pipe-lit ease on summer nights—meadow-paths and wild flowers—a square of amber light in the valley beckoning him home. A little way ahead, hidden for the moment by the old houses of the main street, lay a green, unsuspecting square of land—unaware of those who were swiftly approaching it, who were soon to claim it and begin to tame its wild virgin heart. Mr. Baldwin lay back in the car and thought to himself, " This is a moment that'll never come again—hold it tight, and keep its memory."

They swung to the left in the centre of the village, up the lane that used to end in their footpath from Stanmore. But now, where the lane used to fade into the heathland, the new road began, and presently they were swaying slowly and gently along a broad ribbon of billowy clay.

The ride was over. They stopped beside a neat little Estate Office that might have been built from an expensive box of toy bricks.

" Here we are, sir," said the chauffeur, jumping down and opening the door. " Lovely day."

" Beautiful," said Mr. Baldwin, bumping his head on the roof of the car. " Thank you."

" The wind's dried everything up nicely," added the man as he took Mrs. Baldwin politely by the arm and helped her out.

The Baldwins had no precise idea of what the Manager of a select Building Estate should look like. If a large weather-beaten man in Scotch tweeds had appeared they would probably have said afterwards: "Exactly what we thought! "

But Mr. Watkinson was a surprise. They would not have come near him in a dozen guesses. He was short and square, with a smooth pink face and little polished red patches on his cheekbones: a bald, pear-shaped head and a little pointed beard—rather like Shakespeare. His dress seemed quite unsuitable to his profession, for he wore a large butterfly collar, a dark suit and pointed black shoes. But after all, thought Mr. Baldwin, he was a business man, and most of his time was probably spent at Board Meetings in luxurious offices that demanded pointed black shoes. He could not change each time he came to the Estate to meet a client.

He greeted them warmly but briskly, and conducted them through the outer room to his private office. Mr. Baldwin noticed interesting maps on the wall as he passed through: a girl at a typewriter, a few small fragments of up-to-date houses piled in a corner—a glazed brick, a door-knocker—an interesting looking bath tap. It all looked very busy and prosperous.

Mr. Watkinson wasted no time in coming to the point; he waved aside Mr. Baldwin's faltering explanation that they had not quite decided upon the exact house they needed.

"There's plenty of time to arrange that: you must have a quiet look at all these plans. What we must do first of all is to fix down a good position: you must have one of the best before they're all gone."

"Are they—going?" enquired Mr. Baldwin, pleased but a little anxious. He felt certain there would be a rush for the positions that had the big elms upon them.

"*Going!* We sold seven last week: twenty-nine this month: roughly one a day—and the demand's increasing.

I expected it would go quickly but I've never known anything like this ! " He sat back and threw out his hands to show how helpless he had been in stemming the rush, and Mr. Baldwin was very thankful they had not delayed.

Then he noticed that Mr. Watkinson was eyeing them both—keenly and thoughtfully. Mr. Baldwin began to wish he had not dressed so smartly, as it might give a wrong impression. On the other hand, he reflected, it might be all to the good if the man over-estimated them at first: he would give them more attention and show them the best. He probably handed shabby people to assistants who packed them away in the worst positions.

Then Mr. Watkinson suddenly appeared to make up his mind. He looked at Mr. Baldwin firmly and decisively and said: " You must build your house in Welden Close.⁵⁵

" Welden Close ? ⁵⁵ enquired Mr. Baldwin—guiltily, as though he ought to have known all about it.

For answer Mr. Watkinson briskly rolled out a plan, secured its corners with an inkpot and paperweight and pointed rather dramatically to a green square towards the top of the paper.

" Here/" he said.

" That looks quite nice,⁵¹ said Edith.

" It's the only place that will really satisfy you," answered Mr. Watkinson. " You see, first of all we have Bracklesham Avenue and Cymbeline Road—here. Well, that's very nice indeed for people prepared to live in an ordinary road, facing other houses, but the people I like are those who are *not* prepared to live in ordinary, formal roads, and for those people I have designed Welden

Close. This," he said, pointing to the green square, " will remain open for ever—a village green—a close—and the houses that are built round it will look out for all time upon a stretch of green turf with trees round it—upon gorse bushes—in fact, upon nature undisturbed."

Mr. Baldwin noticed that several of the positions round the Close were coloured in pink.

" Are they—er—gone ? "

Mr. Watkinson nodded. "I'm not showing Welden Close to everybody," he said. Then he looked at them keenly again and added slowly and deliberately: " but if you'll allow me to be very personal—you are the right kind of people."

It was certainly rather personal, and a little embarrassing, but Mr. Baldwin knew what he meant and appreciated the point all the more when Mr. Watkinson explained.

" Why do you join any Club ? Not because of its name—or its age—or its reputation, but because of the kind of people you see going in and coming out. The kind of people—that's the only thing that matters."

" Quite," said Mr. Baldwin.

" And I apply that test to my Estates. It may sound snobbish, but I'm a business man. The right kind of people attract *more* of the right kind of people. I apply that," he went on hastily, " to the *whole* Estate: to Welden Close I apply it in the highest degree—because," he whispered confidently, " because I intend to build a house and live in Welden Close myself! "

He gave them a slow, artful smile as he rolled up the plan, and the Baldwins laughed. It was beginning to sound a bit too buttery and flattering until he had added

that last very human remark. " Now then, come along and look for yourselves ! "

They walked with Mr. Watkinson along the churned clay road: it was quite obvious that all these positions had gone, for besides three houses that were finished, and the three nearing completion, there were piles of scaffolding and stacks of bricks on almost every vacant plot and men were busy cutting foundations on one.

There was a brisk tapping: a cheerful whistling: a steady vigorous hammering—men paused with bricks in their hands to look down at them over the edges of scaffolding and an old aproned carpenter peered over his steel-rimmed spectacles. The whole thing looked very-vigorous and successful.

" It's wonderful where all the people come from to buy these houses,⁵⁵ said Mr. Baldwin.

Mr. Watkinson smiled but did not answer: it seemed as if he had discovered a secret reservoir of homeless people somewhere and was not going to risk the chance of its whereabouts becoming known to his competitors. But Mr. Baldwin was very interested in this house-building mystery and felt that the Manager of an Estate was the man to solve it: he pursued the matter.

" It's not as though the population's increasing at this speed—or as if the older places were being left empty. Where *do* they come from ? "

But Mr. Watkinson was not to be drawn. He changed the subject by pointing down a broad road cut at right angles. " We shall develop these roads later on: we've got fifty acres altogether."

The road they were following faded into trampled grass : ahead lay an untouched sweep of heathland, spotted with

gorse bushes and clamped down with stout girthed oaks and elms.

Mr. Watkinson paused, blew his nose and blinked round with a dreaminess that contrasted strikingly with his brisk manner of a moment ago. Apparently the view before him conjured visions.

" There's nothing to see for the moment, of course—but you must picture the whole of this centre part as an old world village green—the grass cut and rolled—the bushes trimmed a little—the big trees just as they are. Now follow my finger—you see those white tapes ? They mark a road that will enclose the green. The houses will be fifty feet back from the road—each in its own grounds."

He paused, and permitted himself a moment's rapture. " Perhaps I ought not to say it, but this will be one of the loveliest features ever embodied in a modern Estate: three acres of valuable land sacrificed for the benefit of those who live around it."

Mr. Baldwin was overwhelmed by the grandeur and generosity of the scheme. The summit of his ambition had been just an ordinary house in this valley: a house in an ordinary road, looking across at other houses. But a home overlooking this lovely open space—a view from the back to the crest of the ridge—a long view to the front, between thorn trees and elms to a sunset that would linger behind the dark little embowered houses on the opposite of the Close ... it ... there must be a catch in it ! No wonder Mr. Watkinson had looked dreamy. Mr. Baldwin was dreamy now—he saw it all on a summer evening, with the lazy shadows over it: children playing—dogs running for bouncing balls—the little dream houses lying blissfully back—each in its snug dominion of evergreen and

flowers. He was hardly conscious of Mr. Watkinson as he followed him across the rough grassland towards the further side—the houses down by the Estate Office were nothing now: they were as commonplace and as trivial as those in the dusty neighbourhood of his old home.

He awoke from his daydream with a start: Edith tripped over one of the tapes, tossed her umbrella and bag into the air and fell down. Both men ran to her assistance: she was shaken, but fortunately unhurt. Her bag had flown open and a powder puff and eightpence were recovered from the grass.

" All right, dear ? "

" Quite all right, thanks."

" I'm sorry, Mrs. Baldwin. I ought to have warned you of these tapes," said Mr. Watkinson. " We're starting the road to-morrow. It should have been started last week, but we've been delayed by the gravel."

The accident brought Mr. Watkinson back to earth and business. He unrolled the plan and supported it on his knee, and Mr. Baldwin noticed with some concern the number of positions round the Close that were painted over in pink.

" Those have gone, I assume ? "

The Estate Manager nodded. " And these marked with pencilled crosses are being held for confirmation."

It disturbed Mr. Baldwin: there seemed very few positions available.

" Now how would this suit you ?" suggested Mr. Watkinson.

He led them across to one of the pegged out squares of land and tapped it with his heel to show that it was solid.

Tom and Edith stood upon it—they peered round enquiringly like two staid old ponies on a new grazing ground.

"It's very nice" said Edith; she looked up at her husband for confirmation but his eyes were not upon the ground: he was gazing ahead.

"We should like " he said, " a piece with one of those old trees on it—if that's possible."⁵⁵

"Certainly" said Mr. Watkinson.

A little ahead stood a great silent elm: the wind had fallen, but the old tree was secretly beckoning to them with its delicate, lacy branch tips. It seemed to say: "Come over here—I'll look after you: I'll rustle you to sleep on summer nights and roar the ghosts away in winter—ril give you shade—I'll never change: I'll give you peace—and something that'll make your cares and troubles feel very small and trivial. . . ,"

"What about that one ? " said Mr. Baldwin in as calm a voice as he could muster.

The Manager gave a slow, artful smile.

"YouVe picked the plum: the finest site of all."

Mr. Baldwin knew that without being told. He stepped over the tapes and stood upon the only piece of land in the world that could make him happy. The wiry grass sent a thrill of understanding up his legs: he felt the iron-rooted muscles of the giant that towered above them.

"This is our place" he said.

The land sloped towards its further end, and their foot-path formed its limit: a great wild mass of bramble marked its frontier and a stout little may-tree stood sentinel beside it. "This is our place" repeated Mr. Baldwin.

" It's the finest, as I've said," remarked the Manager, " you face due south—you see where the sun's setting—you're at a corner—away from what little traffic there'll be—you also get a much wider plot because it opens fan-shaped towards the end, to fit the corner, you see ? "

He pointed out the position on the plan—and Mr. Baldwin suddenly felt faint: the plot was painted pink—it had gone—it was sold !—and that was the end. He would never be able to live in Welden Valley and see this lovely—this only spot in someone else's hands. It would drive him mad. He felt sick, and suddenly angry. Why hadn't the blundering fool seen that. . . .

" But," he stammered, " it's—it's gone—it's marked in, in pink ? "

Mr. Watkinson looked momentarily disconcerted, but he quickly pulled himself together.

" Oh, yes. Yes. I'm sorry. What am I thinking about ? " He examined the square closely, as if for some secret mark, and then looked up reassuringly. " But I think it can be arranged. It's not definitely decided and I haven't heard from the people. It's their fault entirely for not confirming it. Besides," he added with a guilty glance round, " I want you to have it. You *can* have it." And with a gesture of finality he drew out a pencil and made a triumphant tick upon the square—" It's yours ! "

Mr. Baldwin suddenly became conscious of his heart: it was thudding like a sledge hammer. He was not a fool—and although he knew beyond doubt that this was the gem of the whole Estate, he was beginning to feel terribly afraid that things were not going to be plain sailing . . . this man had flattered them so obviously, and lured them on: he prepared himself for the struggle of his life. . . .

" I suppose," he began, " we could build a house like your Show House here ? "

" Certainly ! "

" The cost, I mean—would it be the same ? "

" This land is £7 a foot."

It was as if Mr. Baldwin's hammering heart had missed the anvil and hit him in the throat: the shock passed, leaving a dull pain of weariness. At the summit of ecstasy had come a death-warrant. The land, then, was extra. The boy had never told them that—he had just said: " This house is £1,175," and had cruelly concealed the price of the land. £7 a foot—that would be hundreds of pounds. It was fiendish to have led him here—to have flattered his selection—then crucified him with £7 a foot.

" But surely," he began in a voice that was suddenly loud and hollow, " the Show House *includes* the land ! "

" The Show House ?—oh, yes, certainly."

His heart rose—he felt himself attacking—Mr. Watkinson was on the defence.

" Then for £1,175 we could build a house on this plot exactly like the Show House ? "

Mr. Watkinson began to smile, then stopped. Something in the trembling voice—in the thin, lined face and burning grey eyes stopped him smiling. He was used to hammering out these things with pitifully eager purchasers—sometimes perhaps he had taken advantage of the power he held, for at no time is a man more vulnerable to extravagance and recklessness than when his feet first grip a piece of land that has captured his imagination. He knew how to face bluster and crafty bargaining, but there was something different about the man beside him now—

something a proud fugitive might have in begging sanctuary. . . .

He pulled out his cigarette-case and held it forward. He did not look up, but he felt his client's head shaking and he saw that no hand reached out for a cigarette. He took one himself and lit it.

" You see, this is a far better position than the Show House."

" Yes, I know, but . . . "

" The land in the road where the Show House is built is £310S.a foot. There's a fifty-foot frontage, so you see the house works out at £1,000, and the land, £175. This frontage is really worth *more* than double—there's at least an extra twenty foot depth and I'm not charging for the extra width at the bottom. I tell you it's cheap, Mr. Baldwin ! "

Mr. Baldwin turned his head. A deep, stormy sunset was gathering behind the trees across the Close: they could have a rustic seat to encircle their elm—the morning sun, and the evening sun would shine upon it and the ridge behind would throw the pink glow upon the cool weathered oak in the lounge.

" I know," murmured Mr. Baldwin, " I know it's worth it." He looked at the Manager puffing hard at his cigarette. "But it means this would cost £175 more. I'm awfully afraid . . . you see, I've retired."

Mr. Watkinson did not reply for a moment. " Would you require us to build the house ? "

" Certainly."

The Manager looked up more hopefully. " It makes a difference, you see. Some people engage their own builders. I tell you what I'll do, Mr. Baldwin ! I'll knock

£75 off the land !—that means you could have a house built, including everything, for £1,275 •—^{^s} ridiculous, Mr. Baldwin ! I'll get called over the coals, but I *want* you to have this land because—well, I guess you'll never be happy on any other bit ! "

It was awful how the devil of ambition could get a cautious man by the ears and turn him into a spendthrift.*- Mr. Baldwin understood now what he had never understood before—how clever, sane men could come the most dreadful crashes over money, simply through ambition—simply because the devil got them by the ears. The devil certainly had Mr. Baldwin at this moment. A week ago, if a plumber had asked for an extra pound to make a better job than his first estimate allowed for, he would have considered it and brooded over it for days before deciding. And now, having faced and won a fight to place £200 on mortgage, it seemed to matter nothing that an extra £100 were added.

Never had Mr. Baldwin sunk to bargaining, but it came now as naturally as if he had done it all his life. " Make it £1,250 and it's done ! " he cried, and when the Manager shook his head—" I'll give you my cheque for the deposit now—this very moment ! "

" We'll lose over it," said Mr. Watkinson. " I could sell that land any day for £j a foot."

" Sell it to me *now* I—and begin the house to-morrow ! "

There was a final, pregnant silence. The whole valley seemed to be waiting for the Manager's reply. He looked at the man in front of him—the burberry had slipped through his arm and was dangling partly on the ground—

he looked at the plump little lady, fiercely gripping her bag between her fingers.

" All right," he said. And for some reason that was quite unusual on such occasions, he reached forward and shook Mr. Baldwin's hand. " You've won ! "

CHAPTER XV

"Ix's THESE LITTLE SET-BACKS that make it so worth doing," said Edith. " I mean, if it was all easy it wouldn't mean nearly so much."

" I know," sighed Mr. Baldwin. " I know."

Edith had said very little in Welden Valley, but she found herself doing most of the talking on the journey home. The strain and excitement had brought a violent reaction upon her husband, and he had almost collapsed in the corner of the carriage. His face was turned to the window—his mind was assaulted with forebodings darker than the fields outside. Now and then an erratic firework would shoot up in the distance and split into a few disappointing sparks: the train rattled over a crossing and some waiting children with fierce moustachios and a shapeless figure in a perambulator reminded them how deeply they had penetrated into the autumn.

" I mean," went on Edith, " if it were easy, everybody would do it, and that would end all the fun and excitement -of it."

" That's right," agreed Mr. Baldwin. There was something in everything that Edith said, but nothing, somehow, that got to the root of what was worrying him. The train stopped at a station and went on before he spoke again.

" D'you realise, Edie, what an awful mess we're in ? "

Edith laughed a little uneasily. " How d'you mean, Tom?"

A touch of his old impatience returned: " Well—think, dear—ask yourself! We've just agreed to put down £1,250 for a new house: we've got to spend nearly £400 on furniture—there's legal charges—removal expenses—all kinds of things, and we've actually got in cash—£218 !"

" But we've got the Debentures."

" I know, Edie——"

" And ' Grasmere.' "

He looked up. " 'Grasmere '—I know—but supposing nobody buys it, dear? After all, how do we know? "

" Of course somebody'll buy it ! "

He shrugged his shoulders and lapsed into silence. Edith felt it better not to disturb him again, and the rest of the homeward journey was disappointingly solemn.

It should have been a progress of triumph: they had walked into Welden Valley and staked their claim upon the finest position on the Estate: they had been overwhelmed by the prospect of simply securing a square, formal position beside houses in an ordinary road, with other houses looking at them at close range opposite. Reality had been unbelievably finer: they had twenty feet more land than the others: it was not only deeper, but it widened out: there was room for vegetables—room for almost anything. They should have journeyed home in a blaze of triumph.

But Mr. Baldwin began to cheer up after supper. The first thing that greeted them upon their arrival home, was a large notice board in the garden: " THIS CHARMING HOUSE FOR SALE." Timbrell and Dove were obviously

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smart people to respond so quickly to instructions and it promised well for the future.

And Edith enlarged considerably upon the idea of growing all their own vegetables. " We'll grow at least ten pounds worth a year," she said. " That'll pay the interest on the mortgage. Then there's room for chickens and we could sell a lot of eggs——"

" That's certainly an idea, Edie. It'll be grand to have our own vegetables out of that good fresh soil."

The chickens and a whisky and soda were the turning point of his depression. His spirits rose steadily as they sat talking it over by the fire after dinner.

" I'm terribly glad we did what we did this afternoon, Edie: we went much further than we ought to—we've taken a big risk, but I don't mind because it's—it's worth it a thousand times ! Supposing we hadn't taken the land in Welden Close—supposing we'd been satisfied with a cheap piece in that road—think how awful it would have been to see the spaces filling up round that open green—to have lived in sight of it all the time—watching the houses being built there—watching a house being built on *our* land ! It would have driven us mad, Edie: we'd have always felt so cheap and mean." A new thought came, and his eyes gleamed across the fire. " D'you realise we're going to be *important* people, living up there in Welden Close ! "

Edith laughed, and rose to go to bed.

" Don't you go getting too proud ! " she said. " You know the saying about pride—and falls."

" I know—well, I'll be up soon, dear. Good night."

" Good night, you reckless old gambler ! "

He lay back in the armchair to finish his pipe alone—

"reckless old gambler": Edith had said it: she had said it in fun, but it was true. Sixty-one next Thursday and suddenly, unbelievably a gambler. For the first time in his life he felt himself tossing rudderless upon a sea of financial obscurity: for the first time in his life he could not—if suddenly called upon—meet the financial obligations he had made, and yet never in his life had he felt so confident in himself—so sure that he could face unexpected troubles and overcome them. He felt taller, stronger—younger at heart than ever he could remember.

He rose and crossed to the window to see that the latch was fastened, and suddenly wondered why he troubled about locking the house up when he went to bed. It was a fussy little habit dating back to his timid, solvent days. If a burglar or two came in now he would look over the banisters and laugh at them, and then go down and give them a drink and good-humouredly kick them out. There was a faint autumn mist round the lamp-post outside: a field mist would be round the trunk of their tree in the valley—the clump of brambles would just have its crown showing above it: a dark lump like a porpoise in a flat grey sea. Brambles!—fancy going down the garden with a paper bag and walking-stick to do an afternoon's blackberrying upon one's own private bushes!

He turned off the light and tiptoed up to bed.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FORTUNE that is traditionally supposed to favour the brave, but which usually gets them into such a mess, came along to give Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin a most encouraging fillip on Saturday morning when Mr. Dove arrived to make the inventory of their furniture.

Mr. Dove was a seedy, battered little man. He had a shaving cut on his chin that had bled and dried: his clothes were creased in curious directions and his thin, sandy hair was scurfy and dishevelled. He looked as if he had been run over and hastily cleaned up so as not to miss his appointment. He had a cold in his head and he seemed to sniff contemptuously at each piece of furniture in turn. He explained several times that there was a terrible slump in second-hand furniture, and that it was cruel to see lovely old stuff knocked down for a song. The Baldwins were thoroughly sick of him by the time he got to the drawing-room.

He was explaining that nobody had drawing-rooms nowadays and was going into it at such length that Mr. Baldwin could have kicked him through the windows into the garden, when he suddenly and unexpectedly became silent. He had opened the little walnut-wood cabinet and taken out one of the dainty shell-like pieces of china that had come to Edith from the Vicarage. He looked at it closely and intently: he turned it over, pushed

his glasses on to his forehead, and peered at the mark with bulbous, faded eyes.

Then he blinked at Tom and Edith.

" You want to sell these ? "

" Certainly. Everything."

" These are good."

" Oh ? " said Mr. Baldwin, overlooking in his pleasure the inference that everything else in the house was bad.

Mr. Dove took out several other pieces and examined them in turn.

" They came from my home," said Edith.

Mr. Dove did not answer this, but after a moment said:

" You don't want to put these in the auction. You wouldn't have the sort of people to give the proper price."

To ask bluntly what they were worth, seemed to Mr. Baldwin like shattering them on the floor. He had a feeling that they would grow in value if nobody talked about the price for a little while, but his imagination was leaping nimbly upwards—five—ten—fifty pounds ? Supposing it turned out to be one of those fantastic discoveries one read about ?—supposing they were a unique set that experts had been searching for, for years and years ?

" I'm not an antique valuer," said Mr. Dove, " I'll send a friend of mine this afternoon." He turned his attention once more to the furniture, and began to sniff again: the stuff in the bedrooms brought a bead to his nose, but the Baldwins were so pleased with him over the china that they gave him a glass of sherry before he went. It was a drop that had been in the bottle ever since the Tarrants came to Bridge, but he drank it with relish.

" Anyway, he's honest," remarked Mr. Baldwin when he had gone. " Some men wouldn't have said a word

about good stuff like that, and bought it themselves at the auction for a knock-down price."

The friend came in the afternoon. He also was rather dilapidated and looked as if he had been in the same accident that had crumpled Mr. Dove. He was a slow moving, elderly man with long white hair, a blue veined nose and a strong smell of tobacco. He did not take so long to examine the china as Mr. Dove. He offered fifteen pounds.

The Baldwins had hoped for more, but it might easily have been less. In any case, it was a lot more than they had ever expected. But Mr. Baldwin was a business man, and he felt it was perfectly in order to get a second opinion.

"We'll consider it and let you know to-morrow/⁵ he said, and the elderly man, with a slow and apparently fruitless glance round the drawing-room, took his departure.

There was an interesting old antique shop in Edgware Road, and that night, after dark, they approached it furtively, with one of the little saucers wrapped in a silk handkerchief.

An elderly woman peered at the little piece of china, turned on another light and went to the narrow stairs and called out, "Joseph ! "

"I'll get my husband to look at it," she said.

There was a slow shambling down the stairs, and then, to the Baldwins' unspeakable horror, came a strong and unmistakable odour of stale tobacco, followed by the elderly man with the blue veined nose who had called that afternoon.

It was the darkest moment in the Baldwins' united lives: never before had they felt so bewildered and

humiliated. For one wild, groping moment, Mr. Baldwin thought he would pretend he had come to accept the offered price—then he remembered that he had already asked the woman what it was worth.

He was no diplomatist: when forced to think quickly he fell back upon honesty. With a laugh that sounded hollow and unlike his own, he started to explain that they had really come to seek a second opinion and that it was an extraordinary coincidence. . . .

The antique dealer waved aside the explanation and showed no sign of annoyance: he went so far as to tell Mr. Baldwin that it was a perfectly correct precaution: there was another antique shop further down the road—perhaps Mr. Baldwin would like to enquire there.

A humbled Mr. Baldwin said he was perfectly satisfied—he had no desire to enquire further, but the dealer was still anxious to reassure him. "I tell you what. We'll ask the wife—she doesn't know the price I've offered. What would you say to a full set like that, Alice? Half a dozen of each?"

"Ten pounds," said the woman.

The man laughed. "I've made it fifteen pounds."

"If you took more notice of what I say," said the woman, "we'd have a bigger shop than what we've got."

"Maybe," said her husband, pulling out his pipe—and Mr. Baldwin hastily repeated his desire to accept.

"Very well, sir. Fifteen pounds. It's a good fair price. I'll arrange with the Auctioneer, and he will credit you. Good evening, sir. You've forgotten the saucer. Better keep it all together till the sale."

"Thank you," said Mr. Baldwin with heartfelt meaning. They laughed it off on the way home, but Mr.

Baldwin still felt as if he had just had a piece of plaster ripped off his stomach.

" I think we must tell Ada," said Edith, after dinner.

" I think we must," said Mr. Baldwin. " Pity we didn't tell her before the notice was put up in the garden—and before Mr. Dove came. She *must* know now."

They had meant to tell Ada a week ago: their first thought had been that she would revel in the comforts and conveniences of a modern home. Their second thoughts had been different. Ada was ten years older than either of them: she had been with them seventeen years, and her roots extended a good way beneath the basement. She was really old, and the more Edith thought of it, the less she could picture Ada in Welden Valley: it worried her, and made her feel unhappy, and she knew that it was best to get it over. . . .

Ada was washing up. She stood with her back half turned to Mrs. Baldwin and listened in silence—a silence that was like a piece of thick wet flannel. When it was over she partly turned her head and said: "Well, it's nothing to do with me, is it ? "

" It's a lot to do with you, Ada. You're one of us and you know what you mean to us. You're in the house far more than us, too."

" But you never told me nothing about it until now." Then she added: " Mind you, it's your business and there's no reason why you should."

" The work'll be so much easier," began Mrs. Baldwin, " you've no idea how convenient everything is ... " Then Ada put down the plate she was drying and began.

She was not insolent: there was more of sorrow than of anger. What was she going to do on her nights out—in a lot of dark fields without any lamp-posts—falling over cows—and no cinema? And all these modern cleaning ideas—she was not too proud to get down on her knees and scrub. All her friends lived in Brondesbury: they weren't going to come with her to this country place and she couldn't start making a new lot at her age. "I know you and the master don't care about friends, but I do!"

She began to lay the plates along the dresser—gleaming, spotless plates; there were two little patches of colour in her seamed face. Mrs. Baldwin looked at the old black uniform, the clean starched apron, the prim little lace cap that modern servants laughed at—and felt suddenly ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Ada . . ."

"There's no need to be sorry, m'am. You want to make a clean sweep and a clean start in the new house and you can't do that with me around. I'm too old to break in a new set of saucepans now. I got my pension and my sister in Paddington. Don't you worry about me, m'am—I'll be all right. Maybe I'd have gone in any case soon—what with being near seventy and them basement stairs. . . ."

"I don't like saying it," said Mr. Baldwin, "but I think I'm rather glad. She'd never have settled in. Without a basement she would have been so near to us—and—and—that would have been very difficult when she was in one of her bad moods. I think it's best, Edie: and as she says, she would have gone soon in any case. We'll get a young country girl—everything fresh and new."

CHAPTER XVII

ON THREE SUCCESSIVE AFTERNOONS the Baldwins went to Welden Valley, partly to discuss the form of their new house, partly to make sure that their land was still there, and that nobody was building a house on it by mistake. Their anxiety in this respect was relieved on the third day when a board marked " SOLD " appeared on it.

They went over all the completed houses and climbed precariously amongst the skeletons of those under construction : they studied piles of plans, admired numerous attractive designs and decided in the end that nothing was better than the Show House they had originally seen.

Apart from the charm of its design the Baldwins knew that they would never forget their first visit to it. They owed everything to it, and to possess a house exactly like it would enshrine a memory.

Mr. Watkinson suggested several small but excellent improvements: the deepening of the bay window in the dining-room to catch the sunset: a small additional window in the best bedroom to give a view of the foot-path up to its disappearance over the crest of the hill: a slightly darker tile: a recess to let the front door mat flush with the surface of the carpet—" We're finding things out every day," he said, " and your house will have the benefit of it, right up till the moment it is

finished." By having a house exactly the dimensions of the Show House Edith was able to measure up for the curtains and begin making them at once.

They thought at first that they could not better the colour scheme of the Show House, but Mr. Watkinson was very honest about it. "If I were furnishing that house again," he said, "I would not have powder blue carpets. They're very charming but they're not suited to the country. People are in and out so much and every little spot shows." He took them across and illustrated what he meant.

They decided upon fawn as the predominating colour—a heathery shade of fawn for the carpets and a slightly deeper shade for the mats: cream scrubbed walls and blue upholstery and curtains. Mr. Watkinson entered into everything as though he were going to live in the house himself. When they explained their colour scheme he seemed overcome at the very thought of it. If anything he was a bit too interested, and once or twice Mr. Baldwin found himself in heated argument, particularly when Mr. Watkinson made the appalling suggestion that they should have the branches of their elm lopped off, apparently down to its bare trunk. Mr. Baldwin stared at him in amazement.

"It'll sprout again in a couple of years," said Mr. Watkinson.

"You suggest—having—our elm lopped !"

Mr. Watkinson nodded. "It's entirely up to you, Mr. Baldwin. It's your tree, but, you know, it's very big, and elms are treacherous things."

"I wouldn't dream of it !" exclaimed Mr. Baldwin.

The Manager shrugged his shoulders: "We had a

big one blown down on our Cobham Estate: cracked a garage open like an egg,"

" I'll risk that."

" It's not only your own property to consider. It may fall the other way upon someone else's house."

" I can insure against that," replied Mr. Baldwin very curtly, and the matter dropped.

For an extra £50 they arranged to have cupboards built in, and wardrobes with long mirrors in their doors.

" We shall begin building," announced the Manager, " in a fortnight's time. I shall have the road up to your plot by then."

" And when," asked Mr. Baldwin, " can we move in ? "

" Don't make it before the end of March," said Mr. Watkinson.

" The end of March—but—but—that's five months ! "

Mr. Watkinson nodded. " I don't want you to be disappointed. I should not be treating you fairly by letting you in before. Let me have the drying March winds on the house before I do the painting. If I paint before the walls have dried you will only have to paint again. Give me time, Mr. Baldwin, time to let the foundations settle, time to give you something we can both be proud of! "

Despite their disappointment they had to agree. The houses in the road by the Estate Office seemed to be growing before their eyes and they had confidently hoped to be in by Christmas. It was awful to face a lingering winter in " Grasmere," for the sale's board in their garden had broken their last bonds with the old house and they felt like restless, discontented lodgers.

" And yet," said Edith, " the spring will be a wonderful time."

They could have spared their disappointment, for now that things had really started time gathered wings and flew with amazing swiftness. They scarcely noticed the days deepening into winter, and the long dark evenings that Edith had dreaded were not long enough for all they had to do. They began an orgy of mat making. Estimates showed that they would need eight in all: two large ones for the reception rooms and six smaller ones for the doorways. It was no longer a matter of spinning out the work to fill in time. Mr. Baldwin set himself to do a square foot per day and grew feverishly impatient when he had to lay off for a week with cramp in his fingers. From tea until dinner he would read by the fire while Edith sat up at the table for the light to work upon the curtains. His books were *Garden Planning*, *Bird Life in England*, and magazines that told him a hundred and one things about the making of a home. Sometimes he would lay down his book and watch Edith with a wistful smile as she bent over the delicate, filmy curtains. Even with her spectacles on her nose and the pool of light shining upon her whitening hair she seemed like a girl wife working with trembling and caressing eagerness upon the tiny clothes of a baby that would come to her in the spring.

One day Mr. Baldwin steeled his heart and undertook a terrific clean out of old papers and letters and made a bonfire in the garden. It needed a special mood to destroy the hoarded relics of a lifetime and he worked like a demon while the mood was upon him. If old receipts had been attractive to collectors he could have made a fortune at Sotheby's: there was a complete set of Water Board

receipts from 1899 in perfect condition, and the stamps upon them covered three reigns. There were stacks of letters that he burned with a blind recklessness, knowing full well that if he opened and read one he would sit down and read the rest and keep them. He emptied every drawer right down to the fluff encompassed pins, and when it was over he dug the little grey heap of smoking flakes into the soil of the shrubbery.

One afternoon there was an unexpected knock at the door, and a young couple arrived with an order from the Estate Agent to view the house. They were the first people to come, and they inspected everything with polite appreciation: they were getting married, the young man said, and his father-in-law had promised them a house. They were interested in " Grasmere " but suddenly got much more interested when the Baldwins explained why they intended to sell. They said they thought it was a splendid idea and would build a house themselves. They left with grateful expressions of thanks and the Baldwins decided to keep their plans to themselves another time.

The Estate Agents were getting very lively, for people arrived, upon an average, twice a week. The Baldwins began to get tired of pointing out the beauties of " Grasmere," particularly as some people obviously came out of curiosity without any idea of buying.

Some were polite, some were indifferent, one or two were quite rude.

" It's scandalous ! " exclaimed Mr. Baldwin, after a visit from a woman with a harsh voice and a sharp nose who had used the words " dark," " damp," " stuffy," and " inconvenient," at least three times each in as many

minutes. " I shall tell Timbrell to be more careful about the people he sends in future."

But as it happened, one of the rudest and most thoroughly unattractive visitors sprang the first surprise.

He called himself Ranken-Dudley: he was a very tall, dusty looking man with a mane of black hair and a big pale, pitted face. He brought with him a disconcerting young woman who was not his wife but whom he called " kiddy." He introduced her as Miss Sarda Northcote and she had vivid carmine lips and green earrings.

He was a teacher of Elocution and explained that he had been in Hollywood for some years, teaching silent film stars how to talk. He had returned with a view to opening a School of Voice Production in London. He looked about him as if he were searching for somebody he disliked and soon decided that " Grasmere " was quite unsuitable.

" I shall require a big room for my classes," he said.

For answer Mr. Baldwin threw open the partition between the dining- and drawing-room.

" We've sat thirty people here at a whist drive—and once had forty to a Tennis Club musical evening."

Mr. Ranken-Dudley was impressed but not convinced.

" If we did that we'd have nowhere to live ourselves."

" There are three large rooms upstairs—and two on the second floor. How many would there be in family ? "

"Just us two," said Mr. Ranken-Dudley a trifle shortly.

" Well," said Mr. Baldwin.

They went away but came back next afternoon. Mr. Ranken-Dudley wanted to look at the big room again to

sec if alterations could be made. They were the first people to make a second visit, and the Baldwins offered them a cup of tea. Miss Sarda Northcote left a large Turkish cigarette end in her saucer and a bright carmine lip print on her cup.

Next morning came a letter from Timbrell & Dove:

" DEAR MR. BALDWIN,—I am very pleased to inform you that our client Mr. Ranken-Dudley is definitely interested in 'Grasmere.' It is somewhat small for his purpose but he is considering the possibility of certain structural alterations.

" We have informed Mr. Ranken-Dudley that your price is £850, and having in mind the limit of £750 recently fixed with you we are given room for negotiation.

" I trust that we shall have further news in the course of a few days."

Nothing happened for a week, and then Mr. Timbrell himself appeared. He tried to put on a casual manner but he was obviously pleased with himself.

" I've brought you some good news, Mr. Baldwin."

" Oh?—good."

" Mr. Ranken-Dudley has been to sec us this morning. He offers £800."

" Eight hundred pounds ? By Jove — that's — that's good ! "

Mr. Timbrell crossed his legs — put his finger tips together and smiled.

" I told him you would not consider it. I stood firm at £825."

Mr. Baldwin curdled inside and stared at the Agent in

disgusted astonishment: it was the sort of fool thing he *would* do—a little man of his type *would* get above himself and let a good thing slip away out of sheer conceit !

" But, surely ! Eight hundred pounds is fifty more than. . . ."

" I stood firm," broke in Mr. Timbrell, " at £825—after a hard fight I got him to agree."

" You mean he'll—he'll pay £825 ? "

Mr. Timbrell nodded and beamed. " I knew you would be pleased."

The sherry had all gone, so they gave Mr. Timbrell a whisky and soda and a biscuit. Although it was only eleven o'clock he appeared quite at ease with it.

" He would like to take possession at Lady Day, so you can practically step straight out of this house into your new one."

Mr. Baldwin promised to get the Deeds from his Solicitor and Mr. Timbrell departed smelling brightly of the hospitality afforded him.

" Well, Edie," said Mr. Baldwin, " what d'you think about that ? Seventy-five pounds more than we expected—£15 for that china ! There's still a chance of keeping out of the Bankruptcy Courts ! What a good thing it was we stuck to the land we wanted. We might have been kicking ourselves now for funking that grand bit in Welden Close and taking a miserable piece down the road ! "

" Thank goodness we didn't," said Edith. " I think you were wonderful that first day with Mr. Watkinson—the way you stuck to what you wanted—and got it ! "

No

And Mr. Baldwin, modest though he was, had to agree. They sat silent for a while, then Edith voiced what both of them were thinking:

" So poor old ' Grasmere's' really gone."

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE GLORIOUS MORNING in mid-December Mr. Baldwin conceived the idea of taking their walk from Stanmore once again. He wanted to come out upon the crest of the ridge and look down at his land : he was aching to see whether they had started work, but he wanted to see by himself, without the Estate Manager at his elbow.

" D'you realise, Edie, that we've been there six times and we've never really been *alone* ? They won't be working on a Saturday afternoon so we can just stay as long as we like and really *look* at it."

They took sandwiches this time, and lunched on the stile beside the copse where they had seen the hedgehog. He insisted upon Edith taking frequent rests as they began to mount the higher ground, although he was itching to get on to make the most of the short December afternoon. As they drew near the crest of the hill, the elms in the valley gently reared their crowns above the horizon, and they paused to guess which crown was theirs.

And then the valley lay beneath them and they stood for a while like explorers upon the rim of a promised land. It was near the shortest day, and the fading sun had lain soft beams across the meadows, blackening the thorn trees and lighting the grey winter streaks in the wiry grass. It took them some moments to get their bearings,

for even in six weeks the valley had changed beyond belief. Two houses that had been but a thicket of scaffolding had grown stout walls, and a ribbon of white road had swept along two sides of Welden Close. They saw the white tapes that marked the unmade road: they followed them past the gorse clumps and close beneath two elms—and suddenly Mr. Baldwin squeezed Edith's arm.

" Look ! "

It was hard to make out exactly what had happened: their tree was all right, and they could see the white pegs that marked their boundaries. Beneath the tree lay something that looked like a ladder, and beside it was a pile of something, either bricks or timber. Then, as their eyes grew accustomed to the light they could see rolled stacks of turf and the faint outlines of foundations.

" They've started ! " said Mr. Baldwin. " Come on ! "

The workmen at one of the half-built houses had left a bonfire smouldering, and some time during the afternoon an eddy of wind had smudged a streak of smoke across the valley and left it there. The valley seemed quite desolate, but remembering the surprising way in which young Mr. Morrison had once appeared from nowhere, the Baldwins descended the slope with stealth and well-nigh tiptoed to their land under cover of the gorse bushes. They wanted no one with them this afternoon.

It was certainly a ladder beneath the tree—an old, paint encrusted ladder that looked as if it had served many a growing house—but the heap that looked from a distance like bricks or timber was actually an old tarpaulin thrown over two wheelbarrows, a pile of sand and some bags of cement.

" Of course," remarked Mr. Baldwin, " cement—

foundations." He looked triumphantly at Edith. " Things are beginning all right now ! "

Mr. Baldwin produced a tape measure. It was only five feet long but quite adequate for measuring their boundaries. He began from one of the front pegs and instructed Edith to mark each point it reached with the tip of her umbrella. He also told her to keep an eye open for Mr. Watkinson, for although he was perfectly within his rights in measuring up the land, he did not want to be caught doing it.

He found, on twice measuring the frontage that he was three inches short.

" That's near enough," said Edith, who was getting a bit tired of it.

" At £7 a foot, my dear, an inch is worth over *los. od.*"

One peg was leaning inwards a little which no doubt accounted for the discrepancy. So he kicked it straight, and in doing so it went comfortably over towards the next plot, adding a couple of inches to his territory. " You often find," he pointed out, " that those tape measures shrink, and we must allow for it."

It was good to be alone: it was possible to plan something of the garden and he drew a rough sketch showing the position of the elm, the house, the thorn tree and the tower of brambles. He wanted to elaborate this at leisure so that the permanent features could be woven into his final design.

As the sun dropped below the crest, the valley was filled with a strange uncertain glow that lingered on beyond the normal span of sunset: the ground was dark but the sky remained light grey and faintly sunlit.

The foundations of the house were puzzling at first:

the front door seemed so extremely narrow and they appeared to have forgotten to make an entrance to the dining-room.

" I expect they know," said Edith, as Mr. Baldwin stood scratching his forehead. " It'll straighten itself out as it goes along and I'm sure good people wouldn't forget a doorway."

" It all looks frightfully small, doesn't it ? " said Mr. Baldwin. " I mean—look here—surely the lounge is going to be bigger than this ? "

The little square of grass within the clay borders of the room seemed no larger than a tool-shed, but it was certainly eighteen feet by fifteen feet when they measured it. It was *very* deceptive, but it was also a unique experience to stand upon soil they would never see again when once the strong white boards had spanned it. " You see the fireplace here, Edie ? This is where your chair will be—and this is where I shall have mine. It's nice to see how clean and fresh it's going to be underneath."

" Funny," said Edith, " to think of my chair being right on top of this rabbit hole ! "

" And mine," put in Mr. Baldwin, " on top of a bunch of thistles ! "

They lingered on their land till a ground mist lapped their knees and lights began to twinkle in Welden Village. Mr. Baldwin strolled up and down within his pegged-out frontiers: he saw where the rustic pergola would go: he planned a gate at its far end to open upon the footpath.

" We ought to have brought our tea with us and had it in the lounge ! "

As they went towards the village, they met two other people gazing at the houses in the road beside the Estate

Office: two pleasant, youngish people who looked interestedly at Tom and Edith as they passed.

" Good evening," said the man.

" Good evening," said Mr. Baldwin, and then, unlike himself, he added, " Coming to live here ? "

" Yes ! " said the man, " this is our house," and he pointed to the one with the Tudor gables.

" Oh, really ?—Mr. Watkinson allowed us to look inside. *I think it's charming.*"

" You do ? " said the young man in an eager voice, " we—we thought so, too. Are you going to live here ? "

" Why, yes. Up there in Welden Close—by that elm, there."

" Splendid—I expect we shall meet again."

And the woman, who was really only a girl, flashed a smile at Mrs. Baldwin and said: "We're starting to furnish next week."

" We're getting ready to," said Edith.

" You must come in soon and see what kind of a mess I've made of it ! "

" I'm certain it won't be a mess," laughed Edith, " but I'd love to see it."

" Fancy talking to strangers in a way like that in Brondesbury Terrace ! " said Mr. Baldwin as they went their way. He took Edith's arm and drew her towards him.

" I believe it's going to be splendid here."

" I'm sure of it," she said.

They broke their news to the lady in the tea-shop as they sat in the alcove by the fire. She was delighted. " It's going to be a beautiful Estate," she told them.

** Lots of people have been coming to see it: nice people—and I know three already who are having houses built. It's going to be a wonderful thing for the Village."

They asked the woman if she knew of a girl who would like to come and work for them and the woman promised to keep an eye open and let them know. They also told her they would certainly want to have their cakes and bread off her. " And that means we shall eat too much ! " called back Mr. Baldwin to the broad figure in the glowing doorway. " Come on, Edie—we'll have to hurry ! "

CHAPTER XIX

As THE DAYS SPED by with gathering swiftness, and the evenings began to stretch out lingering trailers of twilight, the Baldwins grew increasingly thankful that they had not attempted to move before the end of March. Five months, upon first reflection seemed a hideous time to wait, but when it came to the point, five months contained not a day too many for the countless things to be done. Half the enjoyment, reflected Mr. Baldwin, would have been lost in the hopeless disorganisation and anxiety of a hurried move to a damp, half furnished house.

The buying of the new furniture alone demanded a fortnight's concentration. Mr. Baldwin had hit upon the idea of making the furniture a definite purchase out of the money from Edith's Debentures, so that, while the house and land were his, the furniture was Edith's. By this means he made her feel that her sacrifice had gained her a definite and visible stake in the new home. They wandered miles through a labyrinth of sideboards and bedroom suites: they glugged themselves upon weathered oak and well-nigh suffocated themselves in mattresses and quilts, and Mr. Baldwin discovered the remarkable difference between buying and selling. When he had marched into a small, shabby Estate Office and announced in a crisp, authoritative voice: " We want to sell a house," he

had felt as though somebody had opened a refrigerator door with one hand and cut the heels off his boots with the other. But when he had walked timidly into a palatial West End store and murmured: " We want to buy some furniture," it seemed as if his heels were replaced with a deep bow and the whole building quivered with deference. It appeared to Mr. Baldwin a little strange, for selling seemed to him as honourable as buying.

But while furnishing preparations were completed by the middle of January, they grew seriously concerned about the progress of the new house. As far as they could see, the builders had spent a few days laying the foundations and making a thorough mess upon their future garden, and then disappeared and completely lost interest in it. Upon three successive visits in three successive weeks, they were disgusted and disturbed to find nothing but a few dreary grey layers of cement and a muddy, trampled patch of grass. It looked terribly as if the builders had got into some awful kind of mess, and did not know how to continue the job. Mr. Baldwin began to wonder if what he had feared was actually true, and that they had completely forgotten the doorway to the lounge and were frightened to admit it.

On the fourth visit, not only was there nothing further done, but some workmen had had the stupidity to throw a heap of scaffold poles across their blackberry clump and beaten the bushes down. Mr. Baldwin strode down to the Estate Office with his blood boiling.

Mr. Watkinson was away in London and the Foreman builder seemed more surprised than apologetic.

" You mean those blackberry bushes, sir ? "

" Yes !—I mean those blackberry bushes ! "

" We never thought for a moment you'd be leaving 'em there, sir—we thought you'd have them out so as to make the garden. But I'll have the stuff moved at once."

" And when," proceeded Mr. Baldwin, " do you intend to begin my house ?—Nothing seems to have been touched for six weeks."

" Well, sir. You can't build on soft cement. You'd have the walls cracking in a few months. You've got to let the foundations settle in a bit."

" Excuses ! " burst out Mr. Baldwin as he stalked away. " It's always the same—give people plenty of time to make a thorough job and they ignore it completely and go ahead on jobs that people worry for: then you make a fuss and there's a mad rush at the last moment ! Here's the end of January and nothing done ! "

They kept clear of Welden Valley for a fortnight, but when they made their next visit there was such a scene of activity that Mr. Baldwin felt a little ashamed of his impatience. It was as if a magician had waved his wand, the scene had altered so incredibly: the walls were at least twelve feet high and a dozen or more men were creeping amongst a mass of scaffolding, hammering, clicking, scraping, whistling. A carpenter was planing window frames—two labourers were digging a trench for drains—the Foreman builder himself, in a bowler hat with a patch of white powder on it was consulting with a keen eyed, plus-foured young man in the roofless lounge.

" It's only because you made a fuss," whispered Edith.

Mr. Baldwin nodded with a grim smile, but even now he did not look entirely satisfied.

" I hope they don't hurry too much," he said.

He would have been happier if the men in the scaffolding had been laying the bricks more deliberately—had whistled less and concentrated more.

The next visit revealed an even more fevered scene: the house was crawling with men and Mr. Watkinson himself came out of the front door as they approached.

" Ah ! Mr. Baldwin !—Good morning, Mrs. Baldwin ! " and he turned with a contented grunt to view the house in perspective. It was difficult for the Baldwins to grow accustomed to the fact that all this turmoil—all this human activity was for them—and them alone: it did not, somehow, look like the house they had ordered—and yet, as they stood looking at it, it gradually seemed to mould itself into what they had expected. It seemed a little squat and crouching—the window frames were at present a bright startling pink and against the pale, unfinished plastered walls they made the house look like a surprised white cow with inflamed eyelids.

" We'll have the roof on in a fortnight," said Mr. Watkinson. " In five weeks from now we'll be finished. That'll give us a good month for decorating and drying. And then," he said proudly, " we start three more houses—there—and there—and there."

" All round us ? " laughed Mr. Baldwin.

" All round you," confirmed the Manager—" but don't worry !—the noisy part will be over before you come in."

The Baldwins took their departure with lighter hearts. The furnishers were to have a fortnight to lay the carpets and set the furniture. " And now," said Mr. Baldwin, " we simply *must* settle on a name."

The finding of a name should have been an amusing little pastime compared with the hard material side of the adventure, but repeated attempts to agree had brought a widening divergence that threatened to develop into serious conflict. Both were thinking along different avenues, and they had reached a stage when they instinctively disagreed with the other's suggestions almost before they were made. Edith's ideas, to Mr. Baldwin's mind were far too sweet and sentimental to last out a winter: " Restnook," " Larksrise," " Lavender Corner," " Peace Haven," while Mr. Baldwin, in Edith's opinion, was asking for trouble with thinly disguised puns and jokes like " Firstcome," " Open House," and " Clean Sweep." He stuck to " Firstcome," with irritating pig-headedness. " After all, we *did* come first, to Welden Close—so why not be proud of it ? "

" I know," said Edith, " but it's ugly."

He suggested " Chetleigh"—the name of the village where Edith was born: but she was against it, and retaliated with " Baronsmead," after the road in which his father's house had stood.

And like so many long drawn, awkward problems it was settled in the end, as Mr. Baldwin put it—" with a sudden click." The roof was on, and the lavatory basins were being carried in by a procession of men who looked like dishbearers at a mediaeval banquet. They were standing with the Manager, discussing the final painting of the exterior. " Green," agreed Tom and Edith, " a rich, deep green."

" You're right," said the Manager. " You're never wrong with green: it'll look well against light coffee-cream walls. And the gates ? "

" Green," said Mr. Baldwin, " green gates."

" And that's the name of the house ! " said Edith.
" Green Gates ! "

" No," said Mr. Baldwin, by force of habit. And then, after a pause: " Edith, you're right. ' Green Gates ' is right."

And " Greengates " it became.

Six weeks: a month. Three weeks: a fortnight. The sands were running out at " Grasmere " and the last few days slipped by in a fever of forgotten details. Mysterious forms had to be filled in concerning the surrender of their gas stove: meters had to be checked: there were visits to London concerning the £200 mortgage—the Deeds of " Grasmere "—the sale of the Debentures—the insurance. Mr. Baldwin wrote by hand and posted to all concerned:

" Kindly note that, as from the 26th March, the address of Mr. and Mrs. T. H. Baldwin will be:

'Greengates,'

Welden Close,

Welden Valley.

Telephone: Welden 327.

Station: Welden."

One afternoon the Notice of Auction appeared in the front garden in place of the "Fern SALE" board and Mr. Dove came to label the furniture. He said that the house must be entirely surrendered to him on the day before the Sale.

" I'll want to strip the beds and do up the blankets and everything," he explained.

But the Baldwins were adamant.

" We don't care what the house is like—we're going to sleep the last night here and move straight away to Welden Valley directly the Sale's over."

But the Auctioneer also dug his heels in. " We've got to do up all the kitchen utensils—tie the curtains up in bundles—the house'll be impossible that night. There's a comfortable little Boarding House opposite our office that'd make you welcome."

But this was not according to Mr. Baldwin's plan: he wanted to avoid an indefinite period between the old home and the new: he wanted to sleep at " Grasmere " on the last night, attend the Sale in the morning, and when the Sale was over he wanted to close the door, surrender the key and allow the new life to open upon the moment that the old one closed.

It was clear that Mr. Dove did not appreciate the drama and sentiment of the scheme: he finally shrugged his shoulders and said: " Well, if you insist. But I warn you that Thursday's not going to be comfortable—and our men'll have to be in here by eight o'clock on Friday morning."

" We'll be up and ready for them," said Mr. Baldwin. " And anything that's disturbed by us that night will be put back as the men leave it."

" Very well," said Mr. Dove, with an ominous look in his eye.

Tom and Edith were early astir on the morning before the Auction, and they caught the 8.15 to Welden Valley.

" Greengates " was ready and the furniture was promised at ten o'clock. They arrived soon after nine and opened the glistening front door with a glistening little mortice key that Mr. Watkinson handed them with ceremony at the Estate Office. For an hour they roamed the clean, paint-odoured rooms: " We shall never see it like this again," said Mr. Baldwin.

Soon after ten, two big motor-vans came swaying slowly into Welden Close. The first van jolted several times, lurched dangerously and stopped dead a hundred yards from the house. The Baldwins went down to investigate and found that its front wheels had sunk deeply and hopelessly into the sticky yellow clay. It moaned on low gear once or twice, sank lower, and stopped exhausted. The driver climbed down in disgust, and half an hour passed before a fussy little tractor belonging to the Estate came along and pulled the lorry out.

" Better keep off the road and try and get across the grass," advised the tractor driver. It was not a very encouraging beginning: the furniture men began work in a bad temper and Edith was terrified lest they banged the stuff about. But in a few minutes the work was in full swing: the carpets had been laid the previous day and the Baldwins went from room to room, directing operations and occasionally getting a bump that once or twice seemed intentional.

By lunch-time the lounge and dining-room were ready and the Baldwins undid a packet of sandwiches and ate them upon a newspaper spread out on the weathered oak table while the men retired to refresh themselves in their vans. By tea-time the work was done: Mr. Baldwin gave the chief man a ten-shilling note, the vans

gingerly departed across the grass, and they were alone in a furnished " Greengates " for the first time.

There was too much to be done to give much time for meditation: a large crate in the kitchen contained all the new pots and pans and china: another crate, brought by carrier from " Grasmere " contained the few things that had survived from the old house: their own clothing—the clock presented to Mr. Baldwin by the staff of the office—and a few wedding presents and personal belongings that could not be destroyed or sold.

Mrs. Chambers of the tea-shop had fulfilled her promise to find them a girl, and produced no less a person than her own niece, Peggy—a girl exactly after the style the Baldwins hoped for. Peggy arrived at four o'clock for an interview: a sturdy, country-looking girl with a round, rosy face, surprised grey eyes and large pink hands. It was arranged that she should come in next day, make the beds, generally clear up, learn how to work the stove and prepare dinner for them at 7.30.

A man arrived to fix the electric lamps and Edith worked like a Trojan on the curtains and bedrooms while Mr. Baldwin packed the new linen in the heated cupboard and boiled out the new saucepans and kettle.

They left soon after tea, for the Auctioneer's men were at " Grasmere," and the Baldwins wanted to keep an eye on them to see that they did not dismantle their bed. As they dragged themselves wearily to the station they were happy to think that everything was ready for them in Welden Valley when the door of " Grasmere " closed next day.

" Phew ! " said Mr. Baldwin, " what a time it's been ! "

And Edith, with a wan smile, said: "It *has* been harder than I thought ! "

They were glad to have found a promising girl like Peggy—but their happiness even now was tinged with a little sadness. For after dinner that evening at " Grasmere "—after their last dinner in the old house—after the dinner things had been washed up and put into their places in the sad old basement kitchen, Ada would take off her stiff starched apron, put on her rusty old coat and green hat with the artificial cherries in it, and come up to say good-bye.

CHAPTER XX

THE OMINOUS PROPHECIES of Mr. Dove were more than fulfilled when they returned home, and the ravages within " Grasmere " were apparent even from the front gate. The window curtains had disappeared and the old house stared at them reproachfully with gaunt, lashless eyes. The front door stood listlessly ajar and their feet echoed across the matless, carpetless hall.

Mr. Baldwin dropped his umbrella into Lot i and hung his hat upon Lot 2. The partition between the dining-room and drawing-room had been thrown back and all the chairs in the house had been collected and lined up in rows for the comfort of those who were to attend the Sale next day. A small rostrum had been built in front of the drawing-room window and the dining-room table had been pushed far away into a corner.

Even the old pendulum clock on the mantelpiece had been defaced by a large white ticket marked Lot 29 and Tom and Edith were very thankful that their absence in Welden Valley had spared them from watching the end of the old house. They realised how right Mr. Dove had been in urging them to sleep elsewhere on this last evening. In every room the curtains were down and the carpets rolled and stacked in corners, and every piece of furniture, large and small, had been removed from its old position and placed in readiness for disposal. Their

bedroom alone remained a small oasis in a desert of bare floors and walls, although even there the carpet had been rolled up and the furniture labelled.

The men departed at six o'clock, and it was uncanny to see Ada come up the basement stairs in her same old uniform, a cloth under her arm and a handful of cutlery for dinner. Her face was like a mask as she edged her way between the chairs to spread the cloth on the table in the corner. The Baldwins did not attempt either to joke or apologise to her over the appalling muddle, and the old lady appeared to expect nothing to be said. She moved to and fro in her stiff black uniform like the ghost of an old serving lady in the twilit ruins of an ancient home.

Edith went up to wash and Mr. Baldwin tried to cheer up the dull, ash-laden fire.

It was a sad, incongruous little dinner: incongruous because despite its queer position in a corner of the drawing-room, the table was set exactly as if the evening were one of the thousands that were past. Mr. Baldwin's place was laid upon the usual side, facing the dining-room window, Edith's on the side towards the door and nearest to the bell. The salt cellar, the pepper pot and the mustard jar stood huddled in their usual corner like three little fugitives upon a desert island.

It was almost as if Ada had maliciously planned to stir remorse within her master and mistress on this final evening, for Edith, in the hurry of the day, had left the old lady to arrange the last meal at "Grasmere" herself. She brought them a mixed grill, and an apple tart with junket: dishes she had been told were her most successful and most relished by her people.

Tom and Edith could well have managed upon a few

makeshift slices of pressed beef, for the festive little meal gathered memories that tightened the throat. At such moments the bad times slink away and the good ones crowd in with all their wistful sadness. Mr. Baldwin had not expected to feel sad: he had anticipated a keen romance and excitement—and he was disturbed that such unexpected memories came to him. The wide open partition reminded him of the far-off days when he had been Treasurer of the Acacia Tennis Club and the two rooms had been thrown together and used for General Meetings. He could almost hear the babble and merriment of the Musical Evenings that had followed the official business. Good days—but memories: the Members of the old Club had scattered far and wide and he had no reason to feel sad. They were strangers in Brondesbury now and they had no ties to break with old neighbours. . . .

" Pity Ada's not coming/' he said, and even his low voice brought an echo from the curtainless window pane. " Did you ask that girl if she could cook ? "

" She's been helping Mrs. Chambers in the bakery," said Edith, " she's bound to be all right."

" Poor old Ada. Pity she's not ten years younger. She would have enjoyed ' Greengates.' I wonder what she's thinking about down there ? "

He had to climb over three rows of chairs to reach the bell and ring for Ada to clear away. There was nowhere to sit comfortably in the dining-room, for their arm-chairs were wedged in a corner and buried under piles of books. They went upstairs and wandered aimlessly from room to room, waiting for the sound of Ada coming up the basement stairs to say good-bye. Even in their bedroom they felt conspicuous against the uncurtained

window, so they switched off the light and stood looking down the dark road until they felt that Ada must be ready.

Once or twice Mr. Baldwin went to the head of the stairs and stood listening for the signs of the old lady's departure. He could hear the familiar sounds of running water—cupboards opening—plates being lined on the dresser shelves: he heard her poking the fire from the kitchen range: he heard the kitchen door open and the clang of the dustbin lid. Then there was a long silence, and at last the slow, heavy tread on the basement stairs.

They went down to the hall to meet her. She had a shapeless little attache-case with a strap round it for safety, and a short, stubby umbrella. The cherries in her hat nodded grimly at them as she put down her bag to shake hands.

"It's not 'Good-bye,' Ada," said Mrs. Baldwin, "because you've got to come and see us often in Welden Valley."

"I'll be pleased to, m'am. You'll find everything's put straight in the kitchen. There's a good sackful of coal in the shed they ought to allow you for, and the man never came for the jam jars. I've put some cold sausages and the cold tart in the cupboard so as you'll have a bite for lunch. Good-bye, sir. Good-bye, m'am. I hope you'll be all right in that new house."

Mr. Baldwin fumbled in his pocket, produced an envelope and pressed it into Ada's hand. "Something from us both, Ada. We wish you were coming with us."

"Thank you, sir." She put the envelope in her purse and picked up her bag. She turned to go down the basement stairs to the kitchen door, and for the first time in

all the years Mr. Baldwin laid his hand upon her arm. He led her to the front door and opened it for her. They watched her fumble with the gate, close it carefully, and go away into the night, and when they turned back into the house it seemed suddenly to have grown cold and dead. An icy stillness lay in the black shadows of the basement stairs; a solitary glowing eye peered at them from the dining-room fire; Mr. Baldwin looked at his wife, and their eyes met.

" Let's go to the pictures, Edie. We can't stay here."

They got home at eleven o'clock, glanced round the dark, deserted house and went straight to bed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SALE was announced to begin at ten o'clock, and at nine-thirty Mr. Dove arrived with his clerk and two middle-aged, shapeless men who put on green aprons in the hall. Mr. Dove looked round suspiciously and asked Mrs. Baldwin whether she was quite certain that everything they had used had been returned to the exact position of the previous night. "I once knew a Sale ruined because some of the Lots had been moved and couldn't be found. It's got to run slick—without a hitch: you've got to keep people concentrated."

The Baldwins left Mr. Dove checking over the catalogue with his clerk, and went up to sit at their bedroom window. It was nearly ten o'clock and they were very curious to see what kind of people were coming to the Sale.

As the clock struck ten it looked terribly as though the whole thing was going to be a ghastly fiasco. Exactly three people had arrived. A young, shabbily dressed couple and a stout lady who looked as if she had come out of curiosity. The young couple did not even appear to have any original intention of coming at all, for they peered up at the Notice in the garden, discussed the matter at some length, looked at their watches and entered self-consciously as people to a circus side-show.

Mr. Baldwin was in an agony of suspense: he even thought of going down to tell Mr. Dove to call the Sale

off to avoid the stout lady buying everything at a shilling a Lot—and then, gradually, things began to happen. People arrived in twos and threes and some even came in cars. Most of them were women and they recognised several people from the neighbourhood. Then came a few men, singly: men of a type, whom the Baldwins took to be Furniture Dealers: they were pleased at the arrival of the old tobacco-odoured man of the Antique Shop, for he had evidently spotted something during his visit and had come to snap it up.

Mr. Dove had told them it was not unusual for people to attend the sale of their own furniture but to avoid being conspicuous they put on their hats and coats to make it appear as if they were ordinary people, and went downstairs.

About a dozen people were wandering about, looking at the Lots and comparing them with their catalogues, and still a few were coming in.

They could see no sign of Mr. Dove and were beginning to wonder what had happened when Edith touched her husband's arm and pointed to the windows leading into the garden. There was Mr. Dove, and he was behaving in a most extraordinary way. He was standing on the iron balcony outside the windows, leaning on the balustrade, gazing into the garden with his back to the room. He was languidly smoking a cigarette and appeared completely oblivious to the things happening within the house. He might have been a thousand miles at sea, lounging on the promenade deck of a liner.

The Baldwins wondered what on earth he was doing—until suddenly a remarkable change took place. He pulled out his watch and seemed to brace himself for a great

exertion: he threw the cigarette into the garden, swung round and strode into the room.

He had obviously staged his entrance, for he banged the windows to behind him and the clatter brought immediate attention: he stood motionless before stepping on to his rostrum: the audience seated themselves and he rapped the table with a small mallet:

" Ladies and Gentlemen.

"We have a great deal to do to-day: we have one hundred and twenty-seven valuable Lots to dispose of and I shall be very obliged if you will help me by giving me your attention as closely as possible.

" I need say little in introducing this interesting Sale: I have carefully examined every piece and can guarantee its condition without reserve. The majority of these choice pieces have come from old country houses and the owners are reluctantly disposing of them for one reason alone: they are moving to a new house and wish to furnish afresh. I can only add that pieces of this quality and condition very rarely come into the market and I hope you will give everything the consideration it deserves. All right, Bert ! "

The speech ended surprisingly and abruptly and all eyes were turned towards the door as one of the green-aproned assistants wheezed in with Lot i—the Umbrella stand. Mr. Baldwin felt a pang as he saw his old friend held up before twenty pairs of curious eyes: he wondered how many thousand times the tin base had rung with the plop of his umbrella. But he soon found himself too interested in the proceedings to think of the personal side.

Mr. Dove obviously realised the need of a little wit to warm up his audience.

" Now, Ladies and Gentlemen !—What above all things do we need in this good old country of ours ?—an umbrella ! Second only to our umbrellas we need a stand to put them in—and here's an opportunity to give your umbrellas a home to be proud of ! Lot i : Umbrella stand of seasoned oak : sound lead base : perfect shape to fit any hall—large or small. Now then, Ladies and Gentlemen : who's going to be the lucky possessor of Lot i ? Remember that Lot i brings luck ! "

" Half a crown," said the stout lady who had been the first arrival. Her effort brought on a fit of coughing, followed by three incredibly quick, staccato sneezes.

There was a suppressed laugh, and the Baldwins looked anxiously at Mr. Dove to see whether he was annoyed. But Mr. Dove turned the incident cleverly to advantage:

" Madam !—you're wise—next time you go out in the rain you must have an umbrella—and a stand to put it in ! "

Everybody laughed except the Dealers, who wanted to get on with the business, but a friendly intimate atmosphere was established:

" Now then—let's begin ! This lady has opened the Sale with a bid of half a crown for a stand that cost £2 10s., and is as good as new ! Now then——"

" Three shillings," came a squeak from a wistful little face at the back.

" Three and six," said the stout lady.

Mr. Baldwin felt his blood coursing with excitement.

" Four shillings," returned the little lady.

" Four shillings," repeated Mr. Dove. " Now we're beginning ! "

He spoke too soon, for this optimistic prediction seemed to freeze the audience into silence.

" Come along now ! Who's going to say ' Five shillings' ? "

No one seemed inclined to say, " Five shillings "—the umbrella stand looked as if it were shrivelling up in the hands of the green-aproned assistant.

" Four shillings ? " It's a sacrifice ! Any advance on four shillings ? Going, going—Gone ! "

Mr. Baldwin listened to the brief formalities with a heavy heart. The first wicket had fallen very cheaply.

Never had he and Edith passed a morning so filled with conflicting emotions and violent reactions: periods of bitter disappointment would give place to a sudden, exultant surprise, which just as suddenly would fade in the face of a heart-rending sacrifice. Mr. Baldwin's twelve-volume *History of England*, together with the *Gems of International Literature* in ten volumes, were knocked down for a shilling. The dining-room curtains fell for half a crown: there were moments when the Baldwins felt as if it were a hideous nightmare. They observed that it was when the Dealers stepped in for the larger stuff that fairly good prices were forthcoming. Three of them put up quite a struggle for the dining-room table, which was of old mahogany and well carved. It reached the highest price of the morning at £7 10s., followed by the large bookcase at £6 and the walnut-wood china-cabinet in the drawing-room at £5 15s".

Despite the disasters the figures steadily mounted up, and as Tom and Edith lunched in the kitchen they jotted up a total of £59 12s". 6^, which covered eighty-nine Lots, or the whole of the ground floor.

The afternoon was devoted to the bedrooms and a miscellany of kitchen utensils and box-room odds and ends. Three Dealers alone returned after lunch and they remained only to bid for the tallboy in the best bedroom. Here was a genuine surprise, for although Mr. Baldwin had always thought a lot of it he was too disillusioned to expect the £10 that it fetched. The Dealers then departed, leaving the beds and bedding to the women.

At five o'clock a weary, bloodshot-eyed Mr. Dove sat at the kitchen table and after much muttering and arguing with his clerk announced to Mr. Baldwin the satisfactory figure of £98 17s. 6d. The £8 17s. 6d., which was over and above the first rough estimate disappeared immediately when Mr. Dove reminded them that commission and cost of catalogue had to be taken into account, but despite everything the result was not so bad.

Mr. Dove sat back and sighed—took out a cigarette and motioned to his clerk to go upstairs and supervise the removal of such furniture that was being taken away that evening. Heavy boots were thudding overhead on the bare boards of the dining-room: the Dealers' vans had arrived before the Sale was over and a great deal of stuff had disappeared.

Edith had taken the precaution to make a thermos flask of tea and Mr. Dove had a cup with the remaining slice of tart.

"Well," he said, "that's that."

"I must say you did it wonderfully," remarked Mr. Baldwin. "It must be a strain to talk for five hours practically without stopping."

"It's not so much the talking," said Mr. Dove, "it's the concentration. You've got to know human nature—

sum 'em all up and lead 'em on—tickle their fancy—you know ? "

" It must be very interesting," said Edith.

Mr. Dove smiled and rose to take his leave. " Well. I hope we'll meet again. Let me know if I can ever do anything. We'll be sending you a cheque in a day or two and the balance on the house ought to be along Thursday. Are you leaving now ? "

" We're catching the 6.24 for Welden Valley: we've got half an hour before we go."

" I better take the keys with me, and you can just slam the front door when you go. Well, good-bye, Mrs. Baldwin—good-bye, sir. Good luck to the new house ! "

They followed him up the basement stairs and down the bare passage to the front door. The last of the Dealers' men was leaving with two of the drawing-room chairs: a woman was stacking a pile of blankets in a perambulator and another was leaning on the door of a small car, laying the three landscape pictures from the drawing-room on the back seat with a care that scarcely justified the three shillings and sixpence she had paid for each.

The clerk closed his greasy register and followed his master. " There won't be anything else called for to-night," he said. " The rest'll be collected in the morning. Good night, sir."

" Good night," said Mr. Baldwin. He closed the door and was alone with Edith in " Grasmere " for the last time. " It's still ours until midnight," he said with a little twisted smile. " What a time it's been ! We ought to sleep soundly to-night—at ' Greengates.' "

" If Peggy cooks us a supper that doesn't keep us awake," said Edith.

They went over to close and lock the French windows and stood for a moment on the iron balcony. A few autumn leaves were still lying on the paths, for Mr. Baldwin had scarcely touched the garden in the past busy months. They reminded him of the trouble with Ada over the broom and he thought how long ago it seemed. Against the lower wall lay the stack of leaves he had made in the autumn of the previous year: a little heap of embalmed sadness: a little monument to a futile groping for a happiness that had sidestepped him and slipped away.

"We'd better go," he said, and as he turned from the garden the evening light caught the pale green shoots that were forming in the grizzled shrubs beneath the wall.

They went up to their bedroom for the small bags that contained their needs for the previous night and as the clock was striking six they closed the door, pulled back the squeaking gate and turned towards the station.

CHAPTER XXII

Those long-looked-forward-to events are worn-out before they happen. The best times of all sweep down upon us so unexpectedly that anticipation gets no chance to water down the pleasure of reality: and they pass so swiftly that even reality never gets a chance to bore its ugly holes into the memories that remain.

Mr. Baldwin had no doubt looked forward a little too long to the thrill of slamming the front door of "Grasmere" for the last time. He had thought a little too much about the great moment when he would turn his back upon a faded, worn-out life and stride away through the spring evening towards gleaming horizons of unblistered varnish.

Everything happened perfectly to plan until the moment came for slamming the front door. The chaos of the auction had risen to his highest expectations: the departure of the bargain hunters and the last wistful half-hour with Edith in the old house had worked out entirely as he had pictured—and then, suddenly, everything went wrong.

Possibly he stared for a moment too long into the forlorn, umbrella-standless passage, for in that fatal moment of delay a torrent of memories poured from every nook and cranny of the sad old house and filled him with a sudden agony of remorse. The mad stupidity of it all rose

up before him, and he realised, too late, what an unspeakable fool he had been. A few days of trivial discontent had blinded him to a thousand solid, well-tested contentments that " Grasmere " stood for, and because his retirement had made his old home temporarily distasteful he had deliberately broken it to pieces and thrown it away ! The hollow echo of that slamming door seemed to carry away with it everything that he could trust and rely upon. He had understood " Grasmere " and " Grasmere " had understood him. Every rattle of its windows had become the inconsequential chattering of an old, well-tried friend: every chair had patiently moulded itself to the whims of his joints: every stick of furniture, every cup and saucer and door knob had proved itself and would have stood by him to the end. And now he had destroyed it beyond hope of repair. He had destroyed it in a fruitless gamble to cheat the years by discarding the trusted companions of a lifetime—by hobbling away to flirt with a new life that would have nothing in common with him ! The house in Welden Valley was young: it would be hard-muscled, unsympathetic and impatient. He thought with a sudden revulsion of the hard, strange armchairs: the hard, bright lights: the restive, untamed bed that would jerk him impatiently away from it and call for youth to lie with it at night. It had been his happy conviction that he would never feel old or out of sorts in a young, vigorous house like " Greengates." How true that was—but how true with a terribly different meaning ! If he were ill—he would never dare let young " Greengates" know about it: it would despise him for it and turn its back upon him. The old house had always understood: it had always soothed him in its pools of undemanding quietness.

Only the sight of Edith, waiting by the gate, gave him the strength to turn away and face the frightening, uncharted future. He could have rushed to the Estate Agent's office—begged for the key—slept upon the bare boards of "Grasmere" that night and begged Mr. Ranken-Dudley next morning to give him back his home at any cost. He would have called from door to door upon the people who had taken his furniture and begged them to restore it to him. He would have made it his life's work to replace everything in "Grasmere" as he had known it and loved it. ... But Edith was waiting. Nothing on earth could restore "Grasmere" to him now—no power on earth could replace it with all that it had once possessed for him.

"Come along," said Edith.

He could see that she, too, was suffering, and he pitied her and despised himself for what he had done to her. Loose brass knobs on a bedstead had nothing to do with the comfort of one's bed. She walked in tight-lipped, stricken silence, like some old Flemish peasant woman driven from her home by war. She clutched her bag in a way that told him that she had smuggled some secret relics away. In bitter truth they were refugees in that dark moment: refugees dragging themselves to the shelter of a strange, hard building in a strange, uncertain country. . . .

"Two singles—Welden Valley," he mumbled through the ticket-office window.

Right back in the autumn, when first they had heard that "Greengates" would not be ready until the end of March, Edith had said: "The spring will be a splendid time to move." Her words came back to Mr. Baldwin as

he sat waiting disconsolately for the train. A few bright tufts of grass were sprouting from the borders of the gravelled platform and a half-starved, stunted chestnut tree beside the signal-box had gathered its frail resources to push forth a cluster of soft, sticky buds. Even here—in this drab old suburb, the spring found cracks to sprout through: out there in Welden Valley it would stretch its limbs in wild exultancy. He rose to meet the train with a desperate effort to be cheerful.

" Well, Edie," he said, " off at last ! "

" We'll come back one day and have a look round," said Edith, picking up her bag and following him to the bleak, empty train.

" Of course we will. Often. We'll walk down the old road and see what that fellow does to ' Grasmere' ! "

" And if we're homesick we can go and have some Elocution lessons off him ! "

" Good heavens, yes !—it's not as if we were going across the world. I mean—*supposing*—supposing you didn't like Welden Valley—we could always buy the old house back."

" Of course we could," said Edith.

And suddenly the clouds began to clear. The train surged westward, and no passage of time will quench man's longing to cheat the darkness by roaming in the evening towards the setting sun. And Edith did an unexpected thing that warmed and brightened Mr. Baldwin's heart. She opened her bag and produced a flask of sherry.

" There was a good deal left in the bottle," she explained. " It seemed a pity to waste it."

" I should think so, indeed ! " exclaimed Mr. Baldwin.

She had even brought something to drink it from: a small tooth glass that had saved itself from the auction by hiding in the bathroom cupboard behind a bottle of liniment.

Edith took her share; Mr. Baldwin sipped from the flask, and gradually, in all its glory, the journey that Mr. Baldwin had begun to dread burst into robust blossom. Not for the first time in history did a man feel his destiny reviving from an opportune glass of sherry upon an empty stomach. His forebodings and remorse were so completely swept away that he felt well-nigh ashamed of himself. He sprawled out his legs and lit his pipe as the train gathered speed and rattled through the dusk.

" I was a fool just now, Edie. Did you see me standing at the front door after I'd slammed it ?—pretending I was making sure that it was properly shut ? I felt *awful* \— I felt I couldn't bear it. I felt we'd made a horrible, ghastly mistake ! "

Edith nodded and sipped her sherry. " I know," she said.

" You felt it, too ? "

" Of course I did. We shouldn't be human if we didn't. Standing there by the gate I thought of all the times I had gone in and out."

He nodded. " I felt I wanted to scream and hammer at the door—like a little boy shut out in the night. D'you know what I mean ? "

" It'll pass off," said Edith.

" But it *has* passed off! " he cried. " That's the extraordinary thing ! Coming along to the station just now I felt we'd absolutely ruined our lives: I felt we were—sort of—roaming off into a kind of utter emptiness. Isn't this

sherry good?—It's so smooth.—I mean, *Edit*—*supposing* we suddenly woke up and found we'd dreamt it all—and were just on our way back to the old house to carry on exactly the same—would you be glad? "

" No," said Edith in a firm voice.

The sherry had chased away the last remaining houses from the carriage window—they were running out through the open fields, and a light green down upon them gleamed in the sunset.

" D'you realise," he said, " we aren't suburban people any longer?—we're country people ! " He leaned back in his seat and folded his hand round the bowl of his pipe. " Supposing we'd funk'd all this?—we'd just be sitting back there. . . . "

The long day was beginning to tell upon them. They lapsed into silence and turned their faces to the window. After a while Mr. Baldwin said: " I still can't believe it: I shan't believe it's real till I wake up to-morrow in Welden Valley . . . "

He puffed slowly at his pipe. What did it all mean?—what was it all leading them to? The future gleamed excitingly ahead, but it lay beyond a veil that no thought could penetrate. New friends? What kind of friends?—new interests?—new pleasures?

" I hope Peggy goes in all right to get dinner," remarked Edith. " I hope she understood it was to-night. . . . "

" I don't care ! " he said with a laugh that rang with bravado. " We'll cook it ourselves if she doesn't turn up ! "

There were far more lights in Welden Valley than they had expected: at least a dozen houses were brightly

illuminated and despite the late hour the Estate Office was still in full activity. Lights blazed from every window; they could see girls busily typing letters and men moving to and fro. It was reassuring and heartening, for they had expected a groping walk of half a mile through a darkened valley.

Their fears concerning the arrival of Peggy were quickly set at rest, for as they reached the corner where the road turned into Welden Close they saw a clear-cut square of light gleaming ahead of them.

" She's there," said Edith with a sigh of relief.

There was something symbolic in the picture that framed itself in the light from the kitchen window. As they drew near they could see Peggy at work by the table—standing sturdily against the clean distempered wall. She was wearing a light blue uniform and her sleeves were rolled up nearly to her shoulders. Gleaming pink arms moved over a white-topped table, a row of shining plates behind. There were none of the lurking shadows that haunted old Ada's kitchen in Brondesbury Terrace: it was a picture scowled and thrown up by the sea.

The green gates clicked behind them and the lantern light over the front door clicked on soon after they rang the bell. It seemed as if everything in " Grcengates " were going to happen in a series of cheerful clicks.

Peggy threw open the door with surprising quickness. When you rang the bell at the old house there was almost time to go and buy a paper while Ada wheezed up the basement stairs.

" You've got here safely ! " said Peggy—and a cheerful smile made up for the missing " m'am."

" Yes," said Mrs. Baldwin, " quite safely."

They entered the little hall and stood for a moment as if expecting Peggy to tell them to wait while she went to see if the people of the house were at home. " Well ! " said Mr. Baldwin, " I suppose we'd better hang up our coats and hats."

He went to the downstairs cloakroom, touched the switch outside the door and plunged the hall into darkness. " You turn on the w.c. light from inside," explained Peggy. Mr. Baldwin fumbled in the dark—touched another switch and the light flicked up on the first-floor landing. " Takes a bit of getting used to," he muttered.

It was certainly a little puzzling, for the lighting at the old house had been on very simple lines. In " Greengates " you were able to perform complicated manoeuvres with a little practice. When you wanted to go to bed, a switch in the hall turned on the light upstairs: having ascended you extinguished the downstairs light from a switch beside your bedroom door, and it seemed that almost any of the switches turned on or turned out the lantern light in the porch. By the time Mr. Baldwin had mastered these details he was beginning to feel at home.

It transpired that Mrs. Chambers of the cake shop had come up to " Greengates " herself that afternoon to help her niece prepare the dinner. " Not," hastily added Peggy, " that I can't cook myself—only Auntie thought I might have trouble with the stiff taps and things."

" That was very good of Mrs. Chambers," said Edith. " Was everything all right ? "

" Quite all right," said Peggy, " and Auntie took the liberty of making a steak pie instead of frying cutlets. She thought it'd be better in case anything delayed you."

" Excellent," said Mr. Baldwin. Peggy looked so new

that it was hard to believe she had been alive for nineteen years: she looked as if she had been supplied with the house and polished to match it. There were no odds and ends about her: no spots or stains; her bright blue eyes matched the curtains; her bright pink face and arms blended with the fresh, distempered walls. She only appeared to wear three pieces of clothing: a blue cotton dress, a pair of distemper-coloured stockings and brown shoes. Ada always looked as if you could undress her indefinitely without making much change in her appearance. Mrs. Baldwin looked at the girl in wonder and a little sadness: no human being that walked about and touched things could remain in such spotless condition for long.

She felt the same touch of sadness about the house itself, for it was too wonderful at present to be a genuine home. She and her husband were so creased and time-worn in comparison that every movement—every step they took seemed to threaten destruction to their virgin surroundings. Her umbrella and Tom's walking-stick looked awful in that trim little weathered oak stand: they looked like a battered old Punch and Judy from a worn-out side show peeping out of the Queen's doll's house. When Mr. Baldwin hung up his hat in the cloak-room it looked so dusty and greasy that he was ashamed of it and quickly hung his burberry beside it to lessen the comparison.

It was their first view of "Greengates" by artificial light. They would have declared it impossible for the little house to look better by night than it had by day, but it did: it eclipsed their wildest dreams.

The wrought-iron knocker on the front door was

shaped like a miniature sailing ship: it would be a luxury in itself to lift that knocker: it would be worth going out for the pleasure of rapping out one's return upon it. The gleaming letter-box seemed to be crouching back in readiness to seize hold of letters like a playful puppy and swallow them into its little wire stomach. When the door opened you came upon the tough little cocoanut mat let into the floor and flush with the carpet. All previous front-door mats that the Baldwins had known were cumbersome, contrary things that turned up their corners, stopped the door from opening and slid with the feet: this little mat promised never to push itself forward: it gently seized one's feet, wiped them and passed them on without a murmur to smooth stretches of fawn, unpatterned carpet that flowed up the stairs, lapped against the walls, streamed into the various rooms and into the furthest corners without pause or break.

Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin went upstairs. Beginning life afresh had decided them upon doing away with the old-fashioned business of sharing a double bed: they were each to have their own bedroom now: Edith's looked out towards the sunset across Welden Close, Tom's towards where the dawn would come, over the crest of the hill with the time-honoured footpath winding up its side. The beds were made with the new linen and blankets: their pyjamas lay folded beside the turned-back sheets, they flicked on the neat, shell-shaped reading lamps over the beds, and Mr. Baldwin gave a sudden queer little sigh—" / don't know," he said, " it's all too ... well, too good to believe, isn't it ?—I can't help feeling there's a catch in it. Can you believe it's all ours, Edie ? "

Edith neither nodded nor shook her head.

" We're bound to find something that's . . . that's not quite right," she said.

" I almost hope we do," replied Mr. Baldwin. " It looks too much like an Ideal Home at the Exhibition. I feel somebody's going to come along to-morrow and say the Show's over—and pull it all down."

Even the crackling fire in the dining-room looked almost too good to be warm. Dinner was set out upon a spotless cloth that gleamed as if it had been varnished: the new cutlery shone like silver: the new earthenware dinner-service looked too pure to take the pie that Edith cut and served.

They began the meal with a light-hearted gust of conversation, but gradually the deep quietness of Welden Close compelled their voices to undertones. In Brondesbury Terrace it was never completely still: there were always the footsteps of a passer-by: the rumble of a lorry upon the main road: a neighbour calling in his cat—a window closing—a clock chiming—a train hooting: there was always, even in the depths of the night, some tiny sound to break the quietness. Here, in Welden Valley, Tom and Edith sat and listened, for the first time since their busless, lorryless childhood, to the compelling wonder of deep, unblemished silence. The windows framed a clear-cut fathomless square of indigo night and Mr. Baldwin had the queer feeling of being upon a bright-lit stage—of being an actor in a dinner scene: that the dark night enwrapped a vast, silent audience that watched a man and his wife play out the first scene of a drama.

" We ought to sleep wonderfully here," he said, wiping his mouth on a new serviette that was so stiff and shiny that it passed across a crumb and left it on his lip ...

" wonderfully," he added, removing the crumb with his fingers.

Steak pie, brussels-sprouts, and mashed potatoes: stewed pears and a piece of Cheddar that looked so new and clean that it might have been a chunk cut bodily from the distempered wall. Mr. Baldwin rose, and stared out of the window. Faintly he could see the great trunk of his elm, and gradually, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, the green gates outlined themselves. A pang of loneliness came and he tried to shake it off. They seemed so utterly removed out here from the noisy, friendly world of an hour ago. There was not a light to be seen: the intense stillness was broken by a faint rustle in the tree, and in the silence that followed the little house seemed to sink another hundred fathoms into a soundless ocean.

Edith, by force of habit, was piling the dinner plates together—then she remembered there was no basement and no Ada—and pressed the bell.

" I don't see why we shouldn't have the light in the porch," said Mr. Baldwin.

" Certainly not," said Edith. " I thought it was on."

" I turned it off trying to turn on the light in the hall," he said.

It was pleasant to meet Peggy in the passage and to feel that there was life in the world besides their own. He switched on the outside light and returned to the dining-room. He felt like the Captain of a ship with broken engines—drifting in the black emptiness of an Atlantic night—turning on every light in the vain hope of companionship.

The porch lantern certainly improved things: it threw

a pale, ghostly gleam across the little front garden, and he could pick out details here and there: a pile of stone slabs he had ordered for his crazy paving—a few tufts of grass that had escaped the builders' feet. He felt restless, and angry with himself for feeling so. No fire could look more inviting than the one before him—no chairs more anxious to make his acquaintance and become his friends. He ought now to settle down with Edith opposite him—to spread his legs to the fire, light his pipe, and have a long talk with her over the absorbing things that had happened in this eventful day.

But he could think of no more to say at present: everything had been talked out: they had slept fitfully on the last night in the old house and they had been up before seven. Bed seemed the obvious thing—and yet he felt too restless for bed—too restless to talk. He told himself that it was natural to be restless on the first night in a new house—but it did not comfort him. Supposing their lives were to go on exactly as before?—supposing, after all, they found no friends and no new interests—that everything turned out to be too young and out of key for them in Welden Valley? It was easy to be lonely in the old house, for most of their neighbours kept themselves to themselves. There were busy streets, cinemas, endless shops to look into in Brondesbury . . . and a house that understood them. Supposing the people in Welden Valley labelled them as a couple of old bores with no claim upon the buoyant life of a new city?—what would happen if Edith and he were thrown back upon each other?—night after night—month after month, in this utter, impenetrable stillness? He shivered—gave his head a little shake to clear it—and turned to the fire.

Edith was stifling a yawn : she saw him looking at her and smiled apologetically. " I'd sleep anywhere to-night," she said. " I shall sleep like a log in that lovely new bedroom."

" You go to bed right away," he said. " I'll just get my hat and stick and go for a stroll." He took her arm and they went upstairs.

Edith's room looked rather cold and bare when the time came to think seriously of bed. The bed itself looked a little too self-centred and proud of itself to welcome a timid newcomer: it seemed to stick up its chest and stomach a little too high.

" What a charming room it is," said Mr. Baldwin. " You've planned it and thought it all out wonderfully."

It occurred to him for the first time what a struggle poor Edith must have had to keep her love of freshness alive at the old house. She had been a mere girl when they had furnished it over thirty years ago: she had thrown her youthful heart and soul into it—and then for over thirty years she had fought a heart-breaking battle against decay. Now and then she had replaced old, worn-out things with tiny, hard won improvements that in his blindness he had scoffed at and fought against. For all those years her love of fresh, modern things had been stifled: one would have thought her desires would have paled and died; that when the time came to furnish " Greengates" her mind would have groped back feebly towards the old fashioned things that she had understood as beautiful in years gone by.

But lo and behold !—when the chance came—when her desires and dreams should in the normal course of things have passed away, her genius had burst out as

freshly as ever. How on earth had she kept up to date and understood so perfectly what would look right in a modern house ?

" You've done it all beautifully" he said. " Everything's so exactly right."

She turned from her new dressing-table with its pivoting, frameless side mirrors and low-built surface: she was laying out her toilet set—and her brushes and scent bottle looked a little uneasy in their grand surroundings.

" You were the one that made it possible, Tom."

She smiled at him and he turned abruptly to the windows. He had a strong dislike for Darby and Joan scenes, and Edith, on occasions, was a little too inclined to set the stage for them.

" Don't be silly. Anybody can do this with a little"—he nearly said " courage"—" energy."

" It wants more than . . .just energy . . ."

There she was again !—she was always saying things that his own restraint so carefully avoided !

" Anyway," he said, " I couldn't have done it alone—so that's that! Sure you won't be lonely if I go out for a stroll ? "

" Of course I won't. Peggy's here. But don't forget where the house is—it'd be silly to sleep out under a hedge on the first night! "

He kissed her. " You get along into bed. I shan't go far. I'll be back in ten minutes."

It did not seem correct to muffle himself in an overcoat now that he was a countryman. He took his hat and stick, thrust out his chest and strolled off into the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LANTERN LIGHT over the door guided him to the gate, but he had to grope carefully over the rough grass verge that lay between his fence and the road. How extraordinarily dark and quiet it was out there ! When you went out in Brondesbury Terrace you would always see a bus or car slip by on the main road: there would always be someone walking nearby: a row of lived-in, lit-up houses opposite and a line of moth-infested lamp-posts. He found himself longing for the very things he had most longed to be rid of!

Out here there was a cool, sweet country dampness in the air—a rustle of trees, and a smell of earth and stars—and yet, when he turned at a little distance to look at his new home he was filled with a strange melancholy. Nothing could look more inviting than its clean-cut outline and its mellowed lights. It lacked nothing: it was a perfect home—but its very perfection called upon him to achieve the impossible: to live ravenously in the present and to blot out past and future.

Darkness to the front of him: darkness to the right of him—only to the left lay a few glimmering lights, and his lonely steps rang out on the concrete road that skirted Welden Close. As he passed the dim white pegs that marked the empty building sites he began to wonder about the little pinked-in squares on the Estate Agent's map—

sites that he understood had been sold. He realised now that those coloured squares had been decoys: that he had been duped into building out here in this wilderness away from the other people—that his house was to serve as a piece of ground bait for the convenience of the Estate Management. There were probably some awful, unforeseen drawbacks to Welden Close that everyone but he had realised. He had come to Welden Valley with a hunger for companionship and they had stuck him out here where nobody would ever come. . . -

Oh, well—he was depressed, and that was the end of it. Maybe it would be better in the morning. He decided to walk as far as the village—to go slowly by the new houses in Cymbeline Road and see if he could spot through some of the windows the people who were to be his neighbours, but never, probably, his friends. Then home to bed. . . .

" Good evening ! " came a voice through the darkness.

Mr. Baldwin glanced up with a start of surprise. He was passing the gate of the first new house and a rotund little man was standing there. He could not see the man's face—for the bright light over the front door revealed nothing but a stubby little silhouette in plus fours, smoking a cigar.

" Good evening," replied Mr. Baldwin, and he braced himself to walk on. He had always shrunk from people who were too suddenly familiar and his instinct told him to withdraw politely, and have a look at the little man by daylight before taking further steps. But second thoughts warned him that his whole future in Welden Valley might depend upon what he did now. If he were to walk straight by without a word this little man might tell the people of Welden Valley that the newcomers at " Greengates " were too proud of themselves to know their neighbours.

it would mean the very isolation he was dreading. He stopped dead, and said: " Lovely night ! "

" It is indeed," replied the little man. " Are you the chap from ' Greengates ' ? "

Mr. Baldwin felt a twinge of disappointment. For general purposes he divided the human race into three broad categories:

(a) Men who referred to their wives as " my wife."

(b) Men who referred to them as " *the* wife."

(c) Those who called them " my old lady."

He sadly placed his new acquaintance in category (b). He had hoped that no one in Welden Valley would fall below (a). But what did it matter?—they were brother pioneers. He gave a friendly laugh.

" That's right," he said. " How did you know ? "

" Sherlock Holmes ! " replied the little man, jerking his thumb towards Welden Close. " One house up the road; one man comes down the road ! "

Mr. Baldwin responded in a spirit that surprised him.

" I'll have a shot now—and guess you live there ! " he said, nodding towards the house that lay behind the little man.

The little man chuckled, and turned round to admire his new home in the light of Mr. Baldwin's pointing finger.

" I think it's a delightful house," said Mr. Baldwin. He and Edith had noticed it in particular as they had passed: it was a dignified, Regency sort of house with long windows and green shutters, with two neat little box trees in green tubs to either side of the door.

" D'you like it ? " said the little man. " I'm not sure whether I don't prefer the Tudor ones myself—but the wife voted for a Regency one because of the high ceilings.

Tou've got a nice place up there. I'd have built in Welderi Close myself if I'd known somebody else was going there."

Mr. Baldwin never knew quite how it happened, but suddenly he found himself strolling down the road with his new friend and talking to him about Welden Valley as if he had known him for a lifetime. Such a thing would have been unthinkable in Brondesbury Terrace!—nobody would dream of picking up a total stranger and diving into a heart-to-heart talk about Brondesbury, because Brondesbury was not an absorbing subject to discuss: the building of it had been completed years ago and it was now a place that one merely lived in, in silence.

"Van Boon's my name," said the little man. "Nothing Dutch about me though."

Whatever he was he proved himself a good and sympathetic listener. Mr. Baldwin forgot to look at the houses he was passing: he found himself telling Mr. van Doon the whole story of his adventure: how he and his wife had known the Valley when it was a desolate place: how furious they had been when first they had seen its dawning development—he told Mr. van Doon about their unexpected visit to the Show House and all that it had led to. He even told him of his emotions at leaving his old house that afternoon.

"I know," said the little man. "We all take roots and it hurts to pull 'em up. But you're right in coming here: it's got a future, you know—a big future."

"What made you come?" asked Mr. Baldwin.

"Well—the Estate Manager's a pal of mine for one thing."

" Mr. Watkinson ? "

" Yes—old Tom Watkinson. I knew him in Singapore."

" You've lived abroad ? " enquired Mr. Baldwin with a new interest.

" Knocked about a good deal out East," said Mr. van Doon.

" Watkinson tells me he's going to build a house for himself in Welden Close."

Mr. van Doon threw back his head and laughed.

" He always tells people that when he's selling 'em a house. Nothing like it for giving confidence ! " He glanced quickly at Mr. Baldwin and added: " I don't mean he's dishonest—I reckon he really *does* believe he's going to build for himself—but when the time comes he always shuts down and clears off to the next place."

Mr. van Doon was interested in rubber. The whole of his youth, it seemed, had been spent upon remote plantations, but the time had come when the old country had called. " There's always a time," he said, " when a man wants to sleep safely without a revolver under his pillow."

" That's true," said Mr. Baldwin. He would never have placed this comfortable, rather smug little man as an Empire Builder. They had reached the main road of the old village and he was able to see a little more of his new friend by the light of the street lamps. His face matched his body: it was clean-shaven, round and chubby. He had a snub nose and little twinkling grey eyes. He bore no trace of his life in the tropics.

It was a splendid, starlit night. Mr. van Doon threw away his cigar stub and the two men paused to fill their pipes at an old hump-backed bridge that spanned a narrow stream. Beside them lay an inviting village inn and

Mr. van Doon nodded towards it over the flame of his match.

"What about a night-cap?" he said.

The remark pulled Mr. Baldwin back to earth. In the excitement of this new and unexpected companionship he had almost forgotten Edith waiting anxiously in their lonely house for the sound of his returning footsteps.

"To tell you the truth," he stammered with an apologetic laugh, "I only meant to come out for five minutes. It's our first night, and naturally my wife . . ."

Mr. van Doon nodded understandingly, and finished what Mr. Baldwin was groping to say.

"I know," he said, "she's bound to feel lonesome. Mine did to begin with, but she's got a dog now. We'll pop in and have one another night. It's a decent little pub."

They left the bridge, and began to stroll back towards the valley. Mr. Baldwin puffed at his pipe. For the first time a silence fell between the two men, but it was an easy, sympathetic silence. There was something unreal to Mr. Baldwin about this delightful, informal companionship. It had sprung from a darkness that had seemed so utterly empty. No doubt it meant little to Mr. van Doon: he was probably accustomed to picking men out of the night and turning them into companions for a leisure hour—but it meant something to Mr. Baldwin that his new friend, with all his insight, would never have dreamed of. It was his first real heart-to-heart talk to another man for over a year, and he was delighted to find that his powers of conversation had survived the weary months of loneliness. At first he had talked stiffly and jerkily, as a parched man might sip the first drops of water from

the pool of an oasis, but now he was talking freely and easily: he was aching to prolong the pleasure of it and suddenly he remembered that amongst the goods ordered from the village to stock their larder were a crate of ale, a bottle of whisky and some port. They had reached the gate of Mr. van Boon's house, and Mr. Baldwin hesitatingly delayed him with a hand upon his arm.

"Why not stroll back to my house and have a spot with me there?"

"Good enough!" said Mr. van Boon, promptly reclosing his gate.

It may have been the decisive manner of his new friend's acceptance, but directly Mr. Baldwin had made the suggestion he regretted it. It would be magnificent to settle down by his own fireside for a lazy yarn with a friend, but what on earth would Edith think of it?—what on earth would she think of him, dragging a total stranger into the house at half past ten at night?—on their first night, when naturally she would want to enjoy "Greengates" alone with him?

They were in sight of the house now: he could see the light gleaming over the porch, and the subdued glow behind the bedroom curtains where Edith lay listening for his return. He wanted to get rid of Mr. van Boon: he wanted to go in by himself—to be alone with his wife—to sit at the foot of her bed and tell her about the first friend he had made in Wolden Valley. He floundered for an excuse to put Mr. van Boon off until another night, but in place of the excuse came a sudden exultant joy that made him feel like taking his new friend by the arm and racing away with him up the dark hillside. The futile

suburban conventions that had plunged him into loneliness were gone for ever !—the Pioneers of Welden Valley were bound in a common companionship, sharing the same ideals—the same absorbing interests. His house was open to every man and theirs to him ! As he closed the gate he looked up at Edith's window and thought of her lying there alone. He was longing to run upstairs and tell her that their days of lonely wayfaring were over: she knew nothing as yet of Mr. van Doon and the companionship that he symbolised. He threw the gate open with a flourish and stood aside for his friend to enter.

" I expect I can rout up something to christen the new house in," he said.

The green gates clicked behind him. He opened the front door with his glistening new mortice key and flicked on the light in the dining-room. The fire had fallen to a peaceful glow and he was proud to ask a friend in without shame of disorder and shabbiness.

" Make yourself comfortable," he said. " I expect the maid's gone to bed—I'll just go out and see what I can find."

He did not go directly to the kitchen. He hastened upstairs to Edith's room.

She was reading in the luxury of the light above her bed. She lowered her book and looked at him enquiringly.

" Bed comfortable ? " he enquired; " it looks fine."

" Lovely," said Edith. " Who's that downstairs ? "

He looked up at her with a guilty chuckle.

" Why, Edie . . . it's funny ... I was just strolling down the road, and I came across the chap who lives at the white house with the green shutters: the first house you come to ... you know ... at the corner: we had a walk

together—and I asked him to drop in and have a drink. He's an awfully nice chap: he's asked us both to go and have tea and meet his wife."

The last remark was not strictly true, but he felt certain an invitation would come, and he was burning to draw Edith into it. She raised herself upon her elbow. "That's splendid!—what's he like?"

"Well," began Mr. Baldwin, "he's a short, cheery chap—lived abroad a lot ... awfully interesting . . ."

But Edith pulled him up. "Don't leave him sitting there by himself! The drinks are in the larder. I expect he'd prefer whisky if he's lived abroad."

Mr. Baldwin got up, went to the head of the bed and kissed her. "You don't mind, Edie? I'm sure he won't stay long."

"Mind?—it's splendid to meet somebody so quickly!"

He left her wondering what she was going to wear when they went to the van Doons to tea. He hastened downstairs, found the whisky and a syphon, and hurried back to the dining-room.

Mr. van Doon was sitting well forward in his armchair: he was filling his pipe and his eyes were reflectively upon the fire.

"Who did your fireplace?" he enquired.

"Oh—the Estate people. D'you like it?"

Mr. van Doon nodded. "It's a nice job."

Mr. Baldwin tasted the first fruits of the house-proud: he felt that the fireplace in Mr. van Doon's dining-room was not quite so good—that Mr. van Doon was wishing he had a fireplace like the one in front of him. . . .

"We picked it out from a lot of designs," he said. "Say when."

" When," said Mr. van Doon, after a disturbingly long silence.

" Right up ? " enquired Mr. Baldwin with the syphon.

" Half and half," said his friend. " Well, chin-chin."

" Here's to Welden Valley ! " said Mr. Baldwin.

" That's it !—Welden Valley—and let's hope our walls don't crack ! "

Mr. Baldwin pulled out his pipe and pouch and sat opposite his friend. Here was perfect happiness: a fire—a home—a drink and a companion: and a wife tucked comfortably in bed upstairs: the things he had pictured so often had come true at last.

Mr. van Doon lounged back in his chair: he looked more at home in " Greengates " than its owner did at present.

" It's good to have a new house," he said. " It's all so clean and fresh—it's nice to know that nobody's ever died in any of the bedrooms."

Mr. Baldwin lit his pipe and nodded agreement. " I expect you've seen a lot of queer places," he said.

Mr. van Doon required little encouragement: he sank deeper and deeper in his chair: his pipe sank deeper and deeper into his mouth: he balanced his glass on the arm of his chair, and talked.

He was a good talker: and Mr. Baldwin desired nothing more than to lie back, in his chair, to puff at his pipe and to listen.

It seemed that Mr. van Doon was born at Croydon and had owned one of the first motor-bicycles ever built. Incessant punctures had drawn his attention to the poor quality of the rubber then obtainable, and he had gone to the Malay States, opened up a rubber plantation and done

a great deal to remedy things. He told Mr. Baldwin how one reared the trees and tapped their juices: how one stored it and sold it: how one treated the black men to make them respect one: " You've got to hang them now and then," he said; " it's the only way." It amazed Mr. Baldwin to think that here before him, at his own fire-side, sat a man who had hanged natives like hams—and yet it seemed in perfect keeping with the free, devil-may-care life of the Pioneers of Welden Valley.

Welden Valley itself threatened to fall a bit flat after such lurid excursions into the backwoods, but Mr. van Doon's eyes lit up with a new fire when the conversation turned to the life that they had come to share together.

" What are our neighbours like ? " enquired Mr. Baldwin. " D'you know much about them ? "

Mr. van Doon knew all about them. He began with the house next to his own and worked methodically round the entire Estate. They were very much the kind of people Mr. Baldwin had expected. There appeared to be no outstanding personalities: no film actors or racing motorists, but there was something solid and satisfying about them. They were all people of good estate—living in their own houses in apparent ease. There were no families living in basements: no tenements disguised as "maisonettes" as there were in Brondesbury Terrace: a dozen in all: a dozen pioneers: three or four young married couples, three or four men in middle life with families, three or four elderly retired couples and one old lady with a parrot and a girl companion.

" They sound quite interesting," said Mr. Baldwin. He had made up the fire while his friend was talking and

a blue jet of gas was gushing through the black lumps in the grate: the smoke was surging up the chimney with a firm decision that promised complete relief from freak chimney-pots and unsightly cowls. But these were things that lay only in his subconscious thoughts: it needed all his will power to keep his mind firmly planted in reality. Even if he had returned from his walk alone, and sat quietly for an hour by the dying fire with the silence of the valley for companionship, he would still have found it hard to associate himself with the Mr. Baldwin who had once worked for the Temple Insurance Office and lived in Brondesbury Terrace. The difficulty was tenfold in the present circumstances. His second and third whiskies were very modest compared with those he had given his friend, but how the room glowed with light !—it seemed to grow brighter and brighter until the very walls poured radiance from their glistening distemper. It rushed into his veins, and pulsed up to his temples, and overwhelmed him with a sense of unreality. He kept thinking of a Mr. Baldwin sitting in an old dining-room at Brondesbury Terrace, watching the fire die out and listening to the footsteps passing by. He kept wondering who this was who sat by the fire in this strange new room that shouted with light, who listened to a tubby little man with a red face who talked and talked. . . .

^{4<} "They *might* be interesting," said the little tubby man, "if they were properly handled."

They ? Who were they ? With a struggle he pulled himself together. Of course, they were talking about their neighbours. The strange people who lived out there in the darkness were "they."

"How d'you mean ?" His voice sounded as if it flew

out of a loud speaker, and he cleared his throat gently to adjust things.

The little man in the opposite armchair removed the mouthpiece of his pipe and blew a spray of evil liquid into the fire. " They might be *very* interesting—if somebody took the lead." The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the first quarter past eleven—the blue squirt of gas in the fireplace matured into a soft, leisurely flame. Mr. van Doon relit his pipe, took a sip of whisky and edged his chair nearer to his host.

" If we act quickly—if we do it now—it can be done. If we wait until the place has grown too big, we've lost our chance."

Mr. Baldwin was no good at solving cryptograms. " What's the idea ? " he said.

" It's just this," replied Mr. van Doon. " You were saying just now that nobody really cared about the place you come from—that people just lived in their houses and never did anything *together*. That's because they weren't interested in the place: it was built and finished years before they went there—there were no surprises left—nothing more to be built or developed. See what I mean ? "

" Quite," said Mr. Baldwin, with a shrewd nod.

" Now think of Wclden Valley: it's new: just beginning—and it depends upon us firstcomers what happens to it in the end. See what I mean ?—we've got a duty and so far nobody's done anything about it. We're just going the same way as the people in them older places: we just dig our gardens and go shopping—say " How d'you do ? " over each other's gates and when the night comes we just shut ourselves up in our houses like a lot of hermits—

everybody wishing somebody'd *do* something to bring us together and liven us up ! See ? "

" Absolutely true," murmured Mr. Baldwin.

" Now's the time," said Mr. van Doon.

He removed his pipe and waved it confidentially towards the window.

" D'you know that old barn over there ?—a big rambling, tumbledown place that used to belong to Welden Farm ? It would make a wonderful Club House if it was rebuilt, and those flat meadows round it would make wonderful playing fields for tennis and bowls and cricket. It would pay the Estate hands down to take on the job. A big social and sports club would add pounds to the value of this place."

Mr. Baldwin sat up. Clubs had always interested him, but during the past years, in one way and another, he had dropped away from those he had belonged to. " That's a great idea," he said. " Why not suggest it to the Estate ? "

Mr. van Doon sat back in his chair and held up his hand for silence.

" I have," he said. " They'd start to-morrow—only they're afraid of it: afraid it might be a white elephant. They won't do it on their own responsibility, but they'd do it like a shot if they knew for certain that the people in Welden Valley would support it."

" Then why not get them to support it ? "

" They wouldn't want asking twice: they'd jump at it." Mr. van Doon paused and firmly emphasised his final words: " but they must have a leader ! "

Light dawned upon Mr. Baldwin: suddenly he realised what the little man was getting at. He wanted to be the

leader himself, but naturally he wanted someone else to suggest it.

"We want," continued Mr. van Doon, "a man to take the lead: a man who can get all these people together and put some pep into them. Once we've got these first-comers bound together the whole thing would grow and grow. Every new arrival would join as a matter of course. We'd start with a dozen foundation members. In a year there'd be a hundred—in two years five hundred!—there wouldn't be a club like it in the whole of England!"

"You're the man to do it," said Mr. Baldwin.

He was prepared for a smug smile and a little self-deprecation from Mr. van Doon: he prepared himself to persuade his friend and promise to canvass for support from their neighbours. As far as he was concerned he cared little who took the lead as long as a lead was taken. It thrilled him. It was a splendid scheme. As one of the foundation members he might find himself upon the committee, with an engrossing hobby for the winter evenings. It would give both Edith and himself the social life they longed for. He was by no means sure that Mr. van Doon was the right man—but the right man very rarely did take on these jobs. They were nearly always run by the men who were not quite right—who were tolerated because of their energy—"I'm certain you're the man," he said.

And then a surprising thing happened. There was no smug smile or deprecating shake of the head. Mr. van Doon leant forward in his chair, pointed at Mr Baldwin and said: "No. You're the man."

Mr. Baldwin could not reply: the surprise of it took his breath away.

" It's good of you to say Pm the chap," continued Mr. van Doon, " but I'm not. I don't like fellows who run themselves down. I'm not doing that. I reckon I've got my good points like the rest of us—but my good points aren't the sort for taking on a social job like this. If you want a chap to settle a spot of bother with a bunch of niggers, good enough, but I'm a self-made man: rough diamond if you like—I don't mind saying it. I haven't got the education."

He paused abruptly—almost pugnaciously, and Mr. Baldwin felt embarrassed. Mr. van Boon had summed himself up with surprising insight. Mr. Baldwin admired him for it but it was hardly polite to express his admiration in the circumstances. But uppermost in his mind was the quite bewildering suggestion that he himself was the man to lead the people of Welden Valley. A few hours ago, in the barren loneliness of his arrival he would have ignored the idea as a stupid joke. Who in his right mind would pick upon an elderly, retired insurance clerk, whose very friendliness gave damning evidence against his ability to lead and inspire his fellows? But queer things had happened since his lonely arrival in Welden Valley—queer things that shone out of these new dis-tempered walls and clicking electric points: that radiated from the strange little man in the arm-chair opposite—that flowed out of the amber bottle on the gleaming table. He was a new man whom no one, not even himself, had a right to judge. Leaders sprang from strange, unexpected corners. Little incidents flashed across his mind: incidents that led nowhere in themselves, but hinted at exciting things that might have happened. His year as Treasurer of the Acacia Tennis Club had been

a golden one. He had been popular in the office and the younger men especially had shown their respect for him. Many a potentially great leader had passed through life in obscurity—because the man and the hour had never synchronised. Was this the hour?—was he the man? It was too bewildering to disentangle at a moment's notice. He could only shake his head with a weak smile and say—"Don't be silly. *Pm* not the man. I'm certain of that."

Mr. van Doon leant further forward in his chair. "D'you mind me being personal?" he said.

"Not a bit," replied Mr. Baldwin, feeling sure that something nice was going to happen.

"First of all," said Mr. van Doon, "you're the right age. Not too old and not too young. People would respect you, and that's essential. Then again, you've had a business training: you know how many shillings go to the pound. Then—if you don't mind me saying it—you're a man of the world, you've got education and polish. I reckon you could stand up to anybody and give 'em points on polish. You've got enthusiasm—but I've seen enough of you to know you haven't got any silly unpractical ideas. You'd always know what can be done and what can't—and if that isn't enough I'd like to know what is!"

Mr. Baldwin stirred in his chair: it was pleasant to listen to this remarkable analysis of his character—and yet he felt a little uneasy—at any moment he felt that Mr. van Doon might ask for an urgent loan. The queer little man was looking him straight in the face, with piercing, glistening grey eyes.

"I ..." he began, not knowing in the slightest what

he would have said if Mr. van Doon had not abruptly stopped him.

" Wait a minute ! I know what you're going to say—you haven't got time: you don't want to push yourself forward. Maybe you're not even sure of yourself—but I tell you that you're the man for the job and I know the right man when I see him ! Think of it as a duty ! "

Mr. Baldwin leant forward and gulped his whisky. One of his ears cracked and began to buzz: it was as if a shaft of inspiration had pierced his brain. He remembered how once, in an emergency, he had captained the office cricket team—how easily and smoothly he had moved his fieldsmen about—how effortless had been his duty in ushering the opposing team into the luncheon tent and seating them between his own men—he remembered two wide eyes in the darkness of the office stairs upon the night he had retired and a boyish voice that had said: " We shall miss you badly, sir ! "

" I'd do anything I could to bring people together and make them happy," he said.

" Splendid ! " said Mr. van Doon, slapping himself on the knee. " You'll always have me behind you—I shall back you up all I know."

" The power behind the throne ! " said Mr. Baldwin, with a knowing little laugh. Mr. van Doon knew his limitations, but he intended to be in the fun all right !

" The power behind the throne ! " laughed Mr. van Doon. " It's going to be grand fun. It'll be a terrific success—a tremendous job, but a terrific success. We'll start to-morrow !—I'll get a notice round asking everybody to a meeting at my house. I've got a nice big room that'll take fifty at a pinch. Even if they all come—if they all

bring their wives—it'll only mean twenty-five. Twenty-five Pioneers !—I'll fix up cakes and coffee."

The clock began to chime and Mr. van Doon looked up in sudden dismay.

" Is that clock right ?—it can't be twelve ! "

" It is twelve," said Mr. Baldwin, glancing at his watch.

His guest sprang to his feet, pulled his waistcoat down and brushed some ash away. " I shall catch it all right this time ! The wife'll think I've been locked up ! "

" Won't you have a spot before you go ? " asked Mr. Baldwin.

" Not a drop ! " said Mr. van Doon. " You're a nice one to lead me astray like this ! " His face was very red, but despite three whiskies he was perfectly sober as far as Mr. Baldwin could see: he knocked his pipe out, dropped it in his pocket and walked briskly to the door.

" Well, it's been a wonderful evening," he said. " I shouldn't be surprised if we haven't made history to-night ! I'll drop in to-morrow morning with that notice. I'd like you to see it before it goes out."

" Splendid ! " said Mr. Baldwin. He opened the door and watched his new friend go briskly down the rough path. " The gate opens inwards."

" So does mine and every sensible one ! " called back Mr. van Doon. " Chin, chin ! "

" Chin, chin ! " called Mr. Baldwin, feeling a little annoyed at ending the evening with a silly remark. He closed the door. In the sudden silence he became conscious of a queer, high-pitched singing in his ears: he felt about ten feet tall and the veins in the backs of his hands were so big that he could scarcely close his fingers. He stooped to push home the bright little brass bolt and

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his head billowed out like a balloon. The pounding of a waterfall came to his ears. He stood upright and steadied himself against the wall. The house was ablaze with lights, and suddenly he realised what a firm hold he would have to take upon himself to turn them all off in their correct order.

He knew quite well what was wrong. He had had too much whisky. On the first night in his new house he was going to bed intoxicated—a thing that had not happened for years and years. He tried to think out what it all meant—but it was far beyond him—he was too bewildered to think—too bewildered to do anything but concentrate his whole will-power upon the glaring lights—

He reached out towards the three little switches in front of him and gave the lowest one a cautious twitch. The light in the outside porch went out and he found himself laughing out loud. A fluke !—a bull's eye first time ! Emboldened by his success he pushed up the second switch: something darkened above him but for the moment he could not locate it. Then he saw that the light upstairs had disappeared. That was wrong. He would need that when he went upstairs. He switched it on again—tried the upper switch and plunged the hall in darkness. When he returned to the dining-room he was staggered by the reek of tobacco: it closed around him and made him feel a little sick. The fire was blazing brightly and unconcerned.

He took the tongs and groped amongst the red-hot coals to remove the largest pieces and push them under the grate. But the heat pounded upon his face and he lay the tongs down with elaborate care to avoid a sound that might disturb Edith. What did the fire matter ?—it was

an absurd, old-maidish idea to rake it out every night before going to bed.

The grate was full of the white ash from their pipes. There were wet rings on the table from their glasses. Good old, hard living Pioneers !—smoking like furnaces and swilling liquor !—what a life !

He flicked out the light in the dining-room, but as he went to the stairs he saw that he had forgotten to turn off the kitchen light when he had gone to get the whisky.

What a gorgeous little kitchen it was !—clean as a new pin: flick !—it was gone—the house was in darkness save for the glimmer on the upstairs landing that would guide him to bed.

He stood in front of his bedroom mirror: he looked surprisingly—disappointingly normal. His hair was ruffled from lying back in his armchair and his face was a little more highly-coloured than usual—but his head was the correct size and his eyes looked clear and steady. It was probably excitement, and not the whisky that had given such a strange flavour of unreality to the evening. He stood by the window: a clean fresh breeze sponged gently over his face and cleared his thoughts. The hill crest was faintly visible in the dark, starlit night. Somewhere up there the footpath spanned the crest—somewhere up there he and Edith had stood six months ago and looked down upon the valley in anger and dismay. From the same place they had looked down and seen the first stack of bricks and scaffolding, the first vestiges of " Greengates " lying under the elm.

The call of a night bird and a rustle of wind came through the darkness. He felt very tired, but his mind was

seething with the turmoil of the fantastic evening. Dictator of Welden Valley: leader of the people—leader of the Pioneers: it was too fantastic to believe. Even Mr. van Doon now seemed a ghostly visitor without substance or future. But Mr. van Doon had been real: Mr. van Doon was a shrewd judge of men: he had been genuine and sincere in everything he had said. The intense, husky little voice still rang in his ears:

" *Tou* are the man !—*You* are the man to lead ! "

He could still see the piercing little eyes. He went to the mirror. There was no doubt about it: in a certain light and at a certain angle strong, masterful lines formed round his jaw. He was seized with an overwhelming desire to go back to the dining-room: to take pen and paper and write a stirring manifesto to the People of Welden Valley. But even as the desire came an aching weariness crept over him. It was an effort even to raise his hands to undo his collar—it was an exertion even to climb into the cool, unfamiliar, springy bed, to grope for the switch and to plunge the room into the fathomless darkness of the valley.

CHAPTER XXIV

BETWEEN THE SMALL HOURS of three and four that morning Mr. Baldwin turned wearily upon his back and stared up at the dark ceiling of his bedroom. It was a new bedroom no longer: no room could have remained bright and spotless through such an eternity of darkness. He felt that he had been lying in it for half his lifetime—that if he were to turn on the light he would find that the bright distemper of the walls had peeled and littered the floor with aged, discoloured powder.

It was a cruel disappointment, for above all things he had wanted to awake fresh to his first morning in Welden Valley. At half past twelve he had struggled against sleep to draw the bedclothes around him. Five minutes later he had never been more starkly, staringly awake in his life. A riotous crowd of thoughts began to race each other round and round his brain, missing the curves and bouncing off the inside of his skull. For a little while he tried to control them: to cut down their pace and to sort them into order. He tried to begin his plans for the Welden Valley Club, but every time they began to take shape the tubby little body of Mr. van Boon came somersaulting round to send them flying in all directions. It was Mr. van Doon who was keeping him awake. Mr. van Doon became a menace: he wanted to run Welden Valley with Mr. Baldwin as a spineless figurehead: he

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wanted Mr. Baldwin to do exactly what he was told.

The whole thing was ridiculous. He turned irritably on to his side and tried to get rid of his lower arm by resting it upon the bedside table. It was ridiculous to begin worrying about a club that had not even started. The grand Welden Valley scheme was probably stone dead: still-born from a bottle of whisky and a pipe of tobacco, for Mr. van Boon would probably wake up in the morning and decide that it was not worth while. Life in Welden Valley would probably turn out as he had expected all along—a quiet, peaceful existence: a few good books, a few pleasant walks—vigorous hours in the garden, and perhaps a few quiet, pleasant friends. But when he tried to persuade himself that a peaceful existence was all he needed there would come the fascinating vision of a clubroom filled with people—of a spacious office wherein he sat behind a huge desk covered with papers—of a green field speckled with flannelled tennis players—of people saying, " See Baldwin about it: Baldwin'll put it right." ...

It was useless to think any more about it until the morning. He summoned his will power, determined to lie perfectly still, to close his eyes, make his mind a blank, and count slowly to a thousand. He had never been any good at counting imaginary sheep passing through an imaginary gate: he had never been able to conjure up a sufficiently clear picture of the gate or to collect enough imaginary sheep to make the effort worth while. He lay counting grimly, sticking out a finger to mark each hundred, but before the fingers of one hand were stretched, Mr. van Doon swept past and knocked them flying.

He tried an old trick that had sometimes induced sleep on nights of restlessness in the past: he began an imaginary journey from his home in Brondesbury Terrace to his office in the City: he walked to the station, visualising each landmark on the way: he climbed into the train and conjured up each detail of the panorama that flowed by the carriage window. But he lost himself in the maze of chimney-pots round Camden Town: the pillow was closing one of his nostrils and by the time he had re-arranged it the imaginary train had arrived at the London terminus without him.

What did one do with one's arms upon a normal night in bed? Wherever he put them they either slipped down or tugged his pyjamas. One arm was a yard too long—the other a yard too short. He tried laying one across his chest, holding it in place with a thumb through the buttonhole of his pyjama coat, but this drew the coat so tightly under his arm that it threatened to burst his veins. The human body seemed shaped to meet every emergency of life with the one exception of sleep. He stretched an arm above his head and groped for something to hold on to. The old bed at "Grasmere" had comforting brass rails to grasp: this new bed had a smooth, heartless wooden back devoid of fingerhold. It proved what he had suspected all along: it was the kind of bed that took no further interest in a man from the moment its winning smile had rescued it from the showroom.

The whisky had parched his mouth and he would have given anything for a cool glass of fruit salts. He felt desperately lonely without Edith beside him. He began to feel that it was the room that was keeping him awake: its shadowy corners were so utterly barren—so strange—and

still, and destitute of character: the room felt like a railway station waiting-room closed for the night.

With every restless movement he edged the pillow closer to the side of his bed: with monotonous regularity he raised himself upon his elbow and pulled it back. The quiet was so intense that it seemed to be thinning the very air. He longed for the early sounds that used to keep him company on wakeful nights in the old house—the slow, lumbering luggage train that passed on the main line soon after four—the clock of St. Mary's Church that separated the black slabs of time into digestible slices. Once he felt that sleep was coming at last: he scarcely dared to breathe lest he frightened it away, and then his chin irritated and the rubbing of it brought him wider awake than ever before.

Leader of Welden Valley ! What a farce ! A born leader would never have sprawled for five meaningless hours: he would have risen and spent the night upon his plans. He pictured van Doon, rolled up in his blankets like a fat cocoon . . . van Doon . . . cocoon. . . .

Vaguely he heard someone moving nearby, but he was too tired to open his eyes. Blearily and indistinctly he heard something chink down upon the bedside table, and then a voice cut through the clouds . . .

" Good morning, sir ! "

It was Peggy: Peggy with his tea: Peggy in broad daylight. He jerked himself abruptly on to his elbow.

" Good morning, Peggy. What's the time ? "

" Eight o'clock, sir ... and two letters."

Peggy at least had survived the night's eternity with

success. If anything she looked younger: her arms and face shone more brightly in the daylight than they had by night.

" Sleep well, Peggy ? "

" Like a top, sir. Was you comfortable ? "

" Yes, wonderfully."

And he meant it. As Peggy closed the door he closed his eyes—he forgave the pillow—he forgave the bed—he forgave everything in thanksgiving for the deep, dreamless sleep that had come so stealthily and unexpectedly in the end. The tea completed his recovery and he felt ready for anything.

The letters were only two circulars with halfpenny stamps on them: one from a coal merchant and the other from a dairy: but they pleased him nevertheless. They seemed to announce his election to full membership of Wclden Valley.

He jumped out of bed and went to the window. A pale spring sunlight lay upon the hillside—there was a smear of mist upon the grass and a tang in the air that smelt of September but tasted of spring. He threw open the window and performed the breathing exercises that he had promised himself ever since the evening when they had first seen their land. The cool air bubbled in his lungs: the new life had begun. He threw on his dressing-gown and went to Edith's room.

Edith was sitting up in bed opening letters: she had beaten him easily, for the bed was littered with envelopes bearing halfpenny stamps. There were two from laundries, three from dairies, two from butchers and a catalogue of wines.

" I didn't know there were so many tradespeople in the

place." He sat on the foot of her bed. " How did you sleep, Edie ? "

" Quite well," said Edith. But the rumpled bedclothes gave her away. " It's a beautiful bed, but..."

" I know," said Mr. Baldwin. " I didn't sleep much. It wants getting used to."

Edith was bursting with questions about Mr. van Doon. " I felt terribly curious. I kept wondering what you were talking about down there. I wanted to come down and listen outside the door."

He looked up in sudden concern. " Could you hear us?"

" The dining-room's right underneath."

" I'm terribly sorry . . ."

" Don't be silly—it didn't keep me awake. I *wanted* to keep awake. I lay there wondering what I'd wear when we go to tea with them to-day."

Mr. Baldwin felt awful. Drunkard and liar—that was what he had come to. He had kept her awake till midnight—and Mr. van Doon had never asked them to tea at all_____

" As a matter of fact," he stammered, " it wasn't definitely arranged—it... it was left indefinite."

" In that case we'll ask *them* to tea," said Edith. And Mr. Baldwin, humbled and grateful, went to his room and shaved.

Edith's curiosity about Mr. van Doon was very quickly satisfied. They had scarcely risen from breakfast before the gate clicked, and the little man himself came smartly up the path. Peggy was told to show him into the lounge

and Mr. Baldwin's heart fell as he took Edith in to introduce her.

For Mr. van Doon, in the pale morning sunlight, was not nearly so impressive as he had been in the darkness, and in the mellow, forgiving glow of the dining-room on the previous night. His change of clothes had a good deal to do with it. The plus fours and tweed jacket had given him a breezy, open-air appearance, but the tight, natty little blue serge suit he was now wearing made him look like a retired publican, and the light brown, pointed shoes, together with the daffodil in his buttonhole reminded Mr. Baldwin of Whit Monday at Brighton. But his face was the greatest disappointment: it had glowed so rosily under the lamplights of Welden High Street: it had been so chubby and Pickwickian in the light of the dining-room fire, but the rosy flush had now retired, and shut itself up in a multitude of tiny blue-tinted blood vessels around his cheekbones and nose.

But his buoyancy remained. He bounced up from the sofa with an " Ah ! " of delight and took Edith's hand in both of his as if he had been longing to meet her for years.

" I expect you heard about the little binge me and your hubby had last night ! "

Edith laughed. " I heard you come in: I'm sorry I was in bed."

Mr. Baldwin did not like the way his visitor had jerked his head suggestively towards him and winked artfully at his wife: he did not like the word " binge," or " hubby " very much—and he began to realise the horrible mistake he had made. He should have known that the best kind of people are not picked up so casually in the night.

But Edith was charming to Mr. van Doon: whatever

disappointment she felt after her husband's glowing reports was magnificently concealed: she drew him into a conversation about Welden Valley and the little man began to improve at once: he was so vitally interested in everything: he flattered Edith about the taste she had displayed in decorating the lounge, and when he frankly admitted that he liked their fireplaces better than his own, Mr. Baldwin began to like Mr. van Doon better than he did the blue suit and daffodil.

Van Doon got quickly to business. He produced a sheet of bright blue notepaper and handed it to his host.

" I scribbled this out when I got home last night. D'you think it'll do ? "

Mr. Baldwin took the paper and read:

WELDEN VALLEY CLUB

A number of residents have expressed a desire for the establishment of a club to form the centre of the social and athletic life of Welden Valley.

I am writing at their request to invite you to an informal meeting at my house at 9 p.m. on Thursday next, the 6th inst., to discuss the project and consider ways and means. I sincerely hope you will be free that evening to attend.

Very truly yours,

PERCY VAN DOON.

" Brief and to the point, don't you think ? " enquired Mr. van Doon.

" Perfectly," said Mr. Baldwin. There was a restraint about the notice that surprised him. He had feared a

long and repellent manifesto. " I didn't know other people had asked for it ? "

" They haven't," replied van Doon with a knowing smile, " but that's the way to get people keen. I'll copy that out and send everybody one to-night." He rose briskly and slipped the notice into his pocket. " Now what about strolling down and having a look at the old barn ? "

Mr. Baldwin was torn between two earnest and conflicting desires: he was longing to get out into his new garden—to get hold of his shining new tools and begin work—but his eagerness for the club had returned: his spirits had risen and he was burning to see the barn that might soon become the centre of his new life.

" I ought to get busy on my garden ..." he began, but van Doon waved the garden vigorously aside. " Gardens can be done any time—this club business is urgent ! "

Urgent ! Nothing in Mr. Baldwin's life had been urgent for close on two years. It was a splendid thing to be concerned in something urgent. He took his hat—gripped his walking-stick and set off with his new friend across the broad field in front of his house.

It was a morning to lift the heart and make the nostrils quiver. The spring lay crouching in the grass: the rising sap had given a plump sleekness to the elm trunks, and their branches were gathering around them a pale green haze that shone against the sky. Some crows were bustling amongst the trees, and Mr. Baldwin felt the ground beneath him murmur with the tiny yawns of a million little creatures to whom the call had come. Specks of colour glistened in the bank beside the field path, and a cluster of snowdrops, weary little pioneers of spring,

were trying to forget their battles against the last rude blasts of winter by raising their tired, grimy faces to the sun.

Mr. Baldwin had yearned many a time in the past two years for a companion upon his walks, and now that a companion was beside him he would rather have been alone. He wanted to stride on and on, up hill, down dale—to realise that from now on—upon every morning until he died he would walk out of his house each morning and feel the crunch of virgin grass beneath his heels.

Van Doon seemed quite unaware of the splendour surrounding him: he trotted along beside his tall companion, three steps to his two, and prattled incessantly about the new club—about subscriptions and hot water pipes and the crockery he would get from a friend in the wholesale line. He discussed the club tie that they would have; Mr. Baldwin was fond of club ties, and he wished he could look forward a little more keenly to wearing the same colours as Mr. van Doon.

They came to a lane that curled away towards a dell of trees and presently van Doon stopped beside a ramshackle old gate and pointed up a cart track, grass-grown, and apparently disused for many years.

" There you are ! " he said.

Mr. Baldwin's antiquarian instincts leapt within him as he approached the dark old building at the end of the lane. It was a magnificent old place—far and away beyond his expectations. He had pictured a gaunt wooden shed, devoid of character, but this was built of brick: narrow, wine-red Tudor brick, with sturdy oak beams in its sides. The tiles were of the kind that people snapped up and put on new, expensive houses, for no craftsman

could imitate their mellowness, their fascinating twists and gentle, time-worn undulations.

What a place it was to conjure with ! He peered into its dark interior: massive beams spanned its roof-cobwebby, broken machinery littered its floor—but what a clubroom it would make ! A great open hearth could be built in its far end—it was as big as an ordinary village hall and could be divided into several rooms. And the meadow beyond cried out for bowls, and tennis and cricket.

" It'll want a lot done to it," said Mr. van Doon. " This barn can be patched up and made into a sort of entrance hall, and the Club House Proper can be built on behind."

The hard little voice cut gratingly across Mr. Baldwin's thoughts: he was thinking of labourers, stacking those twilit corners with sweet hay: labourers in tattered knee-breeches and greasy three-cornered hats—with old leather jerkins they had smuggled home from the wars of Marlborough: very softly the ripples of history must have lapped against these walls.

" We must be careful not to damage this," he said.

Mr. van Doon looked at him with surprised round eyes. " Damage it ! You'd want a clever man to damage it any more than what it is ! "

" I mean," said Mr. Baldwin, " it's—it's a perfect piece of Tudor work: if we do anything to destroy its appearance we should be vandals."

" But it's only a barn ! How can you have a Tudor barn I "

Mr. Baldwin made no reply. He stood gazing at the old place in silence.

" Let's go down and see if we can catch old Tom Watkinson at the Estate Office," suggested Mr. van Doon. " We'll have a talk about the whole thing."

The Estate Manager was talking to a self-conscious young couple at the door of his office, and while they stood waiting van Doon nudged Mr. Baldwin and whispered : " Two more members for the club ! "

Mr. Baldwin heard the Manager say: " I assure you, sir—it's the only place to build—in fact, I'm going to build there myself." He saw the young man nervously stroke his little fair moustache and the girl clutching her bag: he knew what they were thinking: he hoped with all his heart that things would work out right for them. He heard the young man murmur: " We'll—we'll drop you a line."

" Not later than Friday," warned Mr. Watkinson.

" Not later than Friday," said the young man.

He watched them walk away and he saw a queer little smile flicker round the corners of the Manager's mouth.

Mr. Watkinson did not appear to know Mr. van Doon quite so intimately as Mr. van Doon seemed to know Mr. Watkinson, for while Mr. Watkinson said: " Good morning, Mr. van Doon," Mr. van Doon said: " Cheerio, Tom."

They were invited into the office, and the Manager listened attentively to all that Mr. van Doon had to say. He was silent for some while after the little man had finished.

" You mean," he said at last, " that you want the Estate to bear the cost of converting that barn and building a large club house on to it—and then to stand the risk ? "

" There won't be no risk," exclaimed van Doon. " We'll rope in everybody to join—we'll have hundreds of members in a year or two."

As Mr. Baldwin sat listening in silence it was borne home to him that van Doon had not been altogether straightforward: he had given him distinctly to understand that the Estate Manager knew all about the scheme and was ready to support it if the residents were ready. It was now quite clear, from Mr. Watkinson's manner, that this was the first he had heard about it.

Mr. Watkinson began to grow impatient: he glanced at his watch: Mr. Baldwin rose to go, but van Doon sat stubbornly on:

" But, Tom, old boy—can't you see what it'll mean to the Estate ! The biggest and grandest club for miles around ! People are going to fall over each other to build nearby to get the use of it ! You'll not only get more for your land, but in a year or two you'll get a profit out of the club as well ! "

" I know," said Mr. Watkinson, " I know."

" If I bring you a definite list of people who'll support it _____ "

" All right," interrupted the Estate Manager, " you have your meeting and see me again. I can't promise anything—but it's a good scheme and I'll see what I can do."

Mr. Baldwin made an elaborate excuse to get rid of his persistent little friend outside the Estate Office. He referred to numerous duties in the village and a meeting with his wife at the baker's shop. To his relief van Doon decided to go home and write out the notices for the meeting at once, and Mr. Baldwin walked away alone. As

he passed through the sleepy old village he caught a glimpse of the young couple, sitting in the cake shop, drinking coffee. He felt he would like to go in and speak to them, to urge them on: to encourage them to fight their difficulties and reap their reward. But at the moment he wanted to be alone to think. He crossed the little hump-backed bridge and followed the road up its winding course towards the ridge.

He wondered whether he was a bigger snob than he had suspected. The long and short of it was that van Doon was not good enough. Class counted for nothing and character everything: old Henslip, the Messenger at the office, was in conventional terms a common man, but he was a gentleman with whom Mr. Baldwin had many an evening played dominoes in the office basement. He would welcome Henslip as a member of the Welden Valley Club because he was modest and simple and unaffected and had a jolly sense of fun. Mr. van Doon was far cleverer than Henslip: far better off and better educated, but Mr. Baldwin had no desire whatever to meet him socially: he was perky—he was bogus: he was not genuine.

For two pins he would wash his hands of the whole scheme—but something inside him kept urging him to reflect and think: he reached the crest of the hill and followed a path that looked down upon the valley from the opposite side to his own. It was while he stood there in the spring sunlight, with the cluster of new houses beneath him, that he made his resolution. There would be a Welden Valley Club after all, but it would be the club of his own dreams and not the one that van Doon was thinking of. It would not be "the biggest, grandest club for miles around": it would not have "hundreds of

members in a few years' time": there would be no " Club House Proper " built on to the barn. That grand old barn alone would be the club: it would be restored with reverent care and its members would be few—just the best: the people that mattered—regardless of class or calling—and a small committee would select those members with jealous care.

Instinctively he knew that everything he desired would clash with van Boon. It was an unscrupulous thing to contemplate fighting the very man who had first suggested the scheme, but he was ready and fiercely happy to be unscrupulous if it led to something fine.

CHAPTER XXV

A FEW DAYS of residence at "Greengates" revealed to Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin several small but important adjustments that called for the attention of the builder. The plumbing appeared to be a little too delicately balanced, for if the front door was slammed too hard the lavatory flushed. This was not a nice thing to happen each time a visitor arrived and left, but when Mr. Baldwin tried to demonstrate the trouble to the Estate Manager it naturally refused to happen: the slam of the door was followed by a stony silence from the lavatory. Another thing was due to pure carelessness upon the builder's part, for after Mr. Baldwin had run the hot tap in the cloakroom for half an hour in an attempt to get hot water, he found that the hot water came immediately from the tap marked "cold." He was sharply instructing the plumber to see that the pipes were immediately taken up and relaid correctly when the plumber somewhat insolently replied that it would be quicker to change the labels on the taps.

But these were trivial troubles that did little to mar the happiness of those first spring days in Welden Valley, for Tom and Edith Baldwin felt all the joy, and all the freshness, all that superb enhancement of self-respect that comes from association with things that are clean and new.

One felt a different kind of cleanness after a bath at "Greengates": it was almost like bathing in the open air. The bathroom in the old house had always been a musty, soul-destroying place. It faced the gaunt brick wall of the house opposite, and on the brightest day it was plunged in sulky, dark brown shadow. The window, for as long as they could remember, had been jammed irrevocably open to the extent of two inches at the top: the room used to fill with steam, and a dismal rainbow would form around the choking, gasping gas jets beneath the geyser. You undressed furtively in your bedroom, and as you crept into the bath you felt that pneumonia germs sat waiting for you upon the soap-stained, brown painted ledges. You were oppressed with a sense of doom as you pushed open the steam-slimed door and faced the black coldness of the passage.

But the morning sun shone into the "Greengates" bathroom: the glistening white tiles made one's body look pink and aglow with health: the window stood boldly open and you felt the country air brush softly upon your thighs. There was room to throw out the arms and do rhythmic breathing exercises—you could throw a towel around you, poke your head out of the window and see the hills and trees.

Mr. Baldwin felt almost ashamed to dig his spade into the strong, tuzzled turf behind the house: it was like digging a knife into a magnificent birthday cake and destroying its graceful lines. He felt reluctant to soil his beautiful new tools with their shining blades and spotless ashen handles. But once he had set aside these scruples he forgot everything in a mighty struggle against the vigorous, untamed turf that wrestled with him until great beads

of perspiration plopped into the grass. Here at last was a garden worthy of a strong man's toil ! He taped out the position of paths and flower beds with mathematical precision: the great cubes of turf clung to the earth and came up with a fierce despairing hiss. He piled them together behind the brambles to weather down into top-spit for his beds and he struggled round the house with slabs of crazy paving. He mixed cement upon the box the beer came in and consolidated each foot of hard won land before adventuring further into the wilderness beyond. By lunch-time upon the third morning, five yards of stone-flagged path stretched boldly away from the windows of the lounge: by lunch-time every day his vest and shirt were wringing with sweat and he would take a tepid bath and change his clothes before sitting down to the meal.

Edith spent adventurous mornings in the village: the finding of new shops had always amused her, and here was a paradise on earth—a place in which every shop was new to her. She discovered a greengrocer who grew his own vegetables, a dairyman with his own cows, and a butcher with his own farm. Mr. Baldwin jocularly enquired whether the grocer tinned his own tongue. All the tradesmen urged her to open an account and permit them to call for orders, but Edith was a wise old hand at shopping. She told them all that she had not decided which shops to give regular orders to. She kept them all on tiptoe and extracted remarkably good service from them as a result.

A pleasant surprise for Edith was the return of her afternoon nap that she had thought was gone for ever. It came about through Mr. Baldwin deciding upon a

regular afternoon rest on his bed after such strenuous work in the garden, and so for an hour after lunch Edith was able to draw the blinds, plunge the drawing-room into twilight and recapture the happiest memory of years gone by.

The time between tea and dinner became for Mr. Baldwin the best of all. He had bought a large scale map of the country around Welden Valley: the sun now lingered until well past six, and when tea was over he would take his stick and pipe (but not his hat), and stride away upon a new exploration every evening. Sometimes he would pass through the village and follow the valley until he came to the beech wood with its maze of moss-green paths: at other times he would climb the ridge and take the bridle path to Polegate Hill. On a fallen tree he would sit and watch London slowly appear in the sky as the night clouds gathered up its glow. The set of the sun became the signal for return and the lights were always beginning to pop up around him in Welden Valley as he came in sight of "Greengates." Edith had been granted sole and exclusive rights over the rose beds in the front garden, and often as he returned in the twilight he would see her blue overalled figure moving to and fro amongst her frail young trees. In the few minutes before dinner he would take the Naturalist's Diary that Edith had given him at Christmas and jot down a few notes for comparison next year—"First primrose in Harless Wood"—"Heard cuckoo by bridge on Thurston Road."

But there was a wistful quality in these days as well, for every evening brought them nearer to the night of the meeting at van Boon's to discuss the club, and something told Mr. Baldwin that these were to be the last days he

would ever spend as a lonely man. On the coming Thursday he would meet all the people at present hidden from him behind the curtained windows of the houses in Cymbeline Road. Some would emerge as friends—others as enemies: some would support his scheme for the club—others would support van Doon. Most nights on his return through the Valley he would pass a stranger, and nod, and say " Good night." And always he would walk on with the thought—" Will he be with me—or with van Doon ? " When Edith had gone to bed and he sat working at the dining-room table upon his plans, he would sometimes lay down his pen and wonder whether it was all worth while. Life was very pleasant as it was: why throw himself into a struggle that was certain to lead to restless days and sleepless nights? Defeat would mean embitterment—victory would lead to ceaseless work—disappointments—the clashing of conflicting ambitions—jealousies and enmity. But he always picked up his pen again and went on with his plans. One night van Doon dropped in to say that he had followed up his circular letter with a personal call upon everyone concerned, and he felt confident that there was great interest, and the meeting would be well attended.

Mr. Baldwin took the opportunity of telling van Doon his second thoughts about the club: that a small select club would be far better than a large, public place open to all. Van Doon had looked at him in surprise and said: " Oh, no—the Estate won't help unless everyone in the place can join."

And Mr. Baldwin quietly braced himself to fight.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DAY OF THE MEETING dawned with a strong northerly wind that ferreted amongst the hedgerows and found a few weary, half-skeletoned leaves to play with. Towards evening there came dark clouds and a gusty, uncertain rain that threw ominous shadows towards the critical events that lay so close at hand.

The Baldwins dined lightly upon fish to avoid risk of discomfort or drowsiness at the meeting, for above all things Mr. Baldwin desired a clear brain and sharp wits about him. He said little during the meal, and Edith made no attempt to force a conversation. Since tea-time he had been silently at work, and his final notes, neatly folded, lay ready upon the hall-stand beside his hat. He was restless and ill at ease, and more than once glanced up at the windows as the gale spattered them with rain.

"This is certain to keep people away from the meeting," he said at last.

"Not if they're keen," replied Edith. "In any case nobody's got far to come."

At moments Mr. Baldwin weakly hoped that no one would be at the meeting at all: that the whole thing would be a fiasco. At the next moment he prayed for a room full of people: to have as many there as possible to witness his fight against van Doon and the second-rate things that van Doon stood for.

It was less than a minute's walk to the van Boons' house and although the Baldwins ate slowly there was nearly half an hour to spare when the meal was over. They sat by the fire: they tried to talk of other things: of the garden: of the small library they had discovered in a room behind the newsagent's shop, from which they had that morning drawn two tattered but amusing books. But the time lagged interminably, and Mr. Baldwin wondered how many other people were sitting by fire-sides, waiting for the time to go to the meeting.

"Whatever happens, we're going to meet our neighbours," said Edith; "there's bound to be some nice people amongst them. I like the look of that woman who goes by every morning with that big Airedale dog. I hope she's there." She paused for a moment, then added: "Even if they don't support your plan, we shall still find some nice friends. Some are certain to be on your side."

Mr. Baldwin did not answer at once. He threw a log on the fire and said: "I hope it doesn't end in an awful row: van Doon's the sort of chap who might easily turn nasty: it's the pity the meeting's in his house."

"There's no need for him to be unpleasant," replied Edith. "It's just your scheme against his. They'll discuss it and then vote. There's no reason for it to get personal."

But he shook his head. "It's extraordinary how easily things *can* get personal," he said. "Sometimes I think I'm a fool to trouble about it. It'd be much more pleasant just to go to the meeting and enjoy listening—and just be one of the crowd. But you know how it is, Edie. The world's made up of unpleasant, pushing people and nice,

retiring people. If you mix the two kinds together in a club the nice ones always go and the nasty ones remain. A club either keeps its social standing with a terrific struggle—or it goes down. No club ever goes *up* socially, ever. I simply want a club for the nice people, that's all. I want all the rules to protect the nice ones and keep the nasty ones out. The nasty ones can go and have a club to themselves. We could have such a grand little club down in that old barn if we fight for it. Can't you picture it? A jolly little club room for the winter?—a tea garden for the summer?—with just the people that matter?—simple, interesting people. I want to limit the membership to thirty men and thirty women; half to be under thirty years of age so that it'll never turn into an old fogeys⁵ club. The two things that make people proud of a club is a waiting list, and a rumour that the committee had refused to accept somebody."

"I think everybody will vote for that," said Edith, but Mr. Baldwin shook his head with a smile.

"Not everybody. Not the people who know they wouldn't be elected to a really exclusive club. Van Doon wants to lord it over a colossal club with hundreds of members. He wants quantity: quality doesn't appeal to him. But it does to me."

He rose from the fire and went upstairs to brush his hair and prepare for the battle. He was wearing a dark-grey suit that had seen very little service since his City days. At ten minutes to nine they slammed the front door and heard the lavatory flush defiantly behind them.

"I shall insist upon the builder putting that right," he said. He spoke mechanically, neither in sorrow nor in anger. It was curious how remote and unimportant little

" Greengates " had suddenly become, when a few days ago it had meant everything in the world.

They pushed open their umbrellas and leant against the gale.

Mr. van Doon had specially invited the Baldwins to arrive early in order that they might say " How d'you do ? " to his wife before the crowd arrived. Lights were shining from every window of the van Doon house as they walked up the path and stood between the smug little bay trees by the front door. Mrs. Baldwin had caught sight of someone peering between the front-room curtains as they had entered the gate, but the head had disappeared as if jerked by a string and there was a somewhat tedious, nerve-wracking wait before the door was opened by a superior-looking maid in brown uniform. The maid took their umbrellas away from them like a nurse removing unclean toys from little children. She was asking them for their names when Mr. van Doon himself emerged from a room and advanced with outstretched hand. He was wearing yet another suit: a double-breasted jacket, striped trousers and a large butterfly collar that made him look like a solicitor in a film. He was carrying a cigar that had obviously just been lit.

" Here we are !—Come along in and meet the wife !—I hope the rain doesn't keep 'em away. I'll get busy on the telephone if it does !—I'll rout 'em out ! "

" We must have a good big meeting ! " replied Mr. Baldwin.

" We shall !—even if I have to fetch 'em in the car ! "

Mrs. van Doon was tall and plump, with startling blue eyes and beads to match. She had bright pink cheeks,

full red lips and was in every way the kind of lady men married when they came home from Rubber Plantations.

" Percy's never stopped talking about you both ! " she exclaimed. " It's quite an occasion to meet you in the **flesh!**"

This made Mr. Baldwin feel as if he had come without any trousers on, but he gallantly replied that he, too, had looked forward to their meeting with barely concealed impatience. The house was full of bright amber light and a smell of coffee. A startled, resentful cat peered round a corner and shot upstairs.

Mrs. van Boon took Edith by the arm and ushered her away to remove her coat. Mr. van Doon took Mr. Baldwin by the arm and led him into the large front room.

It was a very fine room—much bigger than the lounge at " Greengates." It was painted a cream colour and the Regency mouldings on either side of the fireplace looked very impressive and correct. The designs embodied bundles of flutes done up in ribbon, small cherubs with trumpets and decorative wind instruments in profusion. Everything was in such harmony, and so cream coloured that Mr. Baldwin could not help feeling it a pity that coal could not be secured in cream-coloured knobs. It was an elegant, impressive room, but not the sort that one could do a piece of toast in. The wind boomed in the chimney and a scurry of rain came faintly from the night,

Mr. van Doon had spared no pains to get everything as perfect as possible for the meeting. A table had been placed at one end of the room, with two chairs behind it. Upon the table were pens and ink and a copy of Whitaker's *Almanack* for reference if needed.

The rest of the room had been arranged in a pleasant,

informal circle of chairs with a settee and two large arm-chairs by the fire.

Mr. Baldwin declared that it looked first rate, but van Doon held up his hand and said: " Wait a minute !—have a look in here ! " He led the way across the passage and threw open the dining-room door.

The sight took Mr. Baldwin's breath away. He had never seen such a reckless display of refreshments. There were plates of sandwiches of every type from cress to lobster: sausage rolls, eclairs, large cream buns—slips of toast with sardines on them and a large purple jelly. Upon the sideboard, glowing in the amber light and catching dancing reflections from the fire, stood a small battalion of bottles and glasses: from home-made lemonade to a crusty-looking bottle of port and a large jug of yellow fluid with fruit floating in it or lying on the bottom, according to the kind of fruit it was. Mr. Baldwin looked round in astonishment. It must have cost pounds. And as he looked, he felt all his fine, carefully-prepared plans crumbling to pieces. No one who came to the meeting could do anything but support a man who entertained them like this. . . .

" There's just a point that's worrying me," said van Doon. " We must have a Chairman for the meeting."

" You must be in the Chair," said Mr. Baldwin. " I shall propose you myself."

" I mean," went on the little man, " just because it happens to be my house I don't want to . . ."

" Nonsense," broke in Mr. Baldwin, " you planned the meeting: it's your idea."

" All right. If you think so. But you might slip the word to someone else to propose me. You see, if you propose

me and I propose you as Secretary, it'll look a bit fishy—a put-up show—if you see what I mean."

"Quite," said Mr. Baldwin. "I'll mention it to somebody. And then you'll propose me as Secretary before the meeting starts? We must have proper notes taken from the beginning."

"Certainly I shall. Directly I'm in the Chair," assured van Doon.

Mr. Baldwin felt relieved. He also felt that he had played a slightly dirty trick: he wanted to be safely elected as Secretary before he declared himself against van Boon's plan. If the election were to come afterwards van Doon might have second thoughts ... he might even contrive to be elected Secretary himself—and that would wreck every remaining hope in Mr. Baldwin's heart.

But he quickly shook off his scruples: he knew that he would have to be unscrupulous to succeed: he was prepared to ride rough-shod over everyone—over van Doon himself if necessary. . . .

He waved his hand towards the table with a laugh:

"You ought to have had some crackers—then we could have finished the meeting blowing whistles in paper hats."

Van Doon did not laugh very much at this joke: Mr. Baldwin felt he had made a tactless remark, that he had belittled van Doon's hospitality. He was just beginning to put himself right when the front-door bell rang and the little man bristled into activity.

"Come along!—we'll meet them in the lounge!"

They were just in time to regain the lounge before the door reopened and the maid announced: "Mr. Forbes Whitehead!"

" Ah ! " said van Doon. " The very man we most wanted ! I'm glad you got down in time ! "

"I *made* time," said Mr. Forbes Whitehead. "Just scrambled into the seven-fifteen."

Mr. Whitehead was a sturdy, thick-set man. He was very bald, but his keen, aquiline face and piercing eyes made up for his lack of hair and stamped him as a young and vigorous personality. He was dressed in the conventional black coat and striped trousers of the City, but while Mr. van Doon had obviously dressed in the same style for this special occasion, Mr. Baldwin knew that Forbes Whitehead was dressed this way through lack of time to change into something easier. Van Doon was bogus: Whitehead was real.

" You two ought to find plenty to talk about ! " said van Doon as he introduced them. " Two City men ! "

The new-comer turned a pair of such penetrating eyes upon Mr. Baldwin that they would have been disconcerting without the broad, humorous smile beneath them.

" Were you on the seven-fifteen ? " enquired Mr. Whitehead.

" No," replied Mr. Baldwin, " I've retired."

" Lucky man ! "

Mr. Baldwin discovered that his new friend was a member of the Stock Exchange and he felt a little awed. The aloof, top-hatted men who came and went through Throgmorton Street and disappeared through the mysterious, forbidden door of " The House " were rather a class apart from the lesser, bowler-hatted men of the Banks and Insurance Offices. But the common interests of Welden Valley soon broke down the barriers, and in a few minutes Mr. Baldwin found himself in a deep and

surprising conversation about swallows, cuckoos and migratory birds in general. Birds were Mr. Whitehead's hobby, and he was literally bursting with them. In five minutes he told Mr. Baldwin more about them than he had learned in sixty years. He promised to take Mr. Baldwin out one day and show him how to observe nature unobserved: he was just explaining how it was possible to lie in secret within six feet of a thrush's nest when van Doon broke in to introduce a talkative white-haired lady named Mrs. McKinney. Mr. Whitehead escaped, but Mrs. McKinney hemmed Mr. Baldwin into a corner and began in a rapid, high-pitched voice to tell him everything he knew about everything.

Mr. Whitehead had interested him so deeply that he had quite failed to notice how quickly the room was filling with people. There were at least eight or nine already, and as he abstractedly nodded and listened to Mrs. McKinney he keenly watched the door over her shoulder as further people arrived. He was glad to see Edith sitting on the couch in conversation with a pleasant lady in horn-rimmed glasses, and he enviously watched Mr. Whitehead discussing motor-cars with a large fat man as vigorously as he had discussed birds with him. Mr. and Mrs. van Doon bustled to and fro, excited and happy that everybody was finding so much to say. The room was throbbing with conversation: the bell kept ringing: somebody said: " The rain's stopped—the moon's out! " and Mr. Baldwin nervously felt for his notes in his waistcoat pocket. The babble was so intense that he began to feel light-headed: it was a long time since he had been in a room with so many people, and it frightened him to think that in a little while they would all be silent—listening to his

To

speech. Mrs. McKinney prattled on about how nice new houses were and what a treat it was to live in the country and had Mr. Baldwin noticed that the spring was coming. He glanced furtively at his watch and saw that it was ten past nine: he noticed with relief that the buzz of conversation had begun to die away: that some of the guests were glancing around with a look of expectancy. He caught Mr. van Boon's eye through the crowd and they exchanged a nod of agreement: the little man made his way to the table and tapped upon it with a pencil. There was no response and he tapped more loudly.

" Ladies and gentlemen ! " he called out.

There was instant silence except from an old lady who was apparently deaf, who went on talking in a shrill, solitary voice until her listener gesticulated her into silence.

" Ladies and gentlemen ! " repeated Mr. van Doon.
" Shall we begin ? "

There was some pointless but friendly laughter; one or two " hear ! hears ! " and then silence. Everyone was looking towards van Doon: van Doon stood by the table in expectancy, and with a thud of the heart Mr. Baldwin realised that he had forgotten to tell anybody to propose van Doon as Chairman. He was upon the point of doing it himself when Mr. Whitehead called out:

" We must have a Chairman to keep us in order ! May I propose our host ? "

This was carried with acclaim, and Mr. van Doon edged round behind the table with a bashful smile.

" Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. This is rather sudden, but I'll do my best. Now will you all make yourselves comfortable ? I hope there's enough seats. I

wouldn't like anybody to come to my house and sit on the floor!"

There was further laughter at this remark and Mr. Baldwin could not help feeling what a heaven-sent opportunity a meeting of this kind offered to a man who never managed to raise a laugh at anything he ever said at any other time in his life.

There seemed to be far fewer people when everyone was seated. There appeared to have been at least fifty when they were all standing up—but now, from his stiff chair beneath the window Mr. Baldwin was disappointed at counting only seventeen.

But they were pleasant, friendly, well-to-do looking people: much better than the sort one saw passing the old house in Brondesbury. There was one exceedingly aristocratic old gentleman with a grey, military moustache and a nice old aristocratic wife—two young, obviously newly-married couples—two single old ladies—a stout, commonplace man in pince-nez, a shrivelled little man in a high collar and a few people behind whom he could not clearly see. He was pleased to note that Edith had retained her seat on the sofa beside the lady in horn-rimmed glasses: she looked flushed and happy, and threw him an encouraging smile.

Van Doon looked as if he had grown six inches as he stood behind the table puffing with circumstance. "I wonder if anyone will feel a draught if we just open the window a little at the top?—I'm afraid it'll get a little close."

There were cries of "Yes!—let's!" and the meeting was entirely upset while all the men got up and looked for the windows behind the numerous curtains. Mr. van

Doon called out: " No !—please !—the maids can do it—let the maids come in and do it! " But the resourceful Mr. Whitehead had already opened a window and was enquiring of a lady beneath whether she would feel it. All the men got up again and offered to change seats if she felt any inconvenience. The maids arrived and were sent away—and Mr. Baldwin felt certain that the whole window business had been manoeuvred to display the fact that van Doon's domestic staff was in the plural.

" Now, ladies and gentlemen ! I'm sure we all want a businesslike meeting and I suggest we begin by appointing a Secretary to keep proper records."

There was a murmur of approval: Mr. Baldwin's heart began to thump and his tongue grew dry. " I had a word just now," went on the little man, " with my friend Mr. Baldwin, and he expressed his willingness to act if that is your desire."

There was another murmur, followed by a ghostly silence. Mr. Baldwin's heart was thudding like a sledgehammer. The silence continued: he saw people exchange glances, raise their eyebrows, and shake their heads—obviously indicating that they didn't know who Mr. Baldwin was. After an eternity, van Doon remarked in a drawling voice: " Will anybody propose Mr. Baldwin ? "

Mr. Baldwin felt suddenly humiliated and angry: he felt that van Doon had deliberately staged this drawn-out delay in order to belittle him. Once more the resourceful Mr. Whitehead jumped up:

" I'd like to propose Mr. Baldwin ! "

" Proposed by Mr. Whitehead," drawled out van Doon.
" Will somebody second that proposal ? "

Again there came the awful silence: were the whole lot dumb !—had only Whitehead got a voice !

" I second Mr. Baldwin," came a thin, nervous voice from the back. It came from one of the young newly-married men: Mr. Baldwin noted him and vowed eternal friendship.

" Mr. Baldwin is proposed by Mr. Whitehead and seconded by Mr. Fitzgerald. Any other nominations ? "

This time the silence was correct and comforting.

" Those in favour ? "

Some hands went up—then several more.

" Carried," remarked van Boon in a voice that sounded full of relief after a ticklish and difficult business. " Will you sit up here, Mr. Baldwin ?—there's plenty of paper and ink."

There was a little applause and some sympathetic laughter as Mr. Baldwin arose and went to his seat beside van Doon. He felt that he had made a sorry and undignified entrance to public life and he knew that van Doon had deliberately made his election seem futile and unsubstantial. He felt like a beaten man: he had no chance against the fates that were fighting upon the side of van Doon to-night: van Doon was in his own house: he was host and Chairman: everyone in the room except Mr. Whitehead seemed dumb: they would follow van Doon like sheep ... he drew the paper towards him, took out his fountain-pen and prepared with a heavy heart to make notes of what transpired as the little man got up to speak.

Van Doon talked for half an hour and Mr. Baldwin had to admit that he talked well. What he said was no doubt

well prepared and his vitality gave a rough eloquence to his words that deeply impressed his listeners.

He began by ridiculing the feeble, squabble-ridden, poverty-stricken little clubs that usually grew up like mushrooms in every new residential area—"They are feeble because they devote themselves to one solitary game or interest which cannot possibly attract sufficient people to make each pay its way. Jealousy prevents them from combining into one strong club embracing every sport. They grow like mushrooms and shrivel up like mushrooms.

"But we people of Welden Valley have got a unique opportunity—and we shall be lunatics if we don't take advantage of it !

"We have a far-sighted, intelligent Estate Management alive to the golden possibilities of one really fine, centralised club as the hub of the social life of the Estate. The Estate themselves will find the money: they will build the club: they will relieve us of all the dull, back-breaking work of founding it. We can be certain of it being a fine, impressive building, because the more attractive they make it, the more people will come and live here—the more people will buy their land—and pay them to build their houses. From their point of view it is a great business proposition because it will double the value of the land they have to sell: from our point of view it is something for nothing ' We have already bought our land and houses—it will only be the newcomers who have to pay more. The subscription will be moderate: the Estate will not attempt to make money out of the club itself: they will probably lose by it—but they will gain ten times their loss in other directions !

" All they need is an assurance from us—the pioneer residents—that we shall give our whole-hearted support and confidence ! Let us send them a message of support to-night and I guarantee they will begin the club to-morrow ! "

There was great applause when he sat down, and enough stamping of feet to set the purple jelly wobbling in the dining-room. During the ovation van Doon leant over towards Mr. Baldwin with glistening eyes and said: " How was that ? "

" Magnificent/" replied Mr. Baldwin with all the heartiness that he could muster. " I wish I could speak like that."

" I'm sure you can," replied van Doon with a sympathy in his voice that said: " I know you can't."

When silence returned van Doon half rose with an apologetic modesty at having to rise again. " I hope we shall have a full expression of opinion from the meeting."

The stout man in pince-nez got up without delay. He heartily congratulated Mr. van Doon upon his very excellent speech and proceeded to make one himself that he obviously considered to be still more excellent. It was, in fact, a considerable feat of memory, for he repeated almost everything that Mr. van Doon had said: he then said a good deal of his own and when finally he sat down one gathered that he was in favour.

Mrs. McKinney then got up and strongly advocated the encouragement of archery. At some length she described the attempts made by her late husband and herself to instil an enthusiasm for this royal and ancient game into the residents of Wimbledon Park, and ascribed

their failure to numerous reasons, the majority of which were not quite clear to the audience.

She received a sympathetic ovation when she took her seat, and continued to enlarge upon her idea in a whisper to an uncomfortable looking lady next to her who kept nodding and rolling her eyes.

The next speaker was the shrivelled little man in a high collar who arose from the obscurity of a small seat in a corner.

"Dentist," muttered van Doon to Mr. Baldwin.

"May I ask," began the little man in a thin, apologetic voice, "whether the club committee will be composed of residents—whether we, in this room, shall be eligible to serve on it?"

"Certainly," replied van Doon. "The Estate Management will expect us to elect our own committee."

"What," asked the dentist, "will be our power if the Estate are, in fact, Owners and Managers of the club?"

Mr. Baldwin felt a sudden glow of pleasure: here was the first opposition: the little dentist was on his side: his friend. For the first time van Doon showed hesitancy as he arose to reply.

"I've already said that the residents will themselves manage the club."

"I know—but what power will they possess if they do not control the one vital element in a club—its finances?"

"I've always imagined that members are the one vital element," retorted Mr. van Doon. He smiled with a return of his self-assurance when some laughter followed this reply—but Mr. Baldwin noticed that the laughter was by no means general.

" Another point," pursued the dentist. " A committee protects a club by refusing membership to those whom they consider undesirable. If the Estate sells land to a man at a high price because they have provided an excellent club nearby, what will the Estate say if the committee refuses membership to that man—and what will the man say to the Estate when he realises that he has paid a high price under false pretences ? "

" I assume," replied van Boon, " that all of us who possess the financial standing and discrimination to live in Welden Valley would be desirable members."

His face was flushed and he was fidgeting angrily with a piece of blotting-paper. There was an attempt at sarcasm in his answer: an attempt to make it seem as if the dentist were casting reflections upon those present in the room. But his efforts missed fire and there was no response from the audience. All eyes were turned towards the fragile little dentist, standing against the wall, fingering his watch-chain. There was a tenseness in the room that comes from an audience hoping to witness an exciting little breeze.

" I see," replied the dentist. " In other words, the residents who form the committee will be forced to accept, even against their will, everyone to whom the Estate sells a house ? "

" I've already said," snapped Mr. van Doon, " the Estate are very particular about the people they sell houses to."

" Thank you," said the little man, disappearing from view upon his seat on the Regency coal-scuttle. There was no applause, but a murmur came that was far more eloquent than hand-clapping.

The stout man in pince-nez stood up again. He was

pugnacious and a little unpleasant. He said that it was nothing short of defamation of character and a criminal offence for a smug, self-righteous committee to exclude a man from a club he wished to join. Some men had suffered all their lives from the venom and spite of people who got on to committees and set themselves up as judges of other men's characters. All committees turned into little cliques who took too much to themselves and it would be an excellent thing if there *were* a power above them to let them know they weren't everybody. He enlarged upon this theme to such an extent and with such venom that it became evident to everybody that at some time in his life he had badly wanted to be on a committee and failed to achieve it.

There was no applause at all when the stout man sat down: if he had intended his outburst as support for van Boon's scheme it dismally failed: the little dentist had pointed out possible weaknesses: the stout man had proved conclusively that the dentist's theories were correct.

In the space of ten minutes the atmosphere of the meeting had undergone an astonishing change. Until the little dentist had risen, it had been like a friendly, rather aimless little tea-party. Now the air seemed pharged with electricity: at any moment a careless word might cause a violent storm: people were speaking in undertones—nodding and shaking their heads. They seemed to be realising for the first time that they were dealing with a far bigger issue than they had anticipated, that the club was something that might profoundly affect the future of Welden Valley and all who lived in it. The smile had disappeared from van Boon's face: he sat back in his

chair, obviously annoyed at the unofficial discussions proceeding in every corner of the room.

Mr. Baldwin realised that his turn had come at last. He had purposely refrained from speaking until he had been able to gauge the feeling of the meeting: so far van Doon alone had spoken constructively—and the little dentist, in a few penetrating questions, had brought van Boon's plan to the brink of destruction. Another attack might end everything, and he saw now that he alone was ready with a constructive alternative that would not only save the club, but save van Doon—for suddenly and unaccountably he felt sorry for van Doon . . . The stout man in pince-nez, in an attempt to support him, had done the little man a hideous disservice that he did not deserve . . .

He stood up, cleared his throat and took a firm grip of his watch chain. Van Doon looked up in surprise, and tapped the table for order.

"Is the poor, downtrodden Secretary allowed to open his mouth?" began Mr. Baldwin.

There were cries of "Yes!"—"No!"—"Sit down!"—"Go on!" and a lot of friendly laughter.

Mr. Baldwin was delighted to find that his unrehearsed opening had struck the right note. He had planned to begin with a graceful compliment to the Chairman, but these good-natured interruptions were more helpful than an ocean of polite applause. They eased the tension, broke down the barriers between him and his audience, and all his nervousness had disappeared when silence permitted him to proceed.

"The rottenest thing in the world," he said, "is destructive criticism. To attempt to pull down and destroy the

carefully considered proposals of our Chairman would be worthy of contempt, and I hope that nothing I say will bring that charge upon me. When the Welden Valley club is a hundred years old I hope it will be clearly remembered that the man whose energy and enthusiasm inspired it is the man sitting beside me to-night."

He bowed slightly towards Mr. van Doon amidst appreciative applause, and he was happy to see the smile return to the little man's face.

" I support his plans with admiration and enthusiasm: it was a splendid proposal of his that one strong, centralised club should take the place of half a dozen futile ones. I disagree with him upon one point only. I disagree with the Estate having any interest or control whatsoever. I believe that would not only ruin its spirit and destroy its character; it would also deprive us of the joy of scheming it out and fighting for it and creating something with our own hands that we can be justly proud of.

" I know that the Estate could build a far grander place than we can hope for by our own efforts—but don't you think we shall enjoy it more if it is a little less grand and a little more our own ?

" Let us go to the Estate and say: ' Give us that barn and meadow upon a yearly rental and leave us to do the rest/ I want all of you to go down and see that barn and picture what we can make of it: it is too fine, and old, and unspoiled to be vandalised into a large modern club. If we make this club with our own hands we shall fight each other—clash our characters one against the other—face disappointment and struggle through to far more enduring friendships than we shall ever find by walking like pampered guests into a glorified hotel—built and

managed for us by the Estate. We shall be free to elect only the people we desire: we shall set a standard that newcomers will try and live up to: membership will be a proud honour, jealously guarded, and not merely something thrown in by a builder with a plot of land ! "

Mr. Baldwin sat down. From his unclenched palm there fell a piece of paper—hot and damp and twisted. It contained his notes: planned with meticulous care through half a dozen long evenings of labour and he had not used a word of them. They contained suggestions for altering the barn: plans of the club's activities, carefully modelled to attract both young and old, with a dozen other details. He had planned a businesslike, cool-headed speech., and instead he had ranted like a soap-box orator . . .

But they were applauding him—and the applause seemed to go on for a long time: he turned round to find van Boon's little round face in his, and van Boon, who should by now have been his bitter enemy, was smiling. " Who said you couldn't speak ? " said van Boon.

Mr. Baldwin felt bewildered. Were they laughing at him ?—was the applause ironical ?—was van Boon's remark a crowning insult ?—or could it be a generous compliment ? He cursed himself for losing his head and forgetting all his best and most carefully reasoned arguments—and yet as the applause ended a murmur arose—a keen, excited murmur from half a dozen impromptu meetings around him.

Vaguely Mr. Baldwin realised that somebody was standing up talking. Mrs. McKinney was telling the meeting that when she and her late husband had tried to found the Archery Club at Wimbledon Park it had been their intention to keep it select and have nobody

who was likely to fool about, because bows and arrows were delicate things, and expensive and easily broken and she knew by experience what a lot of damage one stupid person could do. She thought the best way to avoid this would be to limit the club as Mr. Baldwin suggested because it did not follow that because a man bought a house in Welden Valley he would understand how to treat the delicate implements of archery.

Mrs. McKinney's speech was opportune because it broke the silence and gave everybody a chance of thinking about what Mr. Baldwin had just said. But it remained for the aristocratic old gentleman in spats to voice what all were thinking and to set the seal upon Mr. Baldwin's triumph.

The old man had said nothing so far. Once he had looked at his wife and gravely nodded: once he had glanced at her and shaken his head with a smile. For the rest he had sat motionless, thoughtfully stroking his moustache. He was slight and very thin: he wore an old fashioned suit and an old world tie. His shoulders drooped a little but there was a quiet dignity that compelled attention.

"Colonel Henderson," whispered van Doon into Mr. Baldwin's ear, and Mr. Baldwin was pleased that appearances had not deceived him. He had hoped all along that the old man might turn out to be a Colonel, but spats can be treacherous things and he had feared they might have turned out to be mere decoys round the ankles of a retired grocer.

Van Doon tapped upon the table and the meeting became silent when it saw the old man standing up.

"May I say a word?" began the old man in a gentle,

cultured voice. " May I tell Mr. van Doon how grateful my wife and I feel towards him for a very happy and stimulating evening ? When we came to Welden Valley we expected to be rather lonely old people. We did not expect an invitation to a meeting such as this. We both admired and respected our Chairman's speech: at first we were both ready to support a club managed by the Estate—but after sitting here and listening, and—may I say ?—feeling the fine independent spirit of everyone present this evening I am sure we can have splendid fun if we build up the club on our own—just as Mr. Baldwin has so admirably suggested. I say that if necessary we will both support a club built by the Estate because I think it our duty—but if we have our *own* club—if we have that fine old barn all to ourselves, then I shall take my coat off and mow the grass and wash the cups and do everything in the world for it. Perhaps I am a selfish old snob: a diehard Tory if you like—but I do want the spirit in this room to be kept safe and sound so that it may set a standard for those who follow us."

They applauded Colonel Henderson more for himself than for his words: they applauded him because they all wanted to be like him when they were old.

The two young men at the back were inspired to their feet: they spoke briefly but vigorously. " Our own club or nothing ! " was the gist of their remarks, and through a haze of happiness Mr. Baldwin caught sight of Edith, almost bouncing on the sofa—almost slapping the second young man on the back.

Van Doon behaved admirably. If he felt any disappointment he concealed it with a completeness that won Mr. Baldwin's heart. He stood up and said that his own

proposal was only put forward as an idea to stimulate the meeting to a full expression of views. All that he desired was a first-rate club and his heart and soul would be with whatever the meeting decided upon.

" As Chairman I will ask you to decide by a show of hands. Those in favour of our own private club ? "

Fourteen hands shot up. The deaf lady and the stout man in pince-nez were the only ones who remained aloof.

" Those in favour of the Estate-managed club ? "

No hands went up at all: the stout man in pince-nez stared at the ceiling and continued to remain aloof, and the deaf lady was asking her companion what the first lot of hands were all about.

" Carried ! " said Mr. van Doon amidst enthusiastic applause.

Mr. Forbes Whitehead got up and made some keen businesslike remarks. " To vote for a club doesn't mean it's built and furnished," he said; " we've got a long way to go, but I do suggest we try by some means to buy that barn and meadow so that the club will be ours in fact as well as spirit! "

A small executive committee was then formed consisting of Mr. Baldwin as Secretary, Mr. van Doon, Colonel Henderson, Mr. Whitehead the stockbroker and Mr. Fitzgerald, a young architect who offered his professional services in an honorary capacity. Everyone agreed that it was an admirable committee. It was to start work immediately and report progress in two weeks⁵ time. All present were invited to submit their names for membership without formality and to be elected at the next meeting. All future members were to be proposed and seconded

and carefully considered by the committee before election. „ A very complimentary vote of thanks to the Chairman was proposed by Mr. Whitehead and passed with acclamation. Mr. van Boon replied that no one in the room was happier than he at the result of the meeting and concluded by inviting the company to adjourn to the dining-room for refreshments.

Mr. Baldwin never forgot the last hour of that evening. He never forgot the gay, bewildering atmosphere of that throbbing, panelled dining-room: the warm amber lights, the smell of coffee and log fire and shrimp paste and new hearth-rug and chocolate sponge: the keen babble of voices and bubbling gusts of laughter: the jogging of elbows and the gushing of coffee into saucers—cries of warning, apologies and more laughter. There seemed to be hundreds of people crowded there, and all of them appeared to have something to confide to Mr. Baldwin, their new Secretary. Five different people came up to register their names as members without delay, and with a rock-bun in one hand and note-book in the other Mr. Baldwin jotted down their names and addresses and promised to communicate with them at the earliest possible moment. Colonel Henderson came up to introduce his wife and ask whether the committee would honour him by meeting in his house for their first meeting on Friday night. " You made a magnificent speech," said the old man with a hand upon Mr. Baldwin's arm. " It was your speech that did it."

" It was yours that did it," said Mr. Baldwin, but Colonel Henderson shook his head and smiled.

Mr. van Boon, with a large, half-eaten cream-bun in his hand and a small piece of cream upon his nose, came

up and asked what time to-morrow would suit Mr. Baldwin for an interview with the Estate Manager about the barn and meadow. Mrs. McKinney pushed her way through the crowd and asked Mr. Baldwin what he really felt about archery, and the young architect wanted to know whether Mr. Baldwin would walk down to the barn directly he got home from London to-morrow evening to discuss the alterations. At one time there were half a dozen people standing round Mr. Baldwin, and he had to slip the rock-bun into his pocket to give more freedom to write. Mr. van Boon kept calling out: "Jelly !—who says jelly ! " and Mrs. van Doon kept going round asking everybody whether the room was too hot for them and whether they were quite sure it wasn't, and whether they would promise faithfully to tell her at once if it was. The young architect pushed through the crowd with a large whisky-and-soda and insisted upon Mr. Baldwin drinking it before he exhausted himself any further.

It was past eleven before the first guest said " good-bye " to Mrs. van Doon. It was Mrs. Morrison, the deaf lady, and she asked Mr. Baldwin whether she might make some d'oyleys for putting under the plates at the new club and Mr. Baldwin thanked her and promised to lay her generous offer before the committee.

Gradually the room emptied and the table reappeared in all its battered glory. It looked as if a bomb had exploded upon it: the sandwiches had entirely gone, and only a plate of large sausage rolls had been spared intact as a monument to Prudence. Although the purple jelly now had a large crater in its summit, numerous small pieces of it were visible upon plates pushed furtively on to the window ledge, the sideboard and other secluded

places, for it had not been quite sweet enough and had tasted slightly of paraffin.

By mutual accord the committee lingered until the end. They were arranging their first meeting at the Colonel's house when the little dentist popped back from the front door in a large green muffler. He drew Mr. Baldwin aside to tell him that a friend of his was in the wholesale printing line and would no doubt be pleased to prepare all the printed matter of the club at exceptional prices. Mr. Baldwin thanked him and promised to lay the generous offer before the committee.

He caught sight of Edith peeping into the room to see if he were ready, and he gathered up his papers to go.

" To-morrow night, then, at Colonel Henderson's."

" Eleven o'clock at the Estate Office ! " warned van Boon.

" And six o'clock at the barn ! " reminded the young architect.

" You've got your time cut out now ! " called the Colonel.

" I shall work it all in somehow !—Good night! "

" Good night, Mr. Secretary ! "

The storm had passed, and Tom and Edith Baldwin walked home through a quiet, starlit night. They could still hear van Doon calling out to his departing guests as they opened the green front gates of their home and picked their way through the puddles of the unfinished pathway to the front door. The dining-room was cool and peaceful after the heat and babble of the past hour: the fire glowed faintly beneath a soft grey fur of ash as

they sat down beside it for a little while before they went to bed.

" Well," said Mr. Baldwin with a laugh. " What d'you think about it ? "

" I think it's wonderful," said Edith.

" Van Doon seems quite happy. He took it well."

" He was happy directly after that compliment you paid him about people remembering him in a hundred years' time. He didn't mind what happened after that."

Mr. Baldwin pulled on his slippers and smiled. " People won't remember: they never do. But van Doon won't be there to know."

He lay back in his chair and although it was nearly midnight he filled and lit his pipe.

" From now on," he murmured, " it's work—and work—and work. We shall have to reorganise everything, Edie. Less time for the garden—less time for sleep—less time for everything."

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH THE MEETING of the Pioneers, and the birth of the Welden Valley Club upon that blustering, rain-spattered night our story of Tom and Edith Baldwin is really over. It concerned their lonely struggle in the wilderness and was not intended to draw the curtains from the brimming days that followed.

Ten years have passed since that April night, and this final chapter comes more by chance than by design.

I had need this autumn to visit some friends in Buckingham and my way from London led along the Edgware Road. I was held up by the traffic beside one of those many quiet roads that join the main thoroughfare at right angles. I glanced up as I waited for the traffic to move on, and the name-plate " Brondesbury Terrace " revived a memory. I had worked beside Mr. Baldwin for several years in the Temple Insurance Office: I had subscribed my half-crown towards his clock and stood by the wall in the Manager's room when it was presented to him upon the night of his retirement. I had been one of the first visitors to his new house in Welden Valley, but since then, for over ten years, our ways had parted, and except for an annual Christmas Card I had heard no news of him at all.

The impulse came to swing into Brondesbury Terrace, to drive past old " Grasmere " to see what had happened

to it, and then to break my journey at " Greengates " for a cup of tea. I wriggled my car around the tail-end of a lorry and drove slowly down the road that Mr. Baldwin had lived in for so many years.

Brondesbury Terrace has let the years slide over it with little sign of wear, and the same old houses turn their brown, placid faces towards you as you pass. I began to look for the large notice-board that advertised Mr. Ranken-Dudley's School of Elocution, but as I drew opposite " Grasmere " I saw that the notice-board had disappeared. Mr. Ranken-Dudley has vanished into the noise from whence he came and " Grasmere " has settled down once more into the dignity of a private residence. The front door and railings have been painted a rather disturbing ginger-brown, but the old laurel hedge that Mr. Baldwin worked so hard upon still lingers there in its dusty, chronic baldness. A boy in a green cap came whistling down the steps on his way to afternoon school and a pleasant-looking young mother closed the door behind him. The curtains were clean and tidy, and I looked forward to telling Mr. Baldwin that the old house had taken on a new and happy lease of life.

As I drove on I saw the walnut tree in the neighbouring garden shake its tousled old head and throw a shower of leaves over the " Grasmere " wall. I wondered if anyone had used the heap that Mr. Baldwin had made and whether anyone would stack this year's supply against the lower wall.

If you have not been to Welden Valley in the past ten years a visit will surprise you. A vast iron-grey by-pass

road sweeps round upon its northern side, missing the old village by-a hairsbreadth. " To Welden J-mile " brings you to a railway station, far different from the one that Tom and Edith Baldwin knew in the days when " Greengates " was being built. You can no longer hear a solitary porter yawn through the stillness, for the sleepy little station has been attacked and captured by Metroland: colonised and civilised into producing six train-loads of lively City people a day. The elms no longer creak their joints above the narrow, twisting lane that led to the village: the lane has grown into a broad, curving, concrete avenue upon which Woolworth's, Sainsbury's, Boots' and Lyons' have built their mansions and settled down.

The old village, with its brown turreted church and elm trees, remains almost as it used to be because it lies in a backwater, but the Bell Inn beside the humped-back bridge has swollen into the Bell Hotel and a delicate operation upon the bridge has broadened its back and removed its hump, so that people in dickey seats of cars no longer come down after the car has hurtled on.

As I drove out of the old village and turned into the road that leads to Welden Close I came to a far different corner of the modern world from the screeching, concrete-spattered stretch beside the by-pass. Broad white avenues curve away towards the low hills that rim the valley: quiet, sane avenues with well-spaced, embowered houses that do not stare rudely into each other's bedrooms. Most of them look politely over each other's shoulders towards the southern sky, and everywhere there is a sense of rest and quiet. Welden Valley will always be quiet, for it has been given the golden privilege of leading to nowhere.

The Estate Office has packed up and disappeared. It has sold all its land in Welden Valley and has got its teeth into the naked haunches of a hill three miles away.

Welden Close remains open and inviolate. It has mellowed and softened, and is slowly gathering to itself the tranquil spirit of a village green. But "Greengates" no longer stands there in solitude. Houses surround it on all sides, but they are well spaced and already secluded amongst their fast-growing evergreens. The shrubs that hedge the front of "Greengates" are no longer shivering little striplings, frightened of themselves and suspicious of one another. Their sturdy growth has given them confidence. They have made friends with each other and thrown their arms around each other's shoulders so that the lower windows of the house are hidden from view until you reach the gate.

I could not have called at a better time as far as Mrs. Baldwin was concerned. The season had been kind and her roses were putting up a great show for the lateness of the year. She came to meet me in a business-like blue overall and pulled off a bulky leather glove to shake hands. There was a Committee Meeting at "Greengates" that night, she told me, and her best trees were offering up their choicest blooms to decorate the room.

"Tom's upstairs at work. Come round and see the back garden before we call him down."

"Back garden" is a poor name to describe the little paradise they have made behind the house. The clefts of the stone-flagged path are filled with moss; shy rock flowers specking it here and there with violet and gold.

But the moss is allowed to explore no further than the path, and the lawn, unlike most lawns, is reserved exclusively for grass.

"The lawns are my husband's special interest," said Edith. "He's never laid an inch of new turf or set any seed. It's just the meadow land, brought up to behave itself like a civilised lawn."

A pergola of briar roses spans the garden at the lower end of the lawn, and at either end of the path beneath the rustic archway two small banked-up rockeries have been built. They cleverly conceal the boundaries of the Baldwin territory and give a sense of width and spaciousness.

Upon one side of the lower garden are the vegetables. Upon the other side, beyond a small thicket of currant trees, a corner has been left in its native wildness. In this corner the grass lies tough and wild around the trunk of Mr. Baldwin's elm and the clump of blackberry bushes are as they were upon the first day of the Baldwins' visit.

"We come blackberrying down here with a hooked walking-stick and a jam jar," said Edith. "It's nice to know there's one wild bush in the world that we can go blackberrying around without other people getting there before us and leaving us the green ones."

In this wild corner they have built a rustic summer-house. It is out of view of the house when the trees are in leaf: out of view of all buildings. It might be right away in the wilds, and it looks up towards the hill crest, to where the footpath meets the summit.

"They'll never build up there," said Edith, "because the owner's given it as an open space. Tom brings his work down here quite often."

I gathered that Edith has, by degrees, taken over all the garden except for this wild corner and the lawns. At first the rose trees alone were hers, but she has taken it piece by piece as the work of the Club has steadily increased upon Mr. Baldwin's shoulders.

The Club ? Yes, the Club was doing wonderfully well, but Edith felt very strongly that her husband should have an assistant to relieve him of part of the work. " He's at it day and night. He attends all the sub-Committees and hasn't missed a meeting since the Club was formed. When he had lumbago last spring he insisted upon having a meeting in his bedroom ! He likes to keep everything under his hand and know exactly what's happening everywhere."

She was telling me how Mr. Baldwin had offered to resign after his tenth year as Secretary last April, and how the General Meeting had shouted him back to his seat, when she was interrupted by the French windows flying open and Mr. Baldwin himself came hurrying down the path to meet us.

He will be seventy-one next year. His hair is quite white now, but his face is the colour of polished oak and his eyes are clearer and keener than ever I saw them in his office days.

He took me upstairs to his bedroom, if it can still be called a bedroom, for it looks more like the sleeping quarters of an Adjutant upon Active Service. The bed has been shoved carelessly away into a corner as an irritating necessity that calls for too much valuable time, and beneath the window that looks across the open country to the hill crest there stands a large table piled with books and papers. Open shelves along the walls are lined with

Club Minute Books, files of correspondence, reference volumes and some new books on Gardening and History.

" You must excuse the mess," said Mr. Baldwin. " I do most of my work up here to be out of reach of people who call. I simply have to make it a rule to be 'out' to everybody in the afternoons or I'd never get through any work at all. The Club ?—Yes, most of it's the Club."

I began to congratulate him upon the success he had made of it, but he quickly broke in to stop me.

" It's not me: it's team work. We struck lucky with our original Committee; that's the key to it all. We've got a fellow named Forbes Whitehead. He's a stockbroker—a wonderful chap. He took charge of the finances: he raised a loan and fixed up a plan to buy the barn and meadow. He arranged a sinking fund and in three years we pay back the last penny and the Club's ours ! Everybody does something. Colonel Henderson runs the garden: he lends his own gardener twice a week and works on it himself like a trojan. A young architect gave his services and made a magnificent job of the barn. It's just like an old Tudor Hall inside, with big curtains to divide it into separate rooms when we need them. The Club's full up now: a hundred members and a waiting list of seventeen. We've kept half the membership reserved for young people: we're running a rugger team for the first time this season and of course the cricket and tennis have been going on for several years. Van Boon ? Yes—he's still here. He's useful because he does odd jobs other people don't want. But you have to sit on him now and then. If you're too nice to him he gets uppish and rude, and if you're rude to him he offers you a cigar. You know the sort of man."

I noticed a pile of open books on his table, and several

sheets of closely written notes. It was pleasant to see again that neat round hand that I knew so well from the ledgers in the office. I asked him whether he were writing a book of his own, and he laughed self-consciously.

" Notes for my next lecture ! " he said. " We've had a series each winter for the last five years and they've turned out quite a success. We often get as many as sixty or seventy members to them." He handed me a neat little booklet. " Here's the list for the new season."

- Oct. 10th. " Memories of the North-West Frontier,"
by Colonel G. S. Henderson, C.M.G.
Nov. 6th. " Nature at Night," by Forbes Whitehead.
Dec. 5th. " Adventures of a Rubber Planter," by
Percy van Doon.
Jan. 6th. " Cricket in Trinidad," by Major Allan
Keeble.
Feb. 7th. " Books to read and books to light the fire
with," by Rev. Walter Fenn.
March 10th. " A Civil War Skirmish in Welden Valley,"
by T. H. Baldwin.

" We encourage members to prepare lectures and submit them to the Lecture sub-Committee. Everybody's had some kind of adventures, or got some kind of interest or hobby worth listening to. I was always rather interested in History. I'm making a study of the history of this little corner of the world and it's twice as interesting if you can stand up and talk about what you've discovered. People ask questions and often come round and discuss them afterwards. I began with ' Welden Valley in the Stone Age/ then ' The Romans in Welden Valley ' ; last year I

did 'What William the Conqueror did with Welden Valley,' and next year it's 'Member of Parliament for Welden ! ' I've discovered that Welden was one of the Rotten Boroughs and until the Reform Act stopped it, a farmer and six labourers had the right to elect a Member ! I'm hoping to begin an Archaeological Society one day—but it's difficult to find time for everything one wants to do."

Mr. Baldwin was tilting back in his chair with his hands behind his head. He looked like a Company Director enjoying a brief relaxation. The sun was setting. Through the window I could see the trunk of his elm and the foot-path winding up the hillside. Faintly I could hear the roar of traffic from the by-pass. He apologised for talking so much: he asked me for my news, and was glad to hear that old " Grasmere " looked well and happy again.

" Funny how long ago that seems," he said. " As you grow older your memory seems to twist right round and point the furthest end at you. I remember my father's old house in Colchester much clearer now than I remember " Grasmere." The Grammar School's much clearer to me now than the office. Come down and have some tea ! "

As we went downstairs I noticed a number of framed photographs of cricket teams upon the wall, and that Mr. Baldwin appeared in all of them in a long white coat.

" Yes," he said, " we've had our cricket team for six years now—ever since we collected enough money to lay the pitch in the meadow. I'm the official umpire—which probably accounts for us winning eight matches this season ! It reminds me I've got to get those batting and bowling averages worked out for the Club Magazine."

During tea I discovered that Edith's activities were not

entirely confined to the house and garden. She is on the Ladies Committee and she reminded Mr. Baldwin that there would be an insurrection amongst the ladies if they were not given the Club for an extra afternoon a week for their new scheme of House and Garden debates.

Mr. Baldwin threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

" It can't be done, Edie ! You know quite well there are only seven days in a week ! They begin rehearsing the Christmas play on Wednesday: the juniors want their weekly dances again and with twenty-eight entries for the Ping Pong tournament we shall have to play as many games as we can in the afternoons. You've got three afternoons already ! "

" There's Friday," put in Edith.

" Friday's the only day when members who don't want to do anything can sit about in peace. Nice time we shall have if the Committee turns them out for your needlework and cookery lectures ! " He reached forward and took his cup of tea. " Still, I'll sound the Committee to-night. I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything."

" Which means," said Edith with a wink at me, " that we can have an extra afternoon without the slightest trouble if you say so."

" Rot ! " said Mr. Baldwin, " I'm only Secretary ! " But Edith only laughed and winked at me again.

The evenings were beginning to draw in, and I wanted to make as much progress as possible along an unfamiliar road before it grew dark. In any case I could not have taken up much more of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin's time, for

Mr. Baldwin had got to hurry down to the Club to supervise the draw of the Ping Pong tournament and get back for a hasty dinner before the Committee Meeting, and a lady named Mrs. McKinney was coming in to see Mrs. Baldwin to discuss the possibility of having an afternoon a week in the meadow for Archery.

" Try and come over one Saturday and see one of our rugger games," said Mr. Baldwin. " Young Whitehead's Captain: he's the son of old Forbes Whitehead and was Captain of his school last year. It'll be a great triumph if we can win a few games in our first season. Here's a fixture card—to save you coming on a Saturday when we're playing away. But you must come in the spring to see the Club at its best: come one evening when the garden's worth seeing and when there's tennis going on and some youngsters practising cricket at the nets."

They came to the gate to see me off: Edith still in the blue overall she had forgotten to remove for tea, Mr. Baldwin in his grey flannels and white sweater. They waved good-bye as I turned the corner that led me away from Welden Close. I drove slowly through the old village where the falling sun was giving a ruddy glow to the church tower behind the trees. I drove more quickly along the new road past Woolworth's, Sainsbury's, Boots' and Lyons'. I skirted the station as a crowd of returning City men and girls came hurrying out towards their new homes in Welden Valley. I just had time to wonder how many of them were members of the Club as the roaring by-pass caught me and swept me away towards the North.

