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Title Reasons of Health

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1949

REASONS OF HEALTH

Jan Farmingham, the son of a British soldier whose service took him among the poor whites and coloured folk of a remote South African outpost, was born and reared in places where theft and killing were not always robbery or murder. In his gigantic frame, a strong and ruthless spirit bred unlimited ambitions, and the wheels of his chariot passed relentlessly over all who stood in his way. They seemed to have been obliterated, yet he felt their shadows ever pursuing him. This secret fear and burden oppressed him most heavily when, to the public eye, he appeared to be most firmly set in the places of the mighty, and destined only for higher pinnacles still.

He was successful in his frontiersman's. South, successful when he descended on the City of London, successful in politics. He was always the coming and rising man. Nothing stopped him. 'He means to be either Prime Minister or lord Mayor of London," said a good judge of such men. He rough-hewed his ends with amazing skill. Did his destiny finally shape them? Was he a murderer? Was he a great wrongdoer, or a much-wronged man?

REASONS OF HEALTH

By the same author

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DISGRACE ABOUNDING
NEMESIS ?
A PROPHET AT HOME
ALL OUR TOMORROWS
LEST WE REGRET
FROM SMOKE TO SMOTHER

Play

DOWNFALl

Novels

THE NEXT HORIZON
GALANTY SHOW

REASONS OF HEALTH

by

DOUGLAS REED

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1949

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD
AT THE ALDEN PRESS
BOUND BY A. W. B.-IN & CO. LTD., LONDON

PART ONE

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FARMINGHAM, the first time I ever saw him, came riding towards me like Jupiter in a juggernaut, so big, strong and masterful was he against the sky as his unseen vehicle approached, with him set firmly astride and high aloft on its cargo. His arresting figure, in khaki shorts and shirt, and sun-helmet, loomed dominant over the scene as the train of trucks rumbled towards me, although he, standing on a rearward one, was much further from me than the natives who strained at the brakes of the nearer ones. They bent sweating over their task; he, erect and shouting orders, was sharply silhouetted against the blue African heaven on the breast of the slope down which they came. He formed a living picture of the white man ascendant in the black man's land.

I had broken my homeward voyage from India to spend a day or two with a distant kinsman, Lance Haynor, who was head of a company owning vast sugar plantations on the Natal coast, some forty miles south of Durban. He had met my ship there the day before and driven me out to his bungalow. On this morning he had shown me over his mills and then turned me loose to wander at will with my camera, until luncheon, in the sugar-fields, which I did with great content, for the sun, at this season, was temperate and kind in Natal, the Indian Ocean stretched blue and lazy not far away and the air was freshened by its nearness. I was fascinated by the great green walls of sugar between which I strolled and by the busy cutters, whose sculptured mahogany backs glistened with sweat as they hacked and hewed at the cane.

At the intersection of several of the lanes which the planters leave between the tall banks of sugar I came across the train bringing the cut cane to the mill. One of these lanes ran up a slight incline before me and as I came to it a dozen mules, in pairs, appeared on the skyline, having dragged the train up the other side of the little hill. At its summit they were uncoupled so that the line of trucks might come downhill under its own weight; the mules were led aside and the train, with a native hanging on the brake of each second truck to check its speed, and the tall white man shouting to them from the rear, moved slowly towards me. The trucks were so heavily laden with the brown cane, shorn of its green shoots by the cutters, that the wheels were concealed from sight; some centipedal monster seemed to crawl, between high green hedges, along the toylike rails which the gangers laid wherever sugar was being cut, taking them up and laying them elsewhere when the field was bare.

It was a good picture for the album I hoped to make and I prepared to take a photograph as the trucks approached gathering a little speed. Then, as the moving mass of cane grew larger in my view-finder, the leading truck began to rock. The white man's shouts from the rear took on a note of urgency and anger and the brakesmen in front became agitated, jerky puppets as they strove, under the lash of his voice, to check its pace. It was too late: the leading truck lurched, left the rails and toppled sideways, strewing cane around. There was a clanging and crashing as the two next trucks ran into it and off the rails and then a diminishing rattle of jarring bangs and bumps as the rest of them jolted against each other and came to a stop.

This was a better picture than I expected, and I moved forward a little to get a nearer view of it. The leading brakesman came running round the front truck and began to pull the masses of scattered cane away to see how it lay. Then, just as I was about to take the photograph, I saw in the view-finder the white man also appear, running, and slash the native furiously about his bent back with a whip. Automatically, I pressed the lever, and looked up.

The tall white man was beyond himself with anger and I saw a red line spring up on the native's back, and then another and another, and the blood begin to trickle from all of them in little tributaries, as the lash fell on him again and again. I had not imagined that a whip could do so much damage and wondered what sort it might be. The white man did not see me; he was too furious for that; and before he could subside enough to notice me a mob of natives sprang up as by magic from the fields around and swarmed around the derailed trucks, between him and me.

I thought at first they might intervene on their comrade's behalf, but then saw that they treated the tiling as a great joke and threw jests at him, and that even he did not seem to feel himself injured, for he grinned sheepishly at these quips, as an English workman might whose friends good-naturedly laugh at him because he has been berated by the foreman. Evidently this was nothing astonishing to them and apparently they did not resent it.

At any rate they knew their master, for they swarmed round the shouting white man, and jumped at his orders like sheep before a sheepdog. He seemed completely fluent in their language and, among these black men at all events, an unusual sense of power and leadership radiated from him. His great arms gathered bigger bundles of cane even than theirs as the littered cargo was cleared from the derailed trucks. He himself crawled under these to see how they lay and could best be righted, and if the rails were damaged. When the perspiring brakesmen fetched a young tree trunk from one of the rearward trucks and the derailed ones were levered back, inch by inch, to their place on the rails, he took the heaviest share of the pull; and all this time he shouted and cursed and dominated the black men as if a regiment of soldiers were at call If he needed them. The man with the red-streaked back toiled among them, as willingly and hard as any.

While I watched, two white men, whom I thought likely to *be* overseers from another part of the plantation, or from a neighbouring one, came past and stopped to watch. They glanced at me but said only good morning. I heard one say to the other, 'Hullo, Farmingham's off the rails again. He's making a habit of it;

The other smiled. 'Let's see this out,' he said. 'Farmingham loves spectators on such occasions,' and they both chuckled.

I thought from this that the big white man might not be altogether popular, or at the least that he was of those whom others like to take down a peg when they get the chance, possibly because the chance does not often offer. This surmise, I felt, was confirmed when the trucks were on the rails again and, very slowly, resumed their journey. The big white man, standing on top of the foremost truck and shouting what sounded like bloodcurdling imprecations at the line of brakesmen behind him, whose eyes rolled white with their anxiety to obey him, either was or pretended to be too busy with his task to spare a glance for the white men who watched. He did not wish, I thought, to see the ones he knew, and thus did not see the stranger.

The growing cane was some ten feet high, and the laden trucks were a little less. Standing on top of the cut cane, his white-helmeted head rose six feet into the golden air above the top of the fields of sugar. Moving thus on a vehicle drawn neither by locomotive nor four-legged things, but only by the force of gravity, towards its destination, he travelled like some tyrant emperor of antiquity on a chariot propelled by hidden slaves. When the brown serpent turned a bend and varished from view I could still see him riding high above the green sea of sugar and when at length a fold in the ground took him from sight his powerful voice yet came back and I could picture the line of anxious black boys clinging to the brakes as if they were still visible to my eyes.

A strong type, I thought, as I turned towards the bungalow and lunch.

MARJORIE HAYNOR was either doing something or not doing anything particular in her garden as I came up the path; I knew from my travels in India how hard the white woman in such places finds the task of filling her time and how often pottering among her flowers counts as an occupation. Whether she was actively employed or not, she was most ornamental, I thought, and I paused a moment, arrested by the pretty sight of her slim figure, in a white linen frock, surrounded by the great scarlet stars of the poinsettia. Haynor was fortunate, I reflected; as a bachelor I was wont, in those days, to jump quickly to such conclusions. She turned and saw me and came languidly across one of those lawns which the English, with extraordinary stubbornness, force the reluctant earth to wear in hot and half-tamed places.

'We are alone for lunch,' she said. 'Lance has just telephoned. He has had to go to Durban and will be back this afternoon. Shall we have a drink before we go in?'

On the cool stoep a turbaned Indian servant was placing a tray with bottles and glasses and ice. Mrs. Haynor, with unhurried movements, gave me a drink and took her own to a long, low sofa, on to which she lifted her legs. She was of those women, I decided, who usually recline and seldom sit. I took a hard chair and looked out over the rolling green sugar-fields to the blue ocean.

'Ah, this is good,' I said happily.

'Enough ice?' she asked.

Oh, I didn't mean the drink,' I said. 'I mean — this.' I nodded with my head towards the scene.

'What do you like so much about it?'

It was a casually polite question, yet I wondered if there was the faintest ring of irritation or mockery in it. Perhaps I was too ready to suspect such, for in other places I had often met, among European folk living in distant lands, an impatience with the newcomer's pleasure in things which to them have become familiar, dull or sometimes repugnant. 'Oh dear,' (such people think, as I now knew from experience) 'he's going to say how picturesque the sarries are, how lovely the colourings, and what happy, childlike beings the natives are.'

But I am a man of simple enthusiasms and am never deterred from publicly enjoying them by the ironic looks I sometimes observe. 'Everything that I can see,' I said, 'the massive bulk of these green crops, the muscles of the sugar-cutters, the great cloud of smoke there where they are burning the trash, the sweep and colour of the sea, the air, the sun. I think this must have been the original Garden of Eden.'

'But you do not think of remaining in it?'

'No,' I said. 'I am going back to England. But I have always liked such things, and liked them everywhere I found them, and I always shall like them. They would make me happy if I were to stay here.'

'I wonder,' she said. 'Perhaps you are an exception. For most people, such tilings very quickly pall.'

'I see you think me naive,' I said, 'but perhaps I do not overlook other sides to the picture. You do not like this place and this life? Tell me why.'

This was a direct question and I already felt that Marjorie Haynor might respond even less than most women to the frontal approach. Of the two main classes of people, those who contain and conceal their thoughts, and those who candidly exhibit them, she evidently belonged, I thought, to the first, and others would not readily be admitted to know what she really felt. It occurred to me that such a woman might reveal more of her mind to a casual visitor, whom she expected quickly to pass out of her ken, than to her neighbours in this small and isolated community; and further, that she would not credit me with understanding this impulse, if I divined it correctly.

'Oh, I didn't say that,' she demurred, rising as the Indian opened the connecting doors to the dining-room. 'I just thought you were over-stressing rather obvious things, like the blue sea and the sun, in a way so many people do when they first come here.'

'That is what I thought you thoughe,' I said, sitting down opposite her and watching her as she handled dishes and spoke, not harshly but hardly, to the Indian about something he had neglected. She was good-looking, dark, with well-marked features and an unsmiling face, and had an air of hidden reserves, of always knowing or thinking more than she said.

I had never met Marjorie Haynor before and knew little of her. Lance Haynor's mother and mine, who were both dead, had been cousins and great friends, and had kept up a constant correspondence after his came to South Africa, married and settled there. I had known Lance as a boy, when his mother brought him to England for some months and they stayed with us. Slight though the blood-tie was, he was now my only living kinsman and this led us both to take up, after our mothers' deaths, the correspondence they had begun. From his letters I knew the outlines of his life, from school through Cape Town University to commerce, and his quick rise to a high post in this big sugar concern.

Eighteen months earlier a letter told me of his marriage, and my silver rose-bowl now stood on the table between his wife and myself. Of her I knew nothing but what Lance had told me on the way out from Durban; that she was the only daughter of sheep-farming people in the Karroo and that he had first met her at a ball in Cape Town. On the previous evening I had asked her if she was South African born, anticipating that she would add to her answer the customary information that her folks originally came from England, or were of Boer descent; but she merely answered, 'Oh, yes, I was born and bred in this country and have never been outside it.' I then first suspected that Marjorie Haynor was not one to say much about herself, and wondered mildly if this pointed to origins among the dour and silent Boers.

All men, I imagine (unless I hold myself to be more typical of the sex than I truly am), are apt to ponder about the conjugal relations of their friends. Few of them can picture the women whom they themselves would be unable to move to physical ardour, but many of them feel a secret doubt whether their friend, Tom Jones, can have succeeded in ever inspiring these ecstasies of the flesh in Mrs. Jones; the thing seems so unlikely, best of fellows though Tom is in all other manly things.

The thought, I fear, had come to me too often, in contemplating my married acquaintances, for me to feel it particularly unworthy on the first evening I spent with Lance Haynor and his wife. Lance was a charming, gentle and courteous man, prone to give way rather than overbear, though he could be firm enough on occasion. Physically he was rather slight. His deference and attentiveness towards his wife would have delighted many women; I wondered if they were what she appreciated. She was a very well-built woman, with full lips and splendid breasts. I felt, mean sensual creature that I am, that a man who found the key to her physical nature would have great joy in what lay beyond; but that it might be the key to all else in her, and that without it he might stand before a locked door. Had Lance found it? She seemed a locked woman.

'So you enjoyed your morning?' she said. I felt that she wished to divert our talk from its former course. I was somewhat obstinately resolved to keep it on that track, and saw the best way to that end in loud praise of all around; Marjorie Haynor interested me.

'I loved every moment of it,' I said enthusiastically.

'What did you do?'

'Oh, I lost myself in the sugar-fields, and watched the cutting, and took some photographs, and revelled in the sun, that friend of man.' (I was an old enough hand to know that applause of the sun might have an irritant and provocative effect.)

'You would never hear the people who live here speak of the sun as a friend, Mr. Browne. It is the enemy here.'

'The enemy?' I looked meaningly at the rich sugar estates spreading away from the bungalow.

'Yes. It is ruthless and uncontrollable, and you can never escape it. It makes things so big. If you plant a privet or a shrub you have a tall hedge or a thick shrubbery almost overnight. In the gardens it's a constant struggle to keep things *down.* The flowers are all so . . . exaggerated. Trees grow twenty feet in a year. And yet it kills. It brings the sugar rushing up and then burns it while we pray for rain! It burns up the ground. There's an endless struggle to keep it irrigated and fertilized.'

'Nevertheless the sugar seems to thrive, and its industry to prosper exceedingly,' I said, looking with a smile round the room.

She dismissed that with a slight movement of her head. 'Do you think a force which does such things has no effect on people?' she asked.

'On people?'

'Yes. It does the same sort of thing to them. Sometimes it produces an unnatural growth in their feelings or energies; sometimes it burns them out. Always it makes them abnormal in one way or another.'

'So this little community is one of abnormal folk?'

'I'm talking generally,' she said, smoothly diverting the thrust. 'The truth is, this is not a white man's country, and white people are never themselves in it.'

'This seems a most normal household,' I said, 'and a most pleasant one.'

Oh, they all *seem* normal,' she said, 'by the usual standards. There are about two hundred white people in this area, and there's a tea-party or a tennis-party every week-end. The sun never fails for the tennis, or for that matter for golf or polo. The women have so many native servants that they couldn't do a hand's turn if they wanted to — not that they ever want to. Most of them have succeeded in discarding the power of thought. They sit about all day and wait for sundown. The men wait for sundowners. We all begin to live at sundowner-time. When it's over we go to bed. That's usually about nine o'clock. What else is there to do?'

She spoke equably but with suppressed impatience. She was certainly a dissatisfied woman in some things, I thought. 1 know now why you were resentful of my facile enthusiasm for this place,' I said.

'Oh, I wasn't resentful,' she said, 'but one always knows beforehand what people from Europe or from England are going to say when they come here for a few days. "How lovely! How lucky you are! If only we could live here." They would die of boredom in a month.'

'But ... if you feel like that about it, how will things work out for you?' I asked.

'Oh, I'm not talking in the first person,' she said quickly. 'I suppose you rather provoked me into showing you the side of things which you don't see. Lance's job is here and that's that.'

'Does Lance feel the same way?'

'Oh, Lance,' she said, and paused. I hoped she would go on, because the words by themselves would not have been flattering. I was glad when she continued.

'Lance is quite a different person from me,' she said. 'His is a disciplined nature.

I was surprised into interrupting her. 'Forgive me,' I said, 'but I should have thought yours was a very firmly disciplined nature.'

'Do I give that impression" she said. 'Well, perhaps it's true.

Who knows? I'm not sure that I do. You know now that my nature rebels a little against some things in this. . . life.' I felt she had nearly said Existence'.

'What are the things that appeal to you, then?' I asked.

'I feel that I would like to move in the main streams of life,' she said, slowly, 'not doze away my days in a backwater. It does not make me happy to feel that I live in a little fortunate island, far from the storms. Something in me draws me towards great cities and populous places. I would like to know what's going on in the world. I would like to be part of the great world, for better or for worse.'

'For better or for worse' I said. 'Where have I heard those words before:'

'Yes, I know,',' she said. 'I am not complaining, I think. I am merely saying what I would like if I could choose.'

'It sounds shockingly as if you want to See Life,' I said.

'Perhaps I do, if there's no more original way of putting it,' she said crushingly. 'I suppose some people can't contentedly box their lives within the compass of a tiny, remote, backbiting, white community.'

'Well, I see what you mean clearly enough,' I said. 'Is that all?'

She looked full at me. 'Of course that's all,' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'You were going to say something about Lance when I rudely interrupted you,' I said.

'Lance is a dear,' she said. 'He's a civilized man.' I was struck by the unusual phrase and made a note to try and find out sometime if she liked men to be civilized. 'He could be happy anywhere.'

'With you, I fancy,' I interrupted her again.

'Yes, with me, I think,' she said, slowly. 'I think that is the truth. So few of us ever know the real truth about ourselves. But even without me Lance is so devoted to his work and to his sense of duty that I think he would appear to be happy, and might really be so.' She paused. 'I don't Tuly know,' she said.

I felt that Marjorie Haynor had answered the question which was running in my mind: whether her husband had found the key to her physical nature. Had he found it, I thought, she would have had no doubts about his need of her and hers of him. I began to feel *i* little worried for him. There seemed to be, between these two, the start of one of those grating frictions which might go on without doing much harm until death did them part, or, if circumstances were mischievous, might produce a breakage. Perhaps if they had children? There was no sign of that yet, but their marriage was young.

'Does Lance know how you feel?' I said.

'Oh heavens, don't say anything to him,' she said sharply, 'and please don't get an exaggerated idea. I don't really know why I said so much. I think you rather led me on.'

'I hope not,' I said.

We had coffee outside on the stoep and sat talking of other things while the afternoon ripened. I was thinking idly of a cup of tea when a car drove up. It stopped at a point where the drive widened to allow cars to turn, and a large lady in a white frock and a big floppy white hat came heavily towards the house.

'Oh, here's that old mammal Mrs. van der Merwe come to tea,' I heard Marjorie Haynor say between her teeth.

Rising, she went forward with a slight smile as the old lady came up the steps, panting: 'Hullo, my dear, I thought I'd just drive round for a cup of tea and a nice chat.'

3

MRS. VANDERMERWE was a jolly, homely body, short of wind but happy and hearty as only a fat woman can be. I soon saw that she was as Scotch in her ways and traits as if she **had** been born in Glasgow, not in South Africa; the Boer name she had married had not changed her. Her mind dwelt entirely within the little circle of the planters. She spoke with pleasure of her last tea-and-bridge party and with anticipatory zest of the next tennis-and-tea one. If the conversation went outside these limits, she became vague and soon, with a masterful touch and a laugh that was like the note of a bass drum, brought it back to the things she knew and loved. It was not to be imagined that she felt any doubts about the sufficiency of these, or could picture such misgivings in Marjorie Haynor or any other of her neighbours.

She brought with her a borrowed book and I saw with mild interest, as she laid it down, that it was *Madame Bovary.* This led me to turn an idle eye on the bookshelves 'hat ran round half the long room; what was the Haynors' taste in books? I wondered. I saw several translations of French and German authors: *Nana* and others of Zola, some of Leon Daudet's and Maupassant's, Hauptmann's *The Weavers,* Sudermann's grim *Dame Care,* alongside Hardy, Galsworthy, Bennett and Lives of Emma, Lady Hamilton and of Lola Montez. A small volume in an old-style binding, when I looked closer, was the rather bawdy *Memoirs of the Count de Grammont.*

'I couldn't get on with it, dear,' Mrs. van der Merve said of *Madame Bovary.* 'It's too morbid for me.'

'Well, you chose it yourself,' said Marjorie.

'Yes, I did, but I didn't know what was in it.'

There are none, in my experience, who display poor taste so clearly as those who do not like the books we admire, and I felt Marjorie's slight impatience, though she did not display it. 'Bovary?' I said taking the book and fluttering its pages. 'It counts as a masterpiece.'

'Maybe; books about mistresses usually do count as masterpieces,' said Mrs. van der Merwe, firmly and surprisingly. 'I've no patience with them.'

I put it in an empty place on a shelf and took another book at random. *'The Turn of the Screw,*[9] I said. 'That's a most unusual book. Is Lance a great reader?'

Mrs. van der Merwe answered. With her booming laugh she said, 'I doubt it. Our men don't read much. By the time they're finished in the fields or at the mill they want a sundowner and after that it's time for dinner and when they've had dinner they're too tired for anything but bed, eh, Marjorie?'

She did not answer directly. 'Lance seldom gets time for reading,' she said.

While Mrs. van der Merwe rattled on I thought at random that there could be no Emma Bovarys among white women living in such a place as this. No secret lovers for them, I reflected, even if they desired one. The isolation, the small community and the ever-watchful eyes of natives and neighbours would be effective guardians of virtue. A woman driven by wanton impulses would have only the alternatives of open, guilty flight, or of repressing her desires; there could be for her no third way, no illicit trysts in small hotels, stolen from the outer respectability of her married life.

As I watched the two women, and sometimes threw in a casual word, it occurred to me that those who make open display of their thoughts may conceal these better than those who keep guard over them. Mrs. van der Merwe's jolly effusiveness, on all occasions, would deter anyone from speculating about her deeper feelings or even from suspecting that she had any. Marjorie Haynor's measured self-control prompted in me curiosity about what she really thought, and gave meaning to her veiled look, to any slight furrowing of her brow or compression of her lips. To me she seemed to show fairly clearly that she thought Mrs. van der Merwe a bore and her conversation puerile, and I wondered that the other did not divine this. But possibly she did, and did not care; her candid jollity could be a mask more impenetrable than Marjorie's, if she wished.

She boomed on, about Mr. van der Merwe's bad luck in the golf tournament, and Mrs. Branton's new baby, and the Smith girl's trip to England for a course of lessons in deportment and flower-arrangement, and then went home, banging the big drum of her merriment all the way to her car and putting her head out of its window for a parting crash of mirth. Marjorie watched her go towards the declining sun and then turned back to the house and me, expelling her breath in a long and eloquent 'Phew.' It was done with a smile, but I thought I detected a real exasperation.

'She seems very jolly,' I said. 'Is she typical of your neighbours?'

'No, she's not typical; she's their facsimile.'

'Oh, they can't all be as fat as that.'

'They're all shapes and sizes, but they're the identical woman. I know every word they'll say before they say it. They haven't one word of conversation outside the daily tittle-tattle of this place.'

'Perhaps they are wise in their generation,' I said.

'I can't see wisdom in narrowness. I knew when she borrowed that book just what she'd say when she brought it back.'

'An interesting character, Emma Bovary,' I said.

She made no comment. 'How can people become so smug as to think that only their own little world and little people like themselves ought to be put in the pages of a book? That is what galls me here. The world is so big and there are so many kinds of people in it. It seems to me absurd to shut your eyes to evil or weakness merely because you have a comfortable bungalow to sleep in and all you want to eat and drink and natives to wait on you. They account all that to themselves for righteousness.'

'There is no righteousness equal to that of resisting temptations to which one is not exposed or being exempt from misfortunes which others suffer,' I said. 'But some might argue that an even greater smugness lies in scorning this little human weakness.'

'Thank you for that,' she said. 'It hadn't occurred to me that I am smug.'

'Smugness takes many forms, perhaps,' I said. 'Like a wart on the back of the neck it is more visible to others than to the owner.'

'For that matter,' she said, 'dialectic is the cheapest road to a pose of superiority. If you have no likes, beliefs or convictions you can argue any case and make it appear right.'

'Scrambling painfully to my feet after the count often,' I said, 'I give you best. I *was* just arguing the opposite case. I think I understand what you feel about life here. I only wondered if it makes for happiness to feel it so strongly. You are rather frank with me about it.'

'Oh,' she answered, more hurriedly than usual, I thought, 'I suppose I let off a little steam with you because it's so rare to have anyone from outside to talk to. You arc here today and gone tomorrow; I don't need to pretend.' (So that *is* it, I reflected.) 'But don't think it's of any importance. I suppose I'm suffering from compound irritation; I must cultivate humility. I wonder where Lance is. Let's have a sundowner.'

'I'd welcome one,' I said, and meant it. The sun was low and the temperature falling fast. It was the hour for which men live in such climates, and I had only realized this during my travels, for in England I seldom drank liquor and rather disliked whisky. In India, and in this bungalow the previous evening, I had come to understand its importance to the white man. As the day passes the sun burns up something within him and leaves him drained of energy. The evening cool relieves, but does not restore him. By some trick of chemistry that tot of whisky revives him, and the second one confirms the work of the first; he is as good as he was in the morning. But the third and later ones undo the good work and rare are those who stop at the second.

As Marjorie handed me my drink her husband's car came up the drive and he waved as he took it past the house to the garage at the back. A minute later he came up the steps.

'Hullo, Geoff,' he called to me, and then kissed his wife. Holding her shoulders in his hands he stood back and looked at her. 'Everything all right, dear?' he said, smiling affectionately. 'Had a good day?'

'Oh yes,' she said, smiling, 'an exceptionally good day.'

I wondered if it was meant in irony. He seemed to notice nothing. 'Good,' he said, giving her shoulder a friendly pat and releasing her, so that she turned to pour his drink. 'Any visitors?'

'Just Mrs. van der Merwe.'

'Oh, good,' he said, again. 'Nice woman. How did she like *Madame Bovary?'*

'She hated it.'

'She did! That's funny. I always understood it was very-good. Geoff, I'm so sorry I couldn't show you round the estate this afternoon. I *had* to rush in to Durban, quite unexpectedly.'

'Don't worry,' I said, 'I had a most rewarding unconducted tour.'

'Where did you go?'

'Oh, all round,' I said, waving my hand towards the sugar-fields, now fading into the twilight. 'I watched them cutting the cane and loading it and bringing it down to the mill, and took several pictures.'-

'You are a keen photographer, Mr. Browne?' said Marjorie.

'Oh no, the merest amateur. I just want to take a few snap-shots and paste them in albums to keep people and experiences fresh for me when I am far away.'

'What did you think of it all?' said Lance Haynor.

'I find it fascinating,' I said. 'I never saw any crop like this sugar, so tall, so green, so thick and so strong. I could wander interminably along the red lanes between those high green walls. It gives me a feeling somewhere between complete spiritual repose and acute sensual pleasure to watch the muscles rippling underneath gleaming chocolate skins and the flash of knives as the cutters shear away the green shoots and throw the bare cane on to the growing pile. That and the sun and the sea. . . .'

I felt again a slightly impatient superiority in Lance's tolerant smile and his wife's ironic one. 'Mr. Browne is an enthusiast, Lance,' she said. 'He thinks this the Garden of Eden.'

[It is lovely, of course,' he said, 'and all the loveliness lies on the surface, waiting for a first sight.'

'You should become a sugar planter,' she said, 'and live here for ever. But will you?'

'Do you know,' I said, 'I think I should be perfectly happy to do so? In fact I'm sure. But I believe there is such a thing as destiny in life and this is not mine.'

'Why not?' she said. 'Surely you have no ties to break, if you think happiness is here?'

'I suppose not,' I said, 'unless destiny is one. I was trained for other things and I feel have to follow the course I set.'

'Don't try to make a sugar planter out of our budding civil servant, Marjorie,' said Lance, smiling at her. 'I think I know what he means, anyway. None of us can do just what we should like.'

'I can't quite see why,' she said, rising to refill my glass.

'Oh, come,' he said, and then seemed to change the subject. 'Did you spend the whole morning watching the cutters?'

'Yes,' I said, 'it was absorbing to me. I saw one of the trains go off the rails.'

'Oh,' he said, sharply; immediately he became the man in charge, interested in every detail of the day's work in the fields or the mill; and Marjorie looked up, too. 'Where was that?'

'Over there,' I said, again vaguely indicating the darkness outside. 'The front truck ran off and a couple behind it. They had them on the rails again in a half-hour,' I added hastily, wondering whether I should have mentioned the incident.

'Oh, they did! I'm glad to hear that. But half an hour lost is half an hour wasted in getting the cane to the mill. Did you see the overseer?'

'There was a white man with the train,' I said. 'A most energetic fellow. It was thanks to him that they got going again so quickly.'

'It may have been thanks to him that the trucks were derailed ' he said. 'What did he look like?'

'A great, powerful chap,' I said. 'He must have stood six feet three, and seemed to speak the natives' lingo as if he were one of them.'

'Sounds like Jan Farmingham,' he said. 'I imagined it would be he. I don't know how often I've told him about overloading his trucks and overdriving his men. It doesn't pay in the end. You see, Geoff, there's great competition among the overseers to get the cane cut and down to the mill quickly. The whole concern depends on that. The mill is always waiting, like some insatiable monster, for cane to crush and for fuel to burn; the crushed cane is the fuel. Any delay slows down the process, the output, and, of course, the shareholders' dividends. All the overseers are as keen as mustard to set up new records for the amount of cane cut and for speed in getting it down to the mill; they know that is the quick way to promotion. But there is a point at which more haste becomes less speed. Farmingham, if he could only realize it, will spoil his own chances if he has many more derailments.'

'You don't know it was he, Lance,' said Marjorie.

'Actually I think that was his name,' I said. 'I heard two other white men mention it, who came by and stayed to watch. They seemed a trifle amused.'

Lance grinned. 'They would,' he said. 'They were probably some of Farmingham's rivals, and his methods don't make him universally popular.'

'Anyway,' I said, 'I shouldn't think anybody else could have cleared the wreck and restarted the train as quickly. His energy was extraordinary and he's as strong as an elephant. When they took a tree-trunk to lever the trucks back on to the rails he seemed to take two-thirds of the haul. I don't know whether they would have managed it without him. He's certainly keen.'

Do you think you can have too much keenness, Lance" said Marjorie.

'From the managerial point of view, yes,' he said, a shade irritably, I thought. 'It's more important to avoid derailments than to mend them quickly. That's the test of a really first-class overseer, and that's what Farmingham won't understand.'

'Well,' I said, 'if command over natives is any test, I should think he would pass it with flying colours. I never saw a man handle them so. He gave one of them a terrific beating.'

Lance gave a loud 'Tut' of annoyance. 'That's Farmingham right enough,' he said, glancing at Marjorie, 'and it's got to stop or he'll have one of these natives laying for him with a knife one of these days. I won't have it.' He turned to me. 'I'm very much worried on that score,' he said. 'We had a bit of trouble a month or two back, when a native whom he'd hit with that pestilent sjambok of his turned on him with a knife. Farmingham knocked him out and roared with laughter about the whole thing. He always says he knows how to handle kaffirs. But I know these people too and I know we'll find him stretched stiff among the sugar one of these nights if he goes on like it. I can't afford to have anything of that kind happen.'

'I'm surprised to hear that,' I said propitiatingly, 'because the man he beat this morning seemed to take it rather like a schoolboy who's had a deserved caning, and the others roared with laughter at him.'

'My dear Geoff,' he said impatiently, 'you don't know Africa. These people never show their thoughts or feelings. They may laugh all over their faces when they're feeling murderous. They may be most dangerous when they laugh in that childish way, especially after they've been hit. They have a sort of face-saving tradition, like the Chinese.'

'There's a permanent difference of opinion among the white overseers about the way to treat the natives, Mr. Browne,' explained Marjorie. 'One school thinks the white man should never raise his hand to them, and the other thinks the only way to get the best out of them is to keep a whiphand over them and use it frequently.'

'Yes, that's true,' said Lance reluctantly, 'and I as manager of this concern have to make them do what I think is right. The responsibility is mine.'

'The trouble is,' she continued quietly, 'that if a referendum were held among the planters Mr. Farmingham's method might get the majority. After all, Lance, he does get results.'

'That's just what I dispute,' he said with open irritation. He seemed about to say something else and then checked himself, with a glance at his wife. 'Shall we go in?' he asked her. 'These moths arc a nuisance.'

'That's something about the Garden of Eden you only notice with time and experience, Mr. Browne,' she said. 'We wait all day for the blessed cool of evening and then we can't sit outside and enjoy it because of the little winged beasts that insist on sharing the stoep with us. Let's finish our drinks and have dinner.'

It was quite dark, and with the darkness came that slightly oppressive feeling that seemed to say to me, and possibly to these two, that Africa is always Africa, even the coastal edge of the southern fragment of it where a fair number of white people live; in the night the heart and pulse of a huge enigma, that sleeps by day, seem to beat, and Africa asks the white man and his woman: 'What are you doing here? Are you come to stay, or will you depart? You are so few, you have been here such a little time; will you yet conquer me or shall I conquer you?' In the blackness a tiny red flower bloomed far away; somewhere a few natives made themselves a fire and around it exchanged their inscrutable thoughts. In the silence came the mournful, tuneless keening of Indians singing; they, too, were strangers in a distant land.

We went to dine, and during the meal and for a little while after it talked lightly of unimportant things, in the manner of European people in a lonely African homestead. We did not speak again of sugar or of Farmingham, but I thought I felt between Lance Haynor and his wife a slight constraint, the shadow of some resentment he may have felt at her mild objections to his opinion about a matter in which he felt strongly. She had expressed her very mild difference of view in the manner of a man's helpmate who wished merely to keep his thoughts balanced and to deter him from taking an extreme course which might not be necessary, or could lead to trouble. Nevertheless I felt that he did not welcome contrary advice, however helpfully meant, in this matter and might only have repressed a sharp rejoinder from consideration of my presence.

It was a little after nine when I felt, quite tangibly, that this was the time for bed, recalling what Mrs. van der Merwe had said on this score. I knew that the sugar folk were up and about at six, so I said I myself was tired and suggested we were all so. They did not demur and Lance asked me if I would like any thing to read.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll take *Madame Bovary* if I may.'

'But you've read it,' said his wife.

'Several times,' I said. 'But I always enjoy re-reading it. Emma Bovary is a fascinating character.'

'I *must* find time to read it,' said Lance. 'I don't know when I last read a book.'

4

THE next day was Saturday and we were due, the Haynors had told me, 'to go down about tea-time and look at the tennis'. There was no talk of playing and I thought I guessed why. The higher officials lived in large bungalows scattered about the estates at a distance of several miles from the central mill and from each other; they had their own tennis-courts and gave tennis-parties for each other when they wanted to play. In a group of smaller houses near the offices and mill lived the more numerous junior employees, who had a tennis club and several courts. As in all communities, there were social grades and the two groups kept a certain distance from each other. Had the men not desired it, their womenfolk, who are more jealous in such matters, would no doubt have insisted on it. In any case, it was not feasible for the heads of the concern to play games in the afternoon with a subordinate whom they might have had to call to book in the morning, or for their wives to have to join in tea-table talk which would probably turn on local rivalries or grievances. So much I inferred from Lance Haynor's casual references when he explained the working of the plantations to me.

So in the afternoon we drove for some miles through the deserted fields and came to one of those corners of England which so stubbornly thrive in foreign fields. There were six hard courts, all full, with green lawns and trees around them, a pleasant club-house, and twenty or thirty players, or non-playing wives, watching from deck-chairs in the trees' shade. I took a chair to one side of the group while the Haynors paused to chat to several people in this group.

I saw Farmingham on one of the further courts and, recalling what I had heard the night before, understood Haynor's contention that it was better for the heads of such a concern to play tennis on their own courts and among themselves. Farmingham looked bigger than ever on a tennis-court; he was a bull of a man and the racket looked puny in his hand. He was a little clumsy in his shots and movements and from an excess of strength and enthusiasm sent the ball smashing into the net or outside the lines more often than he need have done, but he played a powerful and forcing game and would have been winning easily but for his partner, a stolid-looking woman who put her faith in the back-line and the lob but had not the legs to reach a fast drive. His manner towards her was one of ill-concealed impatience, so that she showed nervousness. A voice within me whispered, 'His wife.'

It was natural that, as I let my eye roam over the players and the onlookers, my mind turned to Marjorie Haynor's slightly scornful remarks about this little community. Placing my own impression of them in the scale against hers, however, I felt that she did them less than justice. Their failings, after all, were negative ones: they read nothing, they knew nothing of the greater world, they were not interested in politics, paintings or music. But their virtues were positive: they were physically fit, they worked hard, they were satisfied with their husbands, or wives, and their homes, they strove hard to rear children better than themselves. They were not to be lightly discounted. A woman who became easily critical of such folk, I thought, looking at Marjorie Haynor as she chatted coolly to them, might be trying to excuse herself to herself.

Soon she and her husband joined me, taking a chair on either side.

'What do you think of the tennis?' he said.

'The standard is surprisingly high, I think,' I said.

'We get plenty of practice in these parts,' she said. 'Tennis, table-tennis, polo, golf. At what stage in his civilization did the white man develop this passion for knocking little white balls around? And of what is it a symptom or portent?'

'I've often wondered,' I said, 'and I don't know.'

'There's no harm in it, Marjorie,' said Lance. 'What would you have the white man do with his leisure in such a place as this? Geoff, is that the man whose trucks you saw derailed yesterday?' He nodded with his head towards the furthest court where Farmingham was playing.

'Yes, that's the man,' I said. As we watched, Farmingham's voice, jovial but loud, came to us across the courts in dispute about a point. 'Man, I tell you it was *out!'* he said. Both accent and intonation sounded strange. 'Is he a foreigner?' I asked. 'He sounds like a German speaking English.'

'Oh no,' said Lance. 'You'll often notice that in this country among men who have grown up in Afrikaans-speaking districts. Even if English is their mother tongue they frequently speak it with an accent.'

'And is English his mother tongue?' I said.

Lance laughed and hesitated. 'Well, yes and no,' he said. 'I think you might call it his mother tongue but not his mother's tongue. You put a rather difficult question.

He seemed about to go on when Marjorie interrupted. 'Lance, do you think it's quite fair to go into all that?' she said.

For an instant I saw a shade of resentment pass over Haynor's face, and then he smiled at her. 'All right, let's leave it at that,' he said, as charmingly as any woman could wish.

'Well,' I said, as smoothly as I could, 'to get on to ground indisputably safe, is that his wife he's playing with?'

'Yes, it is,' said Marjorie. 'Why?'

'I had a small bet with myself about it,' I said.

'Which way?'

'I thought from his manner towards her, when she just failed to reach a ball after galloping along the back-line, that I couldn't lose if I married her to him.'

They both laughed, Marjorie with some enjoyment, I thought. 'Jan Farmingham's a difficult man for a woman to keep up with,' she said.

'Well, she tries hard,' I said. 'The whole tragedy of man's eternal pursuit of the unattainable is told by her legs when she toils after those drives which foreseeably are going to beat her racket by a foot.'

'She's a determined woman in a quiet way,' said Lance. 'She never will desert her Mr. Farmingham.'

'Oh?' I said. 'And does that cause him chagrin?'

'Ah, now you are getting me into a difficult corner again,' said Lance. 'You'll have Marjorie after me if you pursue that subject, and anyway I don't know.'

It occurred to me that Marjorie, in fact, had shown no sign of intervening on this occasion, or displayed any visible distaste for the matter. I felt that she would have been ready to continue talking about it, but at this moment the club captain came to say that they were ready to begin the tournament and would Mr. Haynor come and umpire. He went and took his seat in the chair on the first court and Marjorie, perceiving a Mrs. Somebody whom she accounted to be due for a few words from her, also went off.

I watched the play for another ten minutes and then stood up to stretch my legs. I wandered round, looked at two or three games for a few minutes each, inspected the flower beds, ruminated lazily by a swimming-pool and then came round the back of the club-house. A door stood open through which I could see armchairs, a notice-board, and a table-tennis outfit. I strolled *in* and round the walls looking at photographs of prize presentations and the like.

Turning from the contemplation of these relics, I found myself facing the long window of the club-house, on the other side of which lay the veranda and, fifty yards away, the courts. A green sun-blind had been lowered to keep the club-room cool, but did not reach the sill by a small margin, perhaps two inches. Through this long and narrow aperture I could see part of a table with cups and saucers on it and part of a man and a woman who were standing between it and the window. The woman's right hand was pouring tea and as I looked the man's right hand reached out and took her left one, which was by her side.

The handclasp was as passionate as any kiss. I saw the knuckles of both hands turn white under a convulsive pressure. My mind's eye showed me every detail of the scene: the player: and onlookers beyond, absorbed in the play and with their backs turned to the club-house; these two alone on the veranda for an instant, their hands below the level of the table, the blind down over the window behind them. They could not have noticed the tiny uncovered space below the blind or have imagined that so much could be seen through it if anyone were there. Even so, the two hands flew apart almost as soon as they met. Could these hands have spoken they would have cried aloud of a clandestine secret, of the fear of watching eyes.

I knew the woman's hand. The third finger bore Lance Haynor's engagement ring, an unusual one of an old-fashioned kind, with a great square ruby surrounded by large diamonds, and his wedding ring.

I turned and went quietly out of the club-house by the rear door, and strolled round to the front, at a little distance from it, and towards the players. In front of me went Farmingham with a cup of tea in either hand. Glancing back I saw Marjorie Haynor pass from the veranda into the women's room.

5

IF there is anything more disagreeable than to be made, by the will of a friend, the reluctant guardian of some wayward ward in chancery, it is, by chance to be put in possession of somebody else's guilty secret. During the rest of my brief stay with the Haynors I was annoyed to find myself thinking about Marjorie Haynor with some aversion and, I fear, sexual curiosity. In my mind the question 'How far has this gone?' obtruded itself, and perhaps I was not slower than other mortals in fearing the worst. Her taste in books took on a new significance. I was more prone than before to read in her warm skin and full figure the signs of an ardent physical nature, either unawakened or unassuaged, and to see in her cool a nd guarded reserve a garment worn to cloak it. My affection for Lance possibly helped me to this suspicion.

Finding that my thoughts were running ahead of permissible surmise, I took them firmly to task. Truth, I reasoned with myself, is more desirable than attainable, and might not lie in the eye of the beholder of a fleeting handclasp. What had I seen, after all? I was sure what I saw when I saw it, but soon I began to doubt. My mind had received the instant impression of a secret and carnal understanding between two people, of whom one was the wife of my friend, and the other a junior subordinate with whom he was having trouble. What could be graver? But I had seen so small a fragment of an episode. Had my eyes encompassed the whole scene and its attendant circumstances, they might have seen the most harmless gesture of a friendly impulse.

In any case, I was quite clear what I should do: nothing, for nothing could be done. I could not warn Lance, or reproach Marjorie, or caution Farmingham. Any of those courses would merely make of me an impertinent busybody, and probably do harm if none was already done. My belief was that people must order their own affairs. If there *was* a triangle, and that was by no means clear, its proportions must arrange themselves. Today, after many years, I am no more sure than I was then whether I was right or wrong, but I know that I would follow the same course again.

However, chance had put me in the position of the invisible man in the flies of a theatre, who sees more, and may know more, of the players than they of each other, and it was not in human nature, or at any rate in my nature, to repress the titillating sense of superior knowledge, combined with aloof detachment, which this gave me. I thus felt a thrill, partly pleasant and partly apprehensive, the next morning, Sunday, when Lance began to talk about Farmingham as we strolled through the fields. Beneath his urbane and easy manner I had felt, from the moment of my arrival, that something lay on his inner mind and put this down to the not uncommon preoccupation of such men with their business affairs, which often follows them into their leisure moments. What he now said confirmed my surmise and showed that Farmingham was uppermost in his workaday anxieties.

We came to the place where I had seen the trucks derailed, and when he mentioned Farmingham I wondered whether he had chosen to lead me there. 'I expect this is where you saw the trucks come off the line?' he said.

'Yes, this is it,' I said.

'It's a bad bit,' he said. 'The slope is steeper than it looks. It needs to be taken very carefully. By the way, I hope you didn't think I was unfair to Farmingham the other night.?'

'Unfair?' I said in surprise. 'I don't know enough about these things to have a technical opinion. But I know *you.* You couldn't be unfair.'

He smiled. I'm glad you think so,' he said. 'I don't think I could. But you probably noticed that Marjorie thinks differently.'

'Oh no,' I said. 'I didn't get that impression at all. I thought she was just being tactful and trying to save you worry during your hours of ease.'

'I'm afraid there's more in it than that,' he said. 'Farmingham is becoming a bone of contention all over the estate. He's a great worry to me. I hate to feel that anybody thinks me unjust to him, especially Marjorie. But I have to do my job.'

'What's the trouble?' I said.

'Well, at the root of it all is the fact that he's a most unsuitable man and shouldn't be here at all,' he said, 'and that's just what I can't explain to people here. I happen to know a great deal about him. He would never have come here if I had known. Last year they sent me over to America for a month to study sugar growing methods there. while I was away an overseer died and two more left and there was a sudden crisis, with sugar lying in the fields all night and getting wet and so on. When I came back I found my deputy had engaged Farmingham on contract, and that he had made a sort of name for himself by getting arrears cleared up quickly. His praises were on everybody's lips. I didn't see how I could get rid of him and don't see how to do it now. I've been put in a very difficult position. But I'm quite sure he ought not to be here.'

'If that's how you feel, I'm sure you are right,' I said. 'But what have you chiefly against him?'

'Well,' he said, 'mainly, I suppose, this matter of whacking the kaffir. I must tell you that there's a very deep cleavage of opinion about that. You heard Marjorie say as much. Some argue that the native only understands rough handling; that the only way to get good work out of him is to hit him, and that he doesn't harbour any grudge against you for it. Others hold that he responds to good treatment.'

He paused, looking absently over the fields. 'Go on,' I said. 'What do you think?'

'The maddening thing is that I can't make people understand *what* I think,' he said. 'I know perfectly well that the native doesn't necessarily resent a beating. I am merely convinced that the *time* for that has gone. Whether we like it or not, the twentieth century won't let us deal with the native that way. There is an absolutely clear and inevitable and irresistible movement away from that method and towards the other one. Whether the new method will succeed or fail is not the question. The world and the age we live in won't let us continue the old one. As head of this concern I have to decide. Now, before Farmingham came that issue was dead, or dormant. Everybody knew what I thought and wanted, and whipping the kaffir had stopped. But among the overseers, who have to deal with the native and get a good day's work out of him, and who know how difficult he can be, there was always a latent liking for the old method—in moderation, of course. Then Farmingham came, during my absence, and seemed to be most successful with it- His eternal parrot-cry, "I know the native", found a good deal of sympathy. What angers me is that there's a lot of murmuring now to the effect that I am weak and a bit of a softie and think I can get sugar cut by patting the native on the back, and that I'm being unjust to an efficient man. You heard the echo of it in what Marjorie said. It bothers me to think she may share that view, because it shows she doesn't understand my mind at all. That *isn't* my attitude. Of course, Marjorie grew up among the folk of the sjambok and may be unable to shake off inherited ideas.'

'That's a very awkward position for you, I see clearly,' I said. 'But it will work itself out. By the way, you said you knew a great deal about Farmingham.'

'Yes,' he said, slowly, 'unfortunately I do know a great deal about Jan Farmingham.'

'Jan?' I said.

' Yes, Jan or Jannie. It's the Dutch form of John. His mother is supposed to have been a Boer girl.'

'Supposed to have been?'

'Yes. These are the things I can't tell anybody about, except yourself and Marjorie, and I feel she suspects me of prejudice when I mention them. But they explain the shock I had when I found him here on my return, and the anxiety I feel about having him here any longer. I grew up in a *dorp* on the borders of the Orange Free State, and I knew Farmingham there, as a boy and young man. You don't know this country, so I must try and give you a rough picture of the kind of community it was. It was utterly isolated, with a few Boer farmers and British settlers scattered about, and on the edges of the village, or the fringes of the farms, all sorts of poor whites and half-castes and quarter-castes living in incest and misery in tin shacks and hovels.'

'Poor whites?' I said. 'What are they exactly?'

'They're hard to define *exactly,'* he said. 'They're white people who have come right down and live like animals, in conditions much worse than those of a tribal kraal. Inevitably there's a good deal of mixing between them and natives and you see weirdly hued children playing round their shanties. They drink all kinds of poisons and use native drugs. It's hardly possible to give you a clear idea of these people and their lives; you'd have to see it for yourself

'And Farmingham?' I said.

'Farmingham grew up among these folk,' he said. 'In the 'nineties there was a small British garrison there and his father was apparently a soldier who was stationed there for a spell and then went away. His mother was either a Boer girl, or a poor white one, or she may have been a coloured. He claims the Boer girl, and that can't be verified or denied, because all records in that part were destroyed later, in the Anglo-Boer war, and many of the people went away and did not return.'

'Well, then,' I said, 'he counts, and is entitled to count, since the matter cannot be cleared up, to be the son of a British soldier and Boer farmer's daughter, both perfectly respectable.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'And I know, because I saw him grow up, that it's not the truth. He may not have known his mother, and she may not have been clear who was his father. You must believe me; the conditions there were like that. He grew up in a miserable, thieving, drunken community of poor whites and near-whites who lived as outcasts. Incidentally, these people, who often live on a lower level than the natives, are commonly the most brutal in their attitude towards the native.'

As he paused, I put in a comment. 'You know, Lance,' I said, 'I just wonder. You say, in effect, that' Farmingham is of humble and squalid origins and may be illegitimate. These would once have been weighty disqualifications. But you also said before that the world and the age we live in will no longer allow us to conform to standards once generally accepted, no matter what their merits.'

He smiled grimly. In other words,' he said, 'I am unfair. The fault is in his stars, not in Jan Farmingham. But you said you knew me to be incapable of prejudice. Perhaps it is impossible to make even you understand things far outside your own experience.'

'Well, go on, then,' I said. 'You have told me his misfortunes, as the present time, perhaps too lazily, would call them. What are his faults?'

'I was coming to them,' he said. 'Young Farmingham, as you have seen, grew into a very big and powerful man. He was like that in his teens, and he was always violent, as well as a rogue — you must believe me when I say rogue; it is what I know. He was notorious for his strength and brutality. I believe myself that he killed a man. Do you see why I fear to let him continue here?'

'Killed a man!' I said in surprise. 'Murder! But in that case you should have no difficulty in removing him.'

'How little you know the kind of place and people I have in mind,' he said. 'This is not Europe, or England. Murder, manslaughter, self-defence? Who knows? He was not convicted, or even charged. I think he may have committed a most brutal murder, from base and animal motives, but I cannot prove it. I think so because I knew the circumstances well.'

'What happened?' I said.

'A young fellow, a poor white, was found dead with his head battered in,' he said, 'and all of us in those parts were pretty sure that Farmingham killed him from jealousy about a girl. It was the common talk around the farms. But I must tell you that in those days, and in such remote places, it was very rare for a white man to be brought to book on such a charge. The Kaffir Wars were hardly over and there was still much fear and hatred of the native, and among the bitter old farmers a feeling that no great harm was done if one was wrongly punished. The main thing was to uphold the prestige of the white man. Several natives were held and nearly charged. But the dead man was not of much account and the matter just faded away. Nevertheless, I think Farmingham removed somebody whom he thought in his way. He is a man of the most unbridled passions. Perhaps now you can understand how maddening it is to feel that I have such a man working here and to think that any step I take against him is likely to be misjudged as one born of a foolish partiality for the native.'

I thought a moment. "That was all a long time ago,' I said. 'Have you seen much of him since?'

'Nothing at all, until I found him here when I returned. He went away from those parts, not long after the incident I told you of, and I never heard of him again.'

'Do you think he fears what you know of his earlier life?'

'I don't think Jan Farmingham fears anything or anybody,' he said. 'I must say that for him. And in any case he has no reason to feel himself under any suspicion for that killing or to dream that I think him concerned in it. I never came in personal touch with him at all. In a small community like that everybody is known, and I knew him well by sight and notoriety, but I doubt if I ever spoke to him. He and his kind were shunned by the farmers and the white people generally.'

'What a powerful stimulus to hatreds and ambitions such an early outlawry mast give,' I said, 'especially in a big, physically virile man.'

'Oh yes,' he said, 'he may bear no blame at all for his nature. It may all be the fault of his heredity and environment. That does not alter my problem of here and now.'

'You have no *personal* feelings against him?' I asked.

'I?' he said, a little reproachfully. 'Not the shadow of an iota. I thought you said you knew that.'

'Of course,' I said, and I had. The truth was that the picture of a handclasp was vivid in my mind's eye during this whole conversation. I was tormented by the question whether, if any stealthy relationship existed between Marjorie Haynor and Farmingham, Lance had an inkling of it, and thus had his professional anxiety sharpened by an intolerable private one. In that case, I thought, the whole matter would be much worse than anything I had feared and I could not see what might be the end of it. But I felt sure now that he was ignorant of anything between his wife and the man he so much distrusted, and returned to my former hope that there *was* nothing between these two; that my unwittingly prying eye (and how I regretted that uncovered space beneath the window-blind) had read much more into what it had seen than was really there.

Whatever the true state of the matter, from this moment I felt a deep concern on Lance's account. His story convinced me that he had indeed a most difficult problem to solve and good grounds for his anxiety. I wished I could find something helpful to say and, being at a loss for other than empty commonplaces of sympathetic reassurance, was relieved when he spoke again.

'So you see,' he said on a note of exasperation, 'for lack of any substantial reason to dismiss Farmingham, I feel I must wait until either he or a native is found among the plantations with his skull battered in. I cannot believe that a man of such violence as I know him to be will not provoke some mishap of the kind. We've already had one or two incidents, on both sides, and I fear something really serious.'

'I wish I could suggest something useful,' I said. 'It is most worrying for you.'

'It is,' he said. 'After all, the last rebellion was not long ago, and you never know how far these things will spread or where they will end, once something starts. I don't want anything to start here, at all events.' He smiled with sudden apology. 'I'm sorry, I've been most inconsiderate in inflicting my troubles on you. I can't tell you, though, how good it has been to be able to unburden myself to somebody without the fear of being accounted unjust.'

Once more I thought of Marjorie and hoped against hope that Lance Haynor had not more to worry about than he knew. It came to me suddenly that I, the passing stranger in this place alone among these people might see the whole shape of the affair, and I walked back at his side to the bungalow with an unhappy and oppressive feeling of knowing too much and being able to do nothing.

Marjorie rose languidly from a chair on the stoep to meet us as she saw us coming. 'Well, have you settled all the problems of the universe?' she said, with her cool and slightly mocking air.

'Not even one of them,' I said, and felt uncomfortably that I put a challenge into the idle words. But then I reflected that there was hardly anything I could say to her now that would not seem to me to have a second meaning. I consoled myself that she would not suspect any, for I do not enjoy having secret thoughts about others. I could not, however, repress the busy, and unfortunately prurient curiosity of my thoughts as I looked at her. It was distasteful to think so much about the physical woman and Farmingham's exuberant virility, but I could not help it. That ardent handclasp was too vividly imprinted on my mind. What a fearful thing, I thought, for Lance, if the other hand were that of a lover. Then I remembered something I had forgotten: that if Lance were right it might also be that of a murderer.

Somehow that did not seem relevant, or greatly important. Lance was so loyal and patient and charming a man; to betray him, I thought, would be a transgression worse than murder.

6

THAT evening a lot of people came up to the Haynors at sundowner time. The stoep and the living-room gradually filled with them and, as the drinks followed each other, with the rising note of the men's laughter and the women's voices, I reflected, as I watched and listened, that the twentieth century and its beverages have spoiled the art of conversation and that the noise of even polite society is not much different from what was once that of the taproom. Elegance, I thought, went when women joined the smoking and drinking round and thus cast aside the gentle restraints which their presence once placed on the bluff loudness of their males; as a quiet man who enjoys the thrust-and-parry of balanced talk I regretted this.

Nevertheless, I thought them agreeable people within the limits which irked Marjorie Haynor, who might have had no time for the secret impulses of which I suspected her had she been able to preside over a salon. They were friendly and hospitable, inhibited only in the fear, which they all seemed to share, of discussing things outside their little world. I noticed, as I was introduced to all in turn, that they made a perceptible effort to show interest in larger affairs, but it made them uneasy and Within two or three sentences, obviously without their intending this or even realizing it, the talk came back to the matters they knew: the wooden-headedness of native servants, the need for rain, the annoying growth and obtrusiveness of the Indian population, tea-parties and ball-games. They also shared a strange, perverted snobbery about their ignorance of art in any form; more than once I was told in a corner, with a self-congratulatory grin, that 'We're all illiterate here' or 'I'm afraid we don't know much about music here.' As I did not introduce these topics I assumed the speakers to be practising a form of precautionary self-defence against an intruder who might bring them up, and with resignation I waited to be told by one of them, 'I know nothing about art but I know what I like.'

Mrs. van der Merwe, like a human tuning-fork, with her great laugh set the pitch of the hubbub, and I saw that the other ladies, as Marjorie had said, were replicas of her, whether they were young, fresh and pretty or older and a little dried by the sun. This place was clearly a mould which shaped them all and as I watched Marjorie move pleasantly among them I saw no outer sign that she did not conform to it. Indeed, but for her few impatient remarks to me, which by now I might have forgotten had I not seen that disturbing handclasp, I would not have suspected any difference in her.

Among the men I noticed the two who had paused near me to watch Farmingham lever his trucks back on to the rails, and presently I went over to them. They stood a little to one side, talking quietly, and I guessed that they might be unmarried men and habitual companions. They greeted me pleasantly.

'I'm sorry we didn't make ourselves known to you the other day,' said one. 'We didn't know you were staying with Haynor.'

'Are you from home?' said the other.

'From England, yes,' I said. 'I'm making my way back there now. I've been to India.'

'I hope you are having a good time.'

'The best,' I said. 'I've enjoyed every moment here. It's a lovely spot.'

I found that one was the company's doctor, who looked after the health of its employees, of all complexions, and the other its chief chemist. In them, as in the rest, I felt the slight caution of men who do not quite know what to talk about to a newcomer from far away. I thought it best to give the conversation a local turn and was rewarded, for their interest immediately quickened when I mentioned the derailment.

'That was an impressive young man, in charge of the train,' I said. 'I would never have thought a wreck like that could be cleared so quickly.'

'Oh, you mean Jan Farmingham,' said one. 'Yes, he certainly knows how to make the native jump to it.' He smiled at the other. 'I don't think he was pleased that we passed by just at that moment,' he said, and the other joined in the smile. 'Farmingham doesn't like things to go wrong or people to get in his way. *

'He's about the quickest worker we've ever had here,' explained the other. 'I've never known anybody shift the sugar like he does. It's a matter of pride with him, and perhaps ambition, and it has been said that he shows an excess of zeal sometimes.'

His companion grinned. 'An excess of sjambok, you mean, Jack,' he said.

'Well, that's the whole question, as you know, Edward,' said Jack. 'Does it pay or doesn't it? Is it the right way or isn't it? You can argue it for ever and not come to the end.'

I saw that they were quite ready to go on arguing it, and that, having their third or fourth sundowner inside them, they might be more candid in my presence than they would otherwise have been. It was evidently a subject that keenly interested them. It interested me even more because I had in mind a third factor, affecting the argument, of which, I thought, they would be ignorant: Marjorie. Thus I was eager to hear more and put in a prompting word.

'The sjambok?' I asked.

'Yes. Didn't you see Farmingham whack that native'

'Yes, I did. But you didn't.'

'We saw the man's back, which I had to anoint afterwards, for that matter,' said Edward, 'and anyway, we know Jan.'

'You'd better not give Mr. Browne wrong ideas, Edward,' said Jack. 'Visitors don't always understand these things. What did you think about it, Mr. Browne?'

I divined that I might by chance have met members of the opposed camps which caused Lance Haynor anxiety, and was all the more ready to learn their minds, so that I sought a noncommittal yet provocative answer.

'Oh, I suppose I was a bit taken aback,' I said. 'But of course I don't know enough about conditions and methods here to have any opinion.'

'I'm glad of that,' said the chemist:, 'because strangers often do jump all too quickly to wrong conclusions about the white man's treatment of the native. That makes us a bit shy of them, I suppose. Now, I know the native as well as any man here, and it's my firm belief that when he knows he's done something wrong he would much sooner have a beating, and get it over, than a good talking-to and some other punishment which may hurt him much more. I know the doctor here won't agree with me. . . .'

'I didn't say that,' said the other. It *is* a very complicated subject. If I don't agree with you — and I know the native as well as you, Jack —it's not necessarily on humane grounds, though those may play a part.

'There you are,' interrupted Jack, and I saw they were warming to the dispute. 'Humanity. What *is* humanity? Who's to know what the *native* considers humanity: a quick caning, or a fine that seems to him much more painful?'

'As I was saying when you so rudely interrupted me, Jack,' said the doctor, smiling towards me, 'quite apart from any argument about humanity, I don't think we can decide these things inside the boundaries of this little plantation. I think there are tides of opinion flowing in the great world outside, which may be quite wrong and ill-informed, but which will reach us here and force us to conform.'

'Well, I think that's bunkum,' said Jack. 'This is where we have to grow sugar and the great big world can make up its mind whether it wants sugar or not. The fact is, Mr. Browne, that a foolish leniency may do more damage than firm handling. If you stay here you may hear talk about Farmingham being found one morning with a knife in his back. Believe me, the man who may be found dead on a sugar plantation is more likely to be the one who's stopped a native's pay, so that he can't buy a cow to buy a wife with, and thus fulfil a bargain he's honestly made, than the one who's given him a few lashes that he promptly forgets..

'Come, come, Jack,' said the doctor, rather peremptorily, I thought. Jack looked at him and stopped. Then he added, 'Of course, I'm just talking about the matter at large. I'm not making any local or personal allusions.'

Nevertheless, I felt that he might have been referring obliquely to the company and to Haynor; that the doctor had understood him in this sense and wished to check him. It was patently a matter in which they both felt strongly, and I now saw clearly the two camps of which Lance had spoken.

'Do you have any system of fining natives here?' I asked.

The doctor, a cooler man than the other, took charge. 'Something of the sort is being tried out,' he said as if concluding the conversation. 'It's too early yet to tell how it will work. We've had a certain amount of trouble. Some of the natives get excited about it, for the kind of reason Jack told you, and one man did attack an official of the company. Let me get you another drink.'

The topic was clearly at an end, but as he went away with my glass Jack was not to be deterred from his last word. 'Well, I think they'll see,' he said. 'In my opinion Farmingham's right.' He spoke as if to himself and was, I saw, a little flushed; he finished his drink and put down the glass with the challenging air of a man whose convictions had been finally fortified by its contents.

I was left with a further doubt added to the complex matters that exercised my mind. Here in this little, isolated encampment were cabals and parties, possibly rival leaders, perhaps a dubious allegiance among the masses. Had the chemist merely been lured by a fifth sundowner into spilling large and random opinions, or had it unloosed the inner truth of his thoughts: that Lance was more likely to run into violence than his subordinate?

Presently the guests began to drive away into the brooding, secretive night, until only those were left who were to stay to dinner. From courtesy towards me the table-talk turned on 'home', but they had been so long away from England that it would not stay there and soon came back to its familiar tracks'. How simple, level-headed and unimpassioned these folk were, I thought, watching them. How could any illicit passion throb behind Marjorie's cool temples and threaten Lance's household happiness from within, or any danger to it lurk in the dark fields without? I had never noticed morbid ideas in myself before and now put them firmly from me, wondering if I had a touch of the African sun. It was my last evening with the Haynors and, in a quiet way, a most enjoyable one.

7

WHEN I came down to breakfast Lance was already gone to the mill, to start the wheels of the working week a-roiling; later in the morning he was to return, drive me into Durban and give me lunch at his club, and then speed me on my way towards Cape Town, my ship and England.

As Marjorie poured my coffee I thought resentfully how much had changed in me in the few days of my visit. I came in the pleasant anticipation of meeting Lance's wife and of witnessing the fresh happiness of a young marriage; I would go with a mind full of unhappy doubts on his account. I wondered how far her affair with Farmingham had gone and could not, when I tried, force myself to think that none such had begun. Yet I now thought, as I watched her, that it probably had not come to any fleshly consummation; first, because that would be most difficult in this place, and second, because in that case I should have expected to observe an air of fulfilment, even if it was a guilty and secret fulfilment, in her, whereas she strongly impressed me as a dissatisfied woman. If there were any question of a step beyond the pale (and how little, after all, I had to go on) my second thoughts were that Marjorie had not yet taken it. I accounted her a woman possibly in the throes of this decision. The immense difficulty of making it might even save Lance's happiness, if it were threatened. I recalled the stolid-looking woman I had seen at Farmingham's side on the tennis-court. She alone was another great obstacle, and if he were as ambitious as men described him, he would not ruin his career by so reckless an adventure. From all I heard he was a man likely to place success in his affairs before any woman.

I had, however, slightly changed my mind in the matter of what I should do. I had decided, in bed the night before, on a word of warning, disguised and possibly foolish. I brought *Madame Bovary* with me, put it on the table beside me, and casually spoke of it during the meal.

'I didn't care for Bovary so much this time,' I said.

'I thought you admired it greatly,' she said.

'Oh, it's beyond question a consummate work of art,' I said. 'I hardly know another book in which you can feel so intensely the writer putting himself inside the skins of his characters. I've read it several times and each time found something new in it. Flaubert must have drained himself dry in the writing of it. But it occurred to me this time that there may be a vast difference between the impression the artist strives to give and the one the reader receives.'

In what way?' she said, curiously; she was clearly interested.

'Well,' I said, 'Flaubert, I'm sure, set out to portray an ugly thing without softening any of its lineaments. I wager he would have been horrified at the suggestion that he would do that. But, unconsciously I'm sure, he gives it a spurious beauty by his superb description of backgrounds: of lovely nights and cool streams, of grasses streaming in the water and of a ripe peach falling into the nocturnal silence of lovers enclasped under a hedge. He plays soft limelights upon a hideous act. The reader loses sight of the treacherous deed, which is the central theme in the loveliness of the night, which somehow pleads extenuation.'

'But the world *is* beautiful.'

'Judas in the act of betrayal is not beautiful,' I said, 'though be may have been good-looking and moved between alabaster pillars beneath an azure sky. There is no compromise possible. Flaubert ought to have kept the scenery and the weather out of his picture.'

'You remind me a little of Mrs. van der Merwe,' she said.

'Who knows if she was not right,' I said, 'though she could not express herself?'

'It isn't for the artist to decide between right and wrong, surely?' she said.

'If he sets out to paint a goitre he must not disguise it with a pearl collarette,' I said. I spoke much more dogmatically than I felt, but this was for the purpose which she could not suspect.

'Poor Emma Bovary,' she said. 'You arc very hard on her.'

'Not in the least,' I said, 'but on Flaubert. She was what she was.'

'And not worth an artist's trouble?' she suggested.

'Perhaps worth more of it,' I said, 'and less attention given to the perfume of the fields where she wantoned. Leave out the blue skies and the green meadows and the sun and what becomes of her?'

'But the sun does things to people,' she said quickly. 'How can you leave out the sun?'

'Ah, the fault is not in the sun, but in ourselves,' I said. 'Make her plain and put her in rags, in a back-room in a slum, give her a background as drab and filthy as her impulses, and you will find her conduct inexcusable. Or am I wrong?'

'Poor Emma,' she said, again, 'she was only a woman, after all. Do you remember the song she heard the beggar sing?'

'Yes,' I said, 'that was in Yonville, in the yard of the nasty little hotel where she used to meet her nasty little lover.' I deliberately used such words, feeling secure in the knowledge that she could not suspect any allusion. 'He sang, "Maids in the warmth of a summer day, dream of love and of love always". That was one of the glimpses of background which, I think, distort an ugly theme. The effect on Emma's senses is obvious. But the fact remains that she wasn't a maid, but a matron.'

'The fact also remains,' she said, 'that she heard them, and that those and many other exterior things helped to make Emma Bovary.'

'The last word is yours,' I said, smiling, and we talked of other things as we rose and strolled round the garden. I took my parting look at the rolling fields that lay beneath the inescapable sun, and in a little while Lance drove up, collected me and my bags and we set off for Durban. I waved goodbye to Marjorie as she stood on the stoep, a picture of cool and self-controlled white womanhood, then turned and settled in my seat.

We drove for ten minutes between the sugar-fields and came to a place where the road rose and we could see over them for a mile or more on either hand. Far away on the left I saw a white man moving above them as if suspended in air and propelled by magic; he rode as I now knew on laden sugar trucks which we could not see. Even at that distance the vigour of his gestures, the whip in his hand and the faint sound of his raucous orders, as it travelled to us across the sugar-tops, told me who it was.

Lance was intent on the road before him. 'There's Farmingham, isn't it?' I said.

He looked across the fields and then back. 'Yes,' he said. 'I hope I shan't hear of more derailments and beatings when I get back.'

We lunched quietly together and later, as my train drew out towards Cape Town, I looked back at him, watching from the platform with his friendly smile. How charming a fellow he was, I thought; urbane, with the diffidence of true courtesy, loyal — a civilized European in a half-savage land.

8

I HAD arranged my journey to leave me a week in Cape Town which I was anxious to learn to know, before my ship sailed. On the fourth day there I had finished breakfast and settled to read the paper on the veranda of my hotel when I saw, in the space headed 'Stop Press', three lines which said:

> Durban.—Mr. Lance Haynor, general manager of the Newmount Plantations Company, was found dead this morning. Inquiries proceeding.

The shock was so great that for a few minutes I sat with muddled thoughts, confusedly wondering what the bald statement could mean and what I could do. Then I telephoned to the newspaper, explaining that I was a relative, and asked if they had any further information. They had none but promised to communicate with me when they received some. I went to the post office and telegraphed to Marjorie Haynor offering to cancel my passage and return immediately; then I wrote her a letter, which I sent express, saying what things I could and asking her to let me know what had happened if she did not need my personal presence.

Later the newspaper telephoned and read out to me such further messages as they had received. These also appeared in the afternoon's newspaper and subsequent ones in others during the next three days, up to my departure; for Marjorie's telegram, which I received the following morning, said: 'Definitely no, thank you so very much. There is nothing you can do but I shall be ever grateful. Writing.'

The newspaper reports were unexpectedly brief and uninformative. I inferred, from discussing the matter with one or two people I met (although they implied more than they said) that there was a certain dislike of publishing too much about what might be a case of viclence against a white man in which a native or natives were concerned; they seemed all to have this possibility in their minds and hinted that it was not advisable, by too much noise, to *encourager les autres.* The first newspaper accounts merely said that my kinsman had been found dead with serious head injuries; that a native with a bad record and a suspected grievance was being sought; and, later, that some similarly unspecified native was under arrest.

After that little more was printed save further references to this native and then to another native, who had also been arrested. Then 'a native' was released; whether it was the first or the second was not clear to me, but the inference seemed to be that the inquiries were not having much success. I could imagine how difficult they might be in those dark lanes between the sugar-fields and among the hordes of apparently simple yet inscrutable natives and Indians who worked in them.

After much painful indecision I made up my mind to sail. There was no option: I could not thrust my way into the matter or achieve anything in surroundings so unfamiliar. Only by Marjorie's invitation could I have gone. Telling myself that the business must after all be in the hands best able to settle it, and wondering how it would affect the affair between Marjorie Haynor and Farmingham, if there were one, I boarded the ship, leaving an order for several newspapers to be sent regularly to me in England.

These began to reach me soon after my arrival in London, but contained nothing further, and I waited impatiently for Marjorie's letter. It came a fortnight later, but also told me little news; it said the same things at greater length. Lance went for a ride round the estates one afternoon (she wrote) and did not return in the evening. A search was organized and his horse was found, but his body was only discovered the next morning, some distance away among the sugar in a lonely corner of the plantations, with the head battered. It was generally believed that a native had waylaid him. 'Some of them,' *she* said, 'who are still paying for wives in their kraals seem to be feeling very excited about having fines deducted from their pay for laziness or for stealing naps in the fields during the cutting; at any rate that is what I am told.' I wondered who had told her. 'But you can imagine how difficult it is to find the man,' she continued. 'They move about the plantations like the wind in darkness, never give their thoughts away, and never split on each other. The police from Durban are doing all they can but I fear it will be a long job at the best.'

That, in brief, was all she said, save that she thanked me for offering to return, explained that she had not asked me to do so because I could have achieved nothing, and said she would write again as soon as there was anything further to report. As she never did so I was left to assume that all trails had vanished in the great green banks of sugar and the ant-heap-like native compounds.

Nevertheless, Lance was my only relative and her failure to write, after this letter, made me feel that Marjorie Haynor either disliked me or could not bring herself to any further correspondence about what, by all common standards, must have been a most shocking tragedy for her. For a long while some resentment on this account kept alive doubts and suspicions about her in my mind, but after that time grew over the matter until my memory of it was no sharper than it would be of the words on a tombstone, once ramiliar to me but now made illegible by lichen and almost forgotten.

PART TWO

I

AFTER my return to England I settled down to the desk in the Home Office for which my father had had me trained and stayed at it during war and peace for many years. I had no quarrel with my father's choice of a career, for I admired the Civil Service, believing that, in the British scheme of things and in that age, at all events, it represented a form of public service, in the higher sense of the words, which appealed to me more than any solely gainful occupation. The material rewards were modest; on the very summit of them waited no more than retirement with a small pension and a sense of useful duty done, and at the highest a knighthood, like my father's, in distant old age. I asked nothing better.

During a wartime period I occasionally met a South African officer or soldier and I usually asked them if they knew the people and places I had so briefly visited. Several of them vaguely recalled the newspaper reports of Lance Haynor's death but could tell me nothing new about it. One, from Durban, had met Lance at his club there and, when I inquired, he thought he remembered hearing that Marjorie had left the sugar district; where she was he did not know. Two or three years after the war I met a South African who had taken his demobilization in England and found employment here. He had known Farmingham slightly and said he had heard that the big man was doing very well. After Lance's death he had soon become general manager of the company, but a little later had been made head of an even bigger concern. Farmingham, this man said, 'had made a packet out of the war'. He did not know, however, where Farmingham now was or what he was doing.

As the years passed I advanced slowly through the grades of promotion, moved from my junior desk to a bigger one, and became a little more important in my Department. I married, and in the next six years my wife had three children. We were a very happy family and when houses became easier to find I bought one in Surrey, an hour from London. Within this habitation we dwelt at peace.

2

I DON'T remember exactly when or why I first wondered if Colonel Jack Farmingham and Jan Farmingham were one and the same. I think I was in those years when a man, reflecting that the allotted span is three score and ten, realizes that he has reached middle-age, and then, recalling that he has most of his teeth and much of his hair, ridicules the thought; he is clearly going to live to a hundred and need not cross his meridian for another fifteen years.

For long enough I read the name, as it more and more frequently appeared in the newspapers, with only a passing thought, which the similarity awakened, of those far-off days in Natal, and the man called Jan Farmingham. The first name was different and from what I had vaguely heard of Farmingham's commercial success during the war period he could not have held military rank, still less a high one.

There was nothing in the identity of the surnames to make me connect the shadowy man of my memories with this shadow of the public prints.

Then this Colonel Jack Farmingham began to grow into a minor public figure through the imperceptible processes of newspaper publicity. The very name gave him a good start in the affections of the newspaper-reading public; had he been 'Tobias' the man-in-the-train would have reserved judgment; but there was about 'Jack' a subtle suggestion that he was popular with all who knew him and should be so with those who did not. Of such small things (in my experience) are many public heroes made. Knowing a little more than most about the Press, I realized that he was on excellent terms with the paragraphists and gossip-writers, in whose fragments these allusions were frequent. I suspected, also from experience, that he might keep a good table at which they were welcome guests. This, indeed, was sometimes discernible from their references, which revealed a human weakness for displaying how much, and how many, they knew: 'At Jack Farmingham's house last week-end I met. . .'.

The general tone was that further description would not be needed by people socially so well-placed as the writer's readers. My retentive memory, and the unobtrusive interest which my Department takes in public men, particularly while they are becoming public men, combined to fit many such odd scraps of information into a mental picture of this man. In course of time, therefore, this Colonel Jack Farmingham took shape in my mind as 'the financier' or 'the industrialist'. He was chairman or director of many companies and thus well known in the City. He owned factories at Mallerton, a satellite factory township which had sprung up, mushroom-like, twenty miles north of London.

He was clearly wealthy, kept racehorses, made lavish gifts to charity and, I suspected, saw to it that the paragraphists were informed of these.

He was evidently, among many others of similar mould, a forceful, successful and ambitious man who liked to be in the public eye. It was an open question whether this was merely from an amiable vanity, not uncommon among such men, or whether he hoped to elbow his way into larger public affairs; did he want a title, or would his energies turn towards politics, or both? I wondered. The business man who feels, as he reaches the peaks of commercial achievement, that the country cannot continue safe unless he takes a hand in national matters, is also not rare.

An answer to this question suggested itself when Colonel JacK Farmingham began to take part in local politics at Mallerton. His speeches went far outside parish-pump disputes; they contained strong and hostile references to the government, and this gave some political importance to his election, among noisy cheers, to be Mayor of Mallerton. I felt, as I quietly read my newspapers, that Colonel Jack Farmingham, like many successful merchants before him, might be rushing into places where he would lose his footing and, at best, fall upstairs into a seat in the House of Lords, comfortably arranged to prevent him from troubling the angels next door.

It was just about this time that a paragraphist alluded, in the usual cryptic way, as much as to say 'This is known to all men', to Jack Farmingham's 'colonial experiences' and that the thought slowly grew in my mind, 'Can this possibly be Jan Farmingham?' While I was still wondering I saw him, and it was.

I lunched one day with my closest friend, Granger Craft, at his club. We sat modestly at a small table for two on the side. At a central table, with three other men, sat Jan Farmingham.

There was no doubt about it. The three heads, bent deferentially towards him, gave emphasis to the dominance of his personality. I saw at once that he exercised a command over white men, as formerly over black ones, and that this came from an inner force in the man; his great bulk was merely an accessory to it. He was much bigger even than I remembered, but seemed all muscle; he did not look a fat man, in spite of a heavy jowl. His movements were quick and his eyes alert above a strong nose and jaw. His voice was loud, for a club-room, but none showed any dislike of this.

'Granger,' I said, 'who's that at the middle table?'

He did not ask, I noticed, which of the four I meant. He looked across and smiled. 'Trust a troglodyte from the Home Office not to know Jack Farmingham,' he said. 'A new name in the City. The coming man. Our wizard of finance. An extraordinary fellow.'

'Jack Farmingham?' I said. 'He's changed his name.'

Craft looked at me quickly. 'Changed his name?' he said, with keen interest. 'Do you know him, then?'

'No, I don't know him,' I said. 'I once saw him, many years ago, in South Africa.'

'Yes, one gathers he came originally from there, or spent some time there,' he said. 'Although one doesn't hear very much about that period in his career. But what do you mean, he's changed his name?'

'He was Jan Farmingham then.'

'Oh,' he said, as if disappointed, 'is that all? Jan or Jack, what's the difference? Everybody calls him Jack, but I believe his name is actually John. I thought you were going to tell me of dark doings in his past life, an alias or something of the kind. That might have been interesting. But John is only another form of Jan, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'but even such small changes are sometimes significant, don't you think?'

'Not so small a one as that, I should imagine,' he said, 'unless there's some reason to think it sinister. Is there?'

'Not that I can offer,' I said thoughtfully. I know Granger Craft very well and understood from the tone of his answer to my question what he meant me to understand: that he did not share any unqualified general admiration for Farmingham and, at the least, was reserving his opinion. Craft is very well known in the City of London, although hardly known at all outside it. He is a leading accountant there and knows more of its inner secrets, and perhaps of the characters of its foremost men, than any other. He has seen many coming men come and go, and anticipated their going before they themselves imagined it I value his opinion most highly and felt fortunate to have it, implicit but clear, about Farmingham. Craft has the brain of a mathematical genius with the mind of a great judge. There is no room in him for the inexactitude of prejudice or suspicion and I knew that if he were doubtful about Farmingham he would have good cause.

'You say you *saw* him but don't know him?' he asked.

'Yes, he was an overseer on a sugar plantation in Natal where a distant relative of mine was general manager. He disliked Farmingham very much.'

'Oh! Why?'

'Well,' I said, and hesitated; I did not feel I could go into the ancient story of Farmingham's origins and could not even remember the details of it very clearly at a moment's notice after so long, 'chiefly, I think, because he was in the habit of beating the natives.'

Craft laughed. 'How well I can imagine that,' he said. 'He's completely ruthless, passionately ambitious, and I should think would often be physically violent if that paid in the City of London. I've never seen a man reduce protesting shareholders to abject submission as he does. He always looks as if he's ready to jump off the platform and murder an objector. With it all he's very clever and knows just how far he can go. He never quite puts himself in the wrong. I gather he qualified as a solicitor in South Africa and he has all the tricks.'

'What do you think of him, Granger?'

'Speaking quite privately to one of the guardians of our realm,' he said, 'I think he is a most astute crook. I couldn't prove it and wouldn't say it to anybody else.'

'You know him fairly well?'

'Professionally, yes. I was accountant to some of his companies — until I thought I wouldn't be so any longer. We parted on the best of terms. He wanted it like that and perhaps he was right. Does he know you?'

'No, I'm pretty certain he doesn't.'

'Then why not meet him, and form your own opinion instead of pumping me?' he said smiling. 'He's going into the smoking room now for that goldfish-bowl of brandy which he thinks the emblem of taste.'

Farmingham saw us as we entered and called, 'Hullo, Granger, come and join us.' I guessed that, as Craft had hinted, he was too clever to make enemies if he could keep friends. I saw too, from his manner towards Craft and the others, that he was of those who use Christian names on short acquaintance. I shrink from this custom myself and wondered by what device, and for how long, I could withhold my own.

Now that I met for the first time this man who, for a few days long ago, had been much in my thoughts I saw that he had no notion of ever having heard of me before. My all too common surname would not awaken any memories in him, if anyone had mentioned it to him when I was staying with the Haynors. I, for my part, felt no need at all to recall myself to him.

He monopolized the talk, and this was clearly his wonted way, to which his listeners were accustomed. He spoke with a kind of harsh and unsmiling geniality, as much as to say: 'When there's anything to laugh about I'll say the word.' I noticed in his speech traces of the strange accent I had formerly remarked, but they were few and from his careful and precise enunciation I ventured the guess that he had trained himself to remove them. He gave me a quick scrutiny as Craft introduced me and then paid me more attention than I expected or thought myself to deserve, from so masterful and virile a being. He showed interest at hearing that I was a civil servant; I knew, however, that even such humble folk are sometimes held worth cultivating by those whose plan of campaign is to 'make contacts' (for you never know when they will come in useful).

'What is your department, Mr. Browne?' he asked as I sat down opposite him.

I'm in the Home Office,' I said.

'Ah, a policeman,' he said, in the tone of humorous comment but without relaxing the magisterial severity of his face. 'A public enemy.'

I was a thought surprised at the rawness of the jest. 'Do you think so?' I said. 'We like to pose as the friends of law-abiding folk.'

He permitted himself a slight, paternal smile. 'I was pulling your leg,' he said. 'I always like to test a man's sense of humour.' I immediately doubted if he had one, although the three other men now smiled as if to confirm its existence. 'Which particular branch of the Home Office arc you in?'

'Oh, the criminal,' I said. 'It's a sort of liaison office with Scotland Yard that I adorn at the moment.'

'Oh,' he said, with an air of condescending respect, 'that's highly important work. I always say the British detective force is the finest in the world. Look at that murder in Epping the other day, the way they cleared that up. Now, I remember

From this point the conversation changed into a lecture by Colonel Jack Farmingham on criminal law and criminal methods. I felt that I had much to learn. It was only when Granger Craft moved to go that the lecturer turned to me again and said, rather startling me, that I must come down to Mallerton and stay with him one week-end. 'There's always a crowd of lovely people there,' he said, 'generally stag parties. Granger can tell you.'

Craft smiled affirmatively and I was murmuring that he was very kind when one of the other men, who had just been brought an early evening newspaper by a club servant, gave a little whistle and handed it to Farmingham, pointing to something on an inner page. Farmingham looked at it and I saw his face redden with anger. He threw the paper down and for a moment seemed about to explode with wrath. Then he controlled himself, said briefly to the man who had handed him the paper, 'Right. They'll get a writ for libel from me tomorrow,' and turned to us. 'Well, goodbye, Granger,' he said, 'goodbye Mr. Browne. I hope to see you at Mallerton.'

, 'You should accept that invitation,' said Craft chuckling, as we turned into Pall Mall.

'Do you think so?' I said doubtfully.

'Indeed, yes; one of Farmingham's parties is an experience. Just pack a toothbrush and your Christian name. Oh, and tails; Farmingham loves dressing up. I wonder what was in the paper that annoyed him so. Just a moment, I'll get one.' He crossed the road to a newspaper seller and I saw him open the paper and glance quickly at something inside. Then he came back, laughing happily.

'What is it?' I said.

'Well, I'm not sure, but I think it's a very unpleasant libel action for this paper,' he said. 'They've gone just the wrong way about it and they may find they've caught a tartar in Farmingham. Look.'

We stopped and I ran my eye over the paragraph. It was one of several in a financial column. I saw something about 'one of Colonel Jack Farmingham's companies', mention of a 'spectacular fall in the shares' and a reference to 'sharp practices', but I know little of the stock markets or company dealings and was mystified.

'What is it all about?' I asked.

'Why, this is what happened, in my judgment,' he said with an amused look, 'and I think I'm not far wrong. Farmingham and his associates wanted to make a lot of money quickly not long ago. At a meeting of one of his companies, where one or two shareholders asked questions, another shareholder stood up, or rather in my opinion he was put up, and gave a glowing account of the company's prospects. He said he'd just been to Canada, where a new factory was opened not long ago, and found it overwhelmed with orders and inquiries. His words were included in the report of the meeting which was published in the papers. As you know, these company reports are inserted as paid advertisements, but I think the country parson and the maiden lady at Worthing often assume that the editor has checked the accuracy of statements printed, as he would those in the news columns. Anyway, there was a great run on the shares, which went up from about six shillings to thirty in a week or two. Then Farmingham and his friends unloaded theirs, which cost them little or nothing, and made a lot of money, and the shares came down with a bump. Then there was a good deal of talk. That's all.'

'That's all!' I said. 'But that sounds like wholesale embezzlement. It *ought* to be exposed.'

'As I have told you the story baldly,' he said, 'it does sound like robbery without violence and I expect it was so. But when it comes to exposing such things you need to be quite sure of your ground and very careful. To put the wrongdoer in the right is worse than doing nothing, and I think that is what this paper has done. Their libel lawyer must have been asleep. They use the words "sharp practice" as their own opinion, not as the quoted one of some other party to whom they can leave the onus of proof, and they couple it by clear implication with Farmingham's name. At least, that is what he'll say, and I fancy a jury would agree.'

'But, my dear Granger,' I said, 'surely the swindle is obvious. What defence or justification could there possibly be?'

'A dozen,' he said. 'The directors are not responsible for what shareholders say. This shareholder expressed his own opinion. He has probably disappeared, with his pockets lined, and is now in Mexico or somewhere. In that case, he was trying to boost the shares for his own profit. There *is* a factory; even if the position there is not as rosy as he painted it, it may become so and the shares might in time recover. The directors have done nothing wrong. To accuse them of sharp practice, and to mention the chairman's name in such a connection, is monstrous. I can see Farmingham's solicitors gloating over this and hear his K.C.s tearing passion to tatters as they vindicate his wounded honour.' Again he laughed, heartily.

'Well, it seems a rank swindle,' I said, 'and you sound as if you admired him.'

'I have a reluctant admiration for his strength and cleverness,' he said, 'and an intense curiosity about his mind. I have the impression that he feels himself a righteous man in all his acts. He is incapable of thinking anything that he does is wrong, I believe. His ambitions so possess him, and his energy is given so completely to achieving them, that he thinks any man who crosses him is a rogue, and anything done to thwart him evil. I judge him capable of doing dishonest or even criminal things and of so sincerely believing that they are right, because they serve his ends, that he would sincerely and fiercely resent any attack on his probity. At this very moment, I feel sure, he is boiling with rage at the villainy of the man who wrote that.'

'But your own real opinion about him is poor?'

'I think him, by my standards, a bad man and a public menace. But I make a clear distinction between what I privately think and what can be publicly proved. This newspaper may foolishly have found a way to make an honourable man of him, and he's inordinately ambitious. He means to be either Lord Mayor or Prime Minister.'

'Does he though!' I said. 'And which do you think he will become?'

'If this were another country,' he said thoughtfully, 'probably both. In England, probably neither. But you never can tell. Anyway, he's a dangerous man and it will be a pity if, through this affair, he's put in a position to do more harm. He must have ruined a lot of people through that trick with the shares. I don't suppose for a moment he gives them a thought, unless they make themselves a nuisance, when he thinks them scoundrels. Do you know what the best thing would be to do with such a man, Geoff?'

'What?'

'Appoint him Home Secretary and make an honest nun of him. No, don't smile, I'm serious. Put him in a place like that and you put him on the side of the law. His ambitions and his interests depend on the upholding of it. You would find in him the most fanatical defender of public morality, because any who broke the law would be attacking him. Imagine the enormous energy he would put into that cause!'

'Oh, nonsense,' I said, 'it's an awful thought.'

He laughed. 'Stranger things have happened,' he said. 'You know, Geoff, there's a great fascination in watching the game. From the ends of the earth they come to the City of London, the quickwitted and the deadsure. But if they're not honest the City breaks them nearly all, in time. Just once in a long while one slips through into the highest places, and then you may find a blackmailer or a sharepusher in robes of state. Farmingham ought to go into politics before his sins find him out.'

THIS unexpected meeting with Farmingham, and Craft's remarks, left me with a sharper interest than before in the man whose doings, with those of many others in the news, I had previously followed only with the casual attention of a newspaper reader, who in my case chanced also to be an official. My mind began instinctively to delve into the past, striving to disinter from the soil of a vague aversion, which it still retained from those far-off talks with Lance Haynor, the exact details of what he had told me about Farmingham. So many years lay between that the process was difficult, but slowly my memory reclaimed the fragments.

When I pieced them together into the outline of the story I saw how little it was and felt glad that I had not, without reflection, laid it before Granger Craft. For instance, those faint echoes, from a dead century and distant land, of talk about Farmingham's origins and upbringing: how absurd they would now sound, in the third decade of the new one and in England. So much had happened, so much had changed in the world; how easy it would be to deride them as the late Victorian gossip of a few pukka sahibs about someone 'not from the top drawer'. I would have invited a quick dismissal of them from Craft's judicial mind, and an even quicker one, I thought, had I mentioned Lance's suspicion that Farmingham in his youth had killed a man, with whose death his name had never been connected. Whatever the truth of these matters, it lay buried in a past that seemed beyond excavation.

Farmingham, however, loomed ever larger in the present. His libel suit brought him into the central beam of publicity and, once again, I deduced that he sought its glare. The announcement of the action appeared, a mere line among the legal notices, and from then until the case was heard, some months later, the newspapers were prevented by the laws of contempt from making any bald allusions to it. There was, however, nothing to stop them from reporting the doings of Colonel Jack Farmingham and I noticed that the paragraphists of all the journals but the one concerned became busy in this cause. That was not unnatural, because a lawsuit against a newspaper and the people involved in it are always of especial appeal to the public. But the art of puffing is a subtle one and I thought I discerned that by the" time the case came to court a widespread impression would have been created that Colonel Jack Farmingham was a jolly good fellow, untiring in good works, unstinting in generosity, and devoted to the national interest. I thought it unlikely that the jurymen, when they began their task, would approach it with any feelings of prejudice against him, to say the least; and if they had to reject his claim might even feel some regret for disappointing so well-liked a man.

If sympathy for him needed to be enhanced, it was increased by the announcement that he would conduct his own case. At this moment one of the paragraphists, who first reported the fact, introduced 'Colonel Jack, as his friends always call him'. This, I think, was almost genius; the public mind is nearly incapable of resisting so subtle a suggestion that a man enjoys universal affection, especially when he is clearly a courageous one, and the words 'conducting his own case' carry an implication of sublime valour to the layman who is awed and mystified by the processes of The Law.

I found Granger Craft no whit behind the common opinion in this admiration for Farmingham's courage, although he expressed it with the chuckling enjoyment of the stage manager, who from the wings watches the hidden mechanism of the magician's tricks, and not with the open-mouthed bewilderment of the audience in front.

'It's the cleverest thing he could have done,' he said, 'if he's clever enough to do it, and I fancy he is.'

'You think he'll win?'

'I think he has a very strong case if he knows how to handle witnesses, and from what I've seen of him handling shareholders I judge that he does.'

'But won't that be a shocking thing?'

'On the face of it, yes. But what an entertainment!'

Craft was eager to watch the entertainment, and so was I. I was able through official channels to get two places reserved for us in court; most of the large crowd which lined up in the street was turned away when it was full.

Farmingham did not disappoint the curious throng which was come to see Colonel Jack in the flesh, but he surprised me. From my far distant memories of him, and from what Craft had said, I had expected to see a man red with suppressed anger, openly portraying a sense of injury, quick to respond to provocative allusions and loud in refuting them. He was the exact opposite.

Massive in a morning coat, he was the picture of strength and disciplined self-control, a man conscious of his rectitude and resolved to prove it by quiet and inexorable legal argument. He was a very fine-looking man, I realized, and his measured and deliberate speech added to the feeling of power that he gave out. If he displayed a cool and rather effective contempt for the slur that had been cast on him, it was done by most subtle suggestion.

The opening speeches were short and Craft murmured to me that the newspaper's K.C. was reserving his sharpest shafts for Farmingham in the witness-box. There was a reference to the shareholder, whose remarks at the company meeting had caused the shares to rise; he had been subpoenaed, said the K.C, but could not be found. A delicate allusion which followed, to the effect that the company's directors could not be supposed to know where he was, in effect implied that they did. A more direct charge was contained in the silken statement that, while none of the directors' names could be traced in the large sales of shares when they stood at their highest price, milord and the jury would be aware that the identity of the persons truly concerned was not always revealed in such transactions. Taking all the circumstances of the matter into account, in which many persons had suffered grievous loss, and even ruin, the article complained of must be said to have stated the facts correctly, as far as they could ever be known in such a case, and to have commented fairly on them.

'Ah, that's the point,' murmured Craft as counsel sat down. ' Were they correctly stated and was the comment fair? Now we shall see!'

Farmingham hardly deigned to do more than dismiss these imputations as random rumours, without raising his voice or showing rancour, and the court stirred as the first witness was called.

'Here it comes,' said Craft. The witness was the journalist who had written the paragraph. He was a small, elderly man and showed signs of nervousness.

Even Craft was not prepared, I think, for the entertainment which followed. Remorselessly Farmingham held the witness to the issues of correctly stated fact and fair comment. He would not let the man stray from those points. In order to prolong the ordeal, I judged, he slowed down his questions, appeared to weigh them when he knew what he was going to say, and then dropped each word separately and heavily into the tense silence of the court. He was completely master of himself.

'Mr. Wayford,' he began, 'you are a financial journalist, and a well known one?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'You would not write anything incorrect or unfair?'

'No.'

'You keep strictly to statements of fact and fair comment on them?'

'Yes.'

'Now, in this article you speak of sharp practices in connection with the shares of one of my companies. Is that a statement of fact?'

'No, it is a comment.'

'Ah, a comment. Do you think it a fair comment?'

The man in the box shifted a little uneasily. 'I thought so, yes.'

'You thought so! Do you still think so?'

'Er, yes' (after a pause).

'A fair comment then. On what fact?'

'On a rise in prices to an unnatural level, caused by the publication of over-optimistic statements.'

'You refer to the report of the company meeting?'

'Yes.'

'It appeared in your paper and many others. As an experienced journalist, Mr. Wayford, you know that such reports are accepted and printed as paid advertisements.'

'Yes. But the directors should verify their accuracy.'

'You must know that the directors *do* verify their accuracy, as reports of the meeting. In your article, did you intend to convey that you held the directors responsible for publishing false information, by including in the report certain remarks made by a shareholder?'

'No, I didn't go as far as that. It might have been the fault of the shareholder concerned.'

'But your article was widely read as an attack on the integrity of the directors, was it not?'

'I can't say what others thought. I am not responsible for an impression which a reader may wrongly form.'

But you just said that the directors of my company were responsible for an impression which investors may wrongly have formed, did you not?'

Wayford hesitated again. 'You are distorting what I said,' he objected.

'I do not think I am, either what you wrote or have just said. I think your meaning was clear, but the jury can decide. I am not trying to mislead or trap you at all. I want to see if, between us, we can get at the truth of this matter. Now in this article you mention my name. Here it is, "Colonel Jack Farmingham's company" and later, after some remarks about the rise and fall in prices, the words "sharp practices". Do you think anybody would have connected the two?'

'I don't see why they should.'

'But I am the chairman of this company. How could any uninformed reader avoid the implication?'

'Obviously I cannot answer for every inference that every single reader might draw.'

'But you said before that the directors — and I am the chairman — are responsible for every inference that any single reader might draw from a report of remarks at a company meeting, did you not?'

'I've already said that I don't think I said quite that.'

"The record will show. I think I am right. Mr. Wayford, you said you made a fair comment on a statement of fact, and that the fact was an unnatural rise in prices occasioned by a misleading report. Do you think the directors caused that report to be published with that object in view?'

'I cannot offer any opinion about that.'

'Do you know if I or any of the directors profited by the rise in prices?'

'I cannot say. That would be impossible to ascertain, if it were the fact.'

'That sounds as if you do think so, docs it not?'

'No, it means that I don't know.'

'But in that case who is to blame for the sharp practices you referred to?'

'I don't know. It might have been the missing shareholder.'

'You claim that it is a fact, then, that there was sharp practice, and you maintain the phrase, but you do not know who the culprit was. In that case, why did you mention my name?'

'I only mentioned it as the chairman of the company.'

'And you hold that you are not responsible for any inference, prejudicial to me, which others may have drawn?'

'Certainly not.'

'Yet, as I must remind you again, you said that the directors of a company of which I am chairman were responsible for any false impression which the public may have gained from a report published in your paper?'

'I did not put it like that.'

'The stenographic record will decide between us. Mr. Wayford, I believe it is the custom in newspaper offices for a lawyer to read material for libel before it appears. Does that custom obtain in your newspaper?'

'Yes.'

'Was this article so scrutinized?'

As far as I know.'

'Ah, you are not certain. Is not everything read for libel before publication?'

'It is now.'

Farmingham pounced on that incautious 'now'. 'Now?' he said, and paused to let the word sink in. 'Do you mean that by some chance this article was not examined, and that as a result a more stringent regime has been introduced?'

'I didn't say that.'

'I think it is a fair comment on what the jury may fairly deduce from your words to have been a statement of fact.'

So it went on for more than an hour, until Wayford wriggled in the box while Farmingham again and again nailed him to that damaging point: that he expected others to take responsibility for 'the impression' created by what they printed, but would not accept it for himself and, when he saw the corner he had been driven into, denied that he had said so. As he gained mastery over the man Farmingham grew bigger and more insistent, the witness smaller and more nervous. I felt sure that Farmingham, once this admission had been obtained, was greatly enjoying himself and would press home his advantage by repeating the same question over and over again in some slightly different connection each time.

The court adjourned for lunch, and as we made our way towards our own Craft almost rubbed his hands in glee. 'What a man The said. 'What did I tell you? He is really exceptional in his qualities: a brain like a knife-blade, the strength and courage of a bull, the physique of a giant, and an indomitable belief in his own righteousness. I swear that he genuinely feels himself a deeply wronged man.'

'Do you think he has gained the day?'

'I shall be surprised if even Carshalton, K.C., can pull the case out of the fire after that. I almost wonder they didn't settle out of court. Clearly they reckoned without Farmingham as his own counsel.'

' Surely he was very lucky in that witness?'

'But that's just the point, my dear Geoff You can't write such things off merely as luck. His luck is very largely of his own making. Of course Way ford was a weak witness, pitted against Farmingham. But how much of the outcome was due to Farmingham's skill and strength, which seized on and played with Wayford's inherent nervousness and muddle-headedness. It is of the essence of the contract to make the most of such chances, and Farmingham did that. The race *is* to the strong. Fortune *does* favour the brave.'

While we ate an impulse moved me to change my former resolve and tell Craft what I knew of Farmingham from earlier times. I was curious to see if it would in any way modify his opinion of a man of whom he clearly would not make a friend, yet much admired. He listened with keen interest, and when I had finished shook his head as if saying 'No' to an antipathy I had not directly admitted.

'What does it all amount to?' he said. 'Why, just suppose that it became known that Farmingham was a bastard or a half-caste. In England that would count in his favour rather than against it. "He can't help what happened before he was born,' our fair-minded people would say. "Give the man a chance!" And they may be right. I rather doubt it in this case, because I know South Africa a little, and the kind of place and people you describe, and the effects of such an early environment would be very hard to lose. But you'd never make anybody understand that here.'

'Lance Haynor thought he'd murdered a man,' I said.

'What!' said Craft, with keen attention. 'Murder! Now, that's different. Tell me about that.'

So I related this story also and when I finished he shook his head again, but this time at me, in mock reproach. 'Geoff, Geoff,' he said, 'you said murder. But this might have been self-defence, or in protection of another, or the result of a blow struck in a friendly sparring-match, or anything at all — even assuming that he had anything to do with it. Forget it! Why,' he added, 'it almost makes Farmingham more interesting, the thought that he may have killed a man. It's all in keeping.'

' Unless it was done in a cowardly way, from some base motive.'

Craft looked at me. 'You know, Geoff,' he said, 'I'm puzzled. I don't think you're the man to be obstinately prejudiced against this chap merely because a relative, many years ago, told you that he was a nuisance on a plantation, or whipped a native, or was born among the poor whites, or might have killed some unknown man back of beyond ages ago. Is there anything else on your mind?'

'I don't really know,' I said reluctantly. It's not easy to dig up the roots of our dislikes. When they're old they go so deep down you can never be sure just where they begin. I caught him once making up to Haynor's wife.'

'Did you though!' he said. 'Now, that's more serious than anything you've told me. It's odd, too, because I've suspected Farmingham, at one time or another, of almost everything except philandering with women. I've never heard even a rumour of anything of that kind. What were they doing?'

'Holding hands,' I said, abjectly.

He roared with laughter . 'You're incorrigible,' he said. 'Life in Surrey among the toast and teacups is demoralizing you. Was there anything more? Did it lead to any scandal?.'

'Not that I know,' I said. 'Haynor was killed soon afterwards.'

'How?'

'By a native with a grievance, they seemed to think. The matter was never cleared up.'

'What happened to his wife?'

'I've never heard,' I said. 'I didn't know her at all well and I've lost sight of her these many years. I haven't a notion where she is or if she's still alive.'

'Well,' he said, 'I can't see Farmingham in a guilty romance. He's physically attractive to women, I should think, but he has the dullest wife I've ever met and seems devoted to her. You'll meet her if you go to Mallerton. Their life appears to be a model of conjugal respectability, if not exactly bliss.'

We arrived back in court just in time to hear the action withdrawn by agreement between the parties, Farmingham to receive an apology, costs and £5000 in damages. 'A very proper arrangement,' remarked the judge. Farmingham received loud applause from the people in court but did not unbend his stern demeanour to acknowledge it.

Craft and I walked westward together and as we reached the Haymarket saw the newspaper-vans delivering new posters to the sellers. 'Colonel Jack wins his case,' they said in big letters, and the people crowded round to buy a paper.

Craft chuckled. 'Well, my guess is that this has put his foot firmly on the ladder,' he said. 'Heaven only knows how high Colonel Jack may climb now. There's no public hero like the man who has defended his honour single-handed against great odds. The reporters must be licking their lips and their pencils. This is the stuff that great careers are made of. This is the way Napoleons are made, on the battlefields and in the stock-markets. Such men can never again lose a glamour thus acquired, not even if they want to, not even if they ruin themselves and innumerable others. We have witnessed the birth of a legend, the legend of good old Colonel Jack. Lord, what fools these mortals be!'

In high good humour he waved to me and went off to that abode of the gods, the Olympians Club in St. James's.

4

CRAFT was right: from the moment of this celebrated case Farmingham's popular fame swelled like an inflating balloon. The next morning's papers were full of him. The bald reports of the case clearly snowed how he had first outpointed and then knocked out his witness, and in adjoining columns the paragraphists underlined his skill and the surprise this had caused to experienced counsel. Pictures showed something we had not seen: Farmingham raising his hat to the applause of people in the street outside the court. For the first time the public saw gallant Colonel Jack, his formidable stature and his strong features. Nothing lacked that might implant a suggestive idea in simple minds. His unsmiling lips were grimly clamped and a forelock of his thick, greying hair strayed downwards over his forehead.

He leaped in an instant from a name vaguely familiar to some to a national figure whom all thought they knew and should admire, for there can hardly have been a man or woman, youth or girl, in the island who from this day on did not know Colonel Jack, and most of them could have answered more questions about him than about Shakespeare. The success which attends success beat at his door. The very journal which had slandered him published, on top of its apology, a short leading article in praise of his conduct of the case and said humorously that the real culprit in the matter was the printer's devil, whom all the wit of man could not quite vanish from newspaper offices. Between one day and the next huge funds flowed into Farmingham's account at the bank of public credit.

During the next two or three years I met him fairly frequently in casual ways, that is, in clubs, at parties and receptions, and at the dinner-tables of mutual acquaintances. He was always affable to me, although in the manner of one who at any moment might tell me to stand at attention or run an errand, but that was his way with all and I did not resent it. He was clearly growing in self-esteem and knew his worth, and it was not to be denied that he had substantial grounds to count himself among the elect. Respect, and sometimes adulation, surrounded him and I was not a great way behind others, perhaps, in yielding to an admiration which the power of his personality and his self-mastery demanded; my old distrust grew fainter as I watched his prowess and the spell he exercised over his fellow men. He did not for a long time repeat his earlier, rather precipitate invitation to me to visit him and as he was now beyond any need to 'make contacts' I was not surprised. It came to be generally understood that he would take an early opportunity to stand for Parliament, and that the Opposition party thought him a very useful recruit.

Granger Craft and I still discussed him on occasion, but as a standing joke, and one against me. It was understood that, while Farmingham was no Bayard, I had been foolishly sceptical about him, on loose assumptions and threadbare premises, and should feel small in the light of Colonel Jack's triumphant progress. Thus Craft would use a tone of light mockery while I would pretend an obstinate prejudice which he knew now to be forced.

'Well, I hear Farmingham may be in the next government,' he said once.

'Heaven forbid,' I said responsively.

'Why, what's wrong with that?' he said. 'He's only a murderer, rogue, flogger, swindler and adulterer.'

'And a bogus colonel,' I said at random.

'Ah, now I'll take you up on that,' he said quickly. 'Whatever else he is or isn't, I'll wager he's too clever to risk an easy exposure in such a detail as that.'

'He can't possibly be a colonel.'

'Well, I'll lay you a level pound. I know my man. Why don't you find out? You could.'

'I suppose I could,' I said.

And with a little difficulty I did. It was true: once, in wartime, Farmingham had held the rank of colonel in some obscure home defence office in Cape Town for a few months. It was not the kind of colonelcy most men would continue to vaunt, but he was entitled to it, and I paid Craft the pound like a man still unconvinced. 'I told you so, Geoff,' he said with great glee. 'You *must* brush up your Farmingham. You are unjust to a great and good man.'

Then we were both invited to Mallerton, one evening when we met Farmingham at a rather boisterous dinner of one of the City livery companies. Craft was insistent that I should go, and I was curious enough to want to, so he drove me down one Friday evening to Farmingham's house, a late Victorian mansion a few miles from Mallerton and his factory. Colonel Jack had told us to expect 'a stag party except for my wife, who goes to bed early'.

This lady I met with questions in my mind and studied with interest as she sat at the table's end. She was, I judged, in the late forties, and shared the common misfortune of such men's wives, that she seemed much older than he though she was not. I could not recall her features, having had so short a glimpse of them so long ago, but soon made up my mind that she was the same woman, and had not deserted her Mr. Farmingham. She was heavy and stolid and said little, but her manner towards him betrayed the same nervous fear, lest she fail to please, which I remembered on the tennis-court many years before. Now, she was clearly more overwhelmed by him than then; her life, I judged, was a long and laboured effort to keep up with and be worthy of this big, famous and masterful husband. In her secret soul she may still have wondered how she had ever caught him.

He behaved towards her with impressive courtesy, slightly overdrawn, as if he were conscious of an audience, and a heavy affection. When she rose he sprang to open the door for her and, bending over her as she went out, he said, ' Shall we join you, my dear, or are you tired?' 'No, you men stay comfortably here,' she said, with her propitiatory smile. 'I shall go to bed, dear. I *am* rather tired.' I guessed, from his earlier hint, that this might be the usual procedure.

Of us men, I reflected as we settled round the decanter, I, though I was now less insignificant an official than formerly, was the least important. In my private estimation nobody could have been of less consequence than my neighbour, **Barnard**

Poop, who was by general acceptance a Canadian, though I did not account him one by birth; his daily writings seemed to me offensively trivial and illiterate, but I knew that publicity-seekers held him in high regard, and that he shared their opinion.

Next to Farmingham, on either hand, sat Tom Manspring and Carlton Hawes, who showed for each other that warm and demonstrative liking which one expects in two men, both of whom, if the people vote as they hope, will have a fairly equal claim to be the next Prime Minister or the next but one. Between them and Craft, on the one side, and myself, on the other, came two giants of commerce and industry. They were Sir Egbert Plattenfield, of the great picture-theatre concern, and Jerry Limerick of Commonwealth Oil; his peerage was too recent, and his backslapping good-fellowship too well known, for any to speak to him (or of him) other than as Jerry. As I feared, Poop asked me at the start: 'What's your first name?' and I owned to Geoffrey.

It was, I saw, a political party, and an Opposition one, and I made a note to ask Craft later what he thought I was doing in this galley.

Meanwhile I prepared to take my practised part in the table round. This is, to answer questions by other questions and thus to learn a little and to husband my own thoughts; I find it a rewarding method. I realized, from this carefully chosen company, that Farmingham stood a good deal better in the political running than I had surmised, and that Craft's inclusion of him in the next government was a serious remark, not a light one.

The conversation was what it seems always to have been in my lifetime, probably was before I was born, and may well be after my time. That is to say, it turned on Prussians and Russians; if table-talk were kept in a drawer and brought out with the knives and forks, I think the same set of allusions to these subjects might do duty at almost any time between 1850 and 1950, or even earlier and possibly later. I saw that Farmingham and the other men were well ahead of what is called public opinion, as it then was, and that they foresaw a turn of the tide winch might lead to political fortune. Farmingham was especially forceful in his remarks about the Germans.

'In my opinion,' he said, 'the government will have to change its policy or be turned out. It's hoodwinking the public with all these talks and conferences. There's only one way of handling the Germans and that is to stop them now, before it's too late. On that issue, in my judgment, the government must either open its eyes soon, or be turned out, or it will get us into another war. And the sands are running out. That was a great speech of yours on Tuesday, Tom.'

The House didn't seem to think so,' said Manspring.

'They'll come round when they feel the country getting anxious, Tom,' said Carlton Hawes. 'We want a thumping good by-election victory. That would start the ball rolling.'

'You know, it's very difficult to wake the country up, Colonel Jack,' said Poop (it was he who had started 'Colonel Jack' and he seemed to like to keep the memory of his authorship bright). 'You'd be amazed at the letters I get if ever I write anything about German rearmament. The people want to be told that there won't be any trouble.'

'That'll pass, Barney,' said Farmingham, 'it's only a phase. It's up to us to lead public opinion in the right direction.'

'Did you get that report I sent you from my Berlin office, Jack?' asked Jerry.

'Yes, it's on my desk now,' said Farmingham. 'It's very interesting. It confirms all my information, and more.'

'What's that, Jack?' said Carlton Hawes.

'I asked Jerry to get his people in Berlin to check my private advices about troops and armaments, and especially aircraft,' saidFarmingham. 'I'm going to give it to you two to read during the week-end. It's frightening. When you've read it you'll want to move a vote of censure without delay.'

'I don't think the moment has quite come for that yet,' said the other future Prime Minister judicially. 'But from now on we must be ready to seize any opportunity. What a nuisance these Germans are.'

'I mean, dey are unteachable,' said Sir Egbert, translating precisely from the language he had grown up with.

'The fact is.' said Farmingham, in the tone of the chairman of the bench, 'they've got militarism in their blood. They like being dragooned and ordered about. What's worse, they've got a streak of brutality in them.'

I had often heard this phrase before, but was impressed to hear it from Farmingham. He clearly disapproved of violent methods in international affairs, I reflected, and I wondered if he had changed his views about sugar-cutters. The conversation was the replica of many I had listened to; if I had a somewhat sardonic feeling about it this was not because I thought these men were greatly wrong in their judgment, but because they talked in such hackneyed phrases and seemed to look at the matter too much through the lens of politics. I observed that Farmingham was now a man who prided himself on his advisers and correspondents and 'information' and spoke as if he were already in charge of great national affairs, not merely ambitious to be so placed.

His rather trite words received weighty nods of approval and he continued them in even more solemn tone, as if he began a new chapter of the book of Revelations. He would make a great political orator, I saw.

'You can't afford to have a mad dog among the nations,' he said. 'If law and order between the peoples are to collapse, Our Civilization will collapse.' (I added these capitals, feeling that at the words we ought all to rise, face the west and salaam.) 'You can't have a social order without judges and policemen, to keep the rogues and burglars down. We had the chance to play the policeman, and stop this trouble in time, and we've thrown it away. Aren't I right, Geoffrey? You've been in Germany.'

I was surprised that he knew this, and thought Craft might have mentioned it.

'Oh, it was a long time ago and I can't claim to know Germany or the Germans very well,' I said. 'But nobody from my Ministry would ever dispute the need for judges and policemen. Sir Egbert is a greater authority. What does he think?'

Sir Egbert spread protesting hands of modesty. 'Ach, you must not citate me,' he said. 'I am a business man, I have not a political mind. But there can be no doubt of the danger. If we do not rearm quickly and act soon we will have once more war.'

'Hear, hear, Sir Egg,' said Poop ('Sir Egg, as his friends always call him,' I reflected). 'I only wish I could write what I know and feel in my paper. But Camerair has my editor in his pocket; he won't let me get on to politics, as he calls it.'

'These backstage influences in the Press are very dangerous,' said Farmingham.

'You're telling me,' inevitably answered Poop.

'The Press has a very heavy responsibility for our situation,' said Manspring gravely, 'but of course Camerair has great difficulties. We mustn't be unfair to him. He must look at the matter from all sides. It isn't as simple as plain ABC. If I were in his place I should be very much worried about doing anything in the matter of Germany which would let the Communists into Europe.'

'You're perfectly right there, Tom,' said Carlton Hawes, quickly, like a man who thought he had an equal right to picture himself in Camerair's place. 'I was just going to say that.'

The decanter made good time round the table and the conversation showed familiar signs of taking a slight list to port. Faces became solemn, words grew weightier. We were big men handling big affairs of state. We dismissed governments and formed new ones, drew up great plans of arms-manufacture and executed them, moved armies about like chessmen and changed frontiers at our will.

At any rate, they did. I had an impulse to laugh and the feeling that we were not adult men at all, but overgrown schoolboys playing at grown-ups. I wondered at how many tables in England, at how many more in other lands, similar men, well dined and wined, did the same. I reminded myself, however, that these men *would* in fact handle such affairs and do such things. They and their like abroad were the coming generation in public life. For better or worse, the future of nations was being shaped at a thousand tables such as this, at the head of which Jan Farmingham sat and said, 'Well, in dealings between nations I believe in keeping the whip hand when you have it. Lose it and you get whipped yourself. There's no third choice and we're being put in the position of he who will get whipped.'

'But, Jack, don't you think there will haf once to be an international body with the whip hand,' said Sir Egg, 'a super-national policeman, to keep the lawbreakers in order? We cannot permanently cling to old ideas of national sofereignty.'

'No, I think that's bunkum,' said Farmingham. 'If we're going to lie down and surrender we might as well do so now to Germany and not wait for some shady international company to be promoted, and hand over our keys to it. We can control our *own* policemen — that's what Geoffrey Browne's department is for. But who's to control that super-policeman, once he's been given the whip hand? Oh no. Not for me, thank you. We must be our own policeman.'

I was a little surprised, and thought that Craft was right: the very faults one suspected in Farmingham might make the man an able champion of the national interest. I wondered idly how far the separation of private character and public life could be carried, and recalled that posterity seemed only to remember success, achieved at no matter what cost, and forgot or affectionately discounted far worse things, in its heroes, than any I had ever suspected Farmingham of. He now went up a further rung in my opinion, for I disliked Sir Egg's subtle propaganda for a world to be run by (I felt sure) a committee of financiers completely ruthless and unscrupulous; its members, I thought, would all be men just like Sir Egg and a universe ruled by such looked to me like Dante's vision of hell come to earth. It was not only the port which warmed my feeling for Farmingham at this moment.

That was an intensely interesting week-end for me. For the first time I was able to see Farmingham more as others saw him, and less in the light of an old prejudice, and I now realized how attractive a figure he must generally appear. His wife made occasional appearances, like the female figure in a weather clock, and was usually ushered back with courtly devotion, but if we did not see much of her Farmingham somehow contrived to make this little go a long way in creating the impression of a tranquilly happy marriage, deeply rooted in a past of achievement shared and in a future brightened by mutual ambition for two good-looking sons, now approaching university age, whom we saw in silver-framed photographs.

One morning he took us all riding (save Sir Egg) and we found that the big man was an excellent horseman. That evening he told us to be.ready for church the next morning and made it plain that he expected us to go. The vicar met him with the smiling respect due to a man who clearly was always good for repairs to the organ. Jan Farmingham and his wife, in their front pew, lifting their voices in praise of the Lord, obviously felt that they stood firmly in the shoes of bygone lords of the manor and that these fitted without pinching anywhere.

By the time I came to leave I felt that the legend of Colonel Jack might be growing into the truth, and be no longer a legend. Home, family, a contented hearth, conjugal devotion, church-going: these, added to much else, formed a most solid base and a becoming background to his massive figure. Granger Craft and I both noticed that Manspring and Hawes treated him with much respect, and judged that, though they might privately think him crude and raw, they placed much value on his public appeal. "We felt small doubt, from their manner towards him, that he already sat in their shadow cabinet, though in what seat, we could not guess.

On Monday morning he rose as we entered the breakfast-room and took leave, explaining that he had to go to the City very early, and saying that he had given orders for horses to be saddled if we wanted to ride. We were in no such great haste and went for a canter before starting for London. As we picked our riding-crops from a number lying on a table in the hall, I fingered one of unusual appearance. It had a short, ringed metal grip and a long, loose thong. While I dangled it, Craft noticed it and said, 'Hallo, that's a sjambok. Murderous things they can be.'

'Oh, is that what it is?' I said. I've never handled one.' I gave a little flick with it and suddenly felt the snakelike wickedness that leaped into the thong. 'Gosh,' I said, and dimly saw a native's red-streaked back. 'I wonder if this is the one I saw Farmingham use all those years ago.'

'Why not?' said Craft. 'It looks like a souvenir from old times.'

An hour later, invigorated by the air and the ride and feeling all the more ready for a new week's work, we were on our way to London. I remembered what I wanted to ask Craft.

'Why do you think I was invited to this very partisan party, Granger?' I said. 'If the Chief were to hear of it he might wonder why I hadn't mentioned it to him. But I didn't expect these big guns.'

'I don't know,' said Craft. 'Perhaps you're the only senior man in the Home Office Farmingham happens to know and he wanted to have a closer look at you. After all, *in* certain circumstances, I suppose he might be your Chief one of these days, Geoff. If they get in they're clearly going to find **a** place for him. I expect they've been sharing out Cabinet seats in anticipation and Colonel Jack already feels himself Home Secretary. I *thought* there was a subtle change in him this time. Did you notice that the City is waning in his mind, and the state of the world growing larger in it? Geoff, I bet you that's it. He's begun to run England!'

5

FARMINGHAM did not need to wait for a general election before he could enter Parliament. When I read, some months later, that the sitting member for Mallerton, a safe seat held by Farmingham's party, had died suddenly I telephoned Craft and arranged to lunch with him. We had not discussed Colonel Jack for some time, and it was now tacitly accepted that I had been rather foolish about him, but I felt this event gave me a chance to renew my former contention that Farmingham's success was largely due to almost miraculous luck.

It is not so easy, even for a coming man, to get into Parliament, and until he has crossed that rubicon all his further ambitions are held in check. At a general election personal and local popularity often lose their value, being lost in the clash of some greater controversy, with the opposing arguments by which the electors identify the candidates. At Mallerton, as Barnard Poop wrote in announcing that Farmingham would stand for the vacant seat, Colonel Jack was unlikely even to be opposed. That brought the prospect of his appearance at one of the Ministries much nearer, and I was sufficiently concerned in the matter to **want** to hear what Craft now thought about it.

'You must admit,' I said when we met, *that the man has the **most** amazing luck. Mallerton has fallen into his hands like a ripe plum, just when he needs it. You can't say that he has made his own good fortune this time.'

'No,' he said, 'but he would have done. He's absolutely determined to get into politics and if obstacles don't remove themselves he would find a way to remove them. Sooner or later, I'm sure, he would have fixed it up that someone with a safe seat should retire to let him in, and if money could do it he would have been ready to pay. I don't think it makes any difference.'

'But it's so much a matter of time, of fortune at the tide,' I said. 'A year from now it might be impossible to imagine Farmingham in office. He has to strike while the iron of his popularity is hot. It only needs another scandal about one of his companies to upset the boat. You know how fickle the public affections are. Think of Topleigh.'

'But Farmingham isn't an exposed rogue,' he said. 'He's a man whose honesty and honour have been vindicated in a court of law, which is just the opposite. He won't run any risks of that kind now.'

'Topleigh did.'

'Topleigh never held office, he was just a Member. Of course,' he added thoughtfully, 'there is possibly one man who could ruin Farmingham.'

'Who?'

'That missing shareholder. He was known as a hired man and tout about the City, who could be bought cheaply for any dirty work. That's why he may have acted for others than Farmingham or on his own account. If Farmingham *did* employ him for that job, and if he's still alive, he holds a most dangerous secret. But in that case I'm absolutely certain he hasn't a cheque, or a single line in writing, or anything but his own worthless word for it. That is why he will continue to lie low. If Colonel Jack did step aside from the strait and narrow path on that occasion, he can sleep tranquilly now, I think. I shouldn't care to approach Farmingham as a blackmailer unless I met him in a public street and could tell him that I had photographic evidence stored in a safe place. But in this case there certainly isn't any such evidence. Farmingham isn't the man to employ tools unless he has a sure hold on them afterwards. Of course, the best safeguard against an accomplice with a grievance is that he can't give you away without putting himself in the dock too.'

'I see you still think Farmingham did rig those shares.'

'I told you so at the time, but I think he's a different man today. I wonder how many millionaires would care to have all the details of their early deals examined. Millions are like the general's medals, you know; once you have the first row the rest come quickly and easily. But that first row is hard to get. It's wonderful how honest some men become when they have the hard part of the climb behind them and sit in judgment on others. That was Topleigh's bad luck; they should have made him Chancellor of the Exchequer. He would have been merciless with sharpers.'

'I can't believe you are quite right about that. Once a rogue always a rogue, and if you put a rogue in a place where he has power, he'll misuse it for his own ends.'

'You reckon without the wrongdoer's yearning to be righteous — or at any rate, to be held so by all men. If you want your purse to be safe, put a pickpocket to guard it, call him Warden of the Purse, and give him a banquet at the Guildhall. He will feel a zest in his office beyond any that a man could experience who never knew the temptation to steal. If Farmingham did despoil the public on that occasion, he'd make a marvellous Solicitor-General.. He would be like the social climber who has found a way into the Royal enclosure at Ascot; he would be more eager than any to keep the riff-raff out, and he would know what loopholes to close.'

'I see what you mean but you carry the argument too far.

According to you, the prisons should be searched for good ministers.'

'On the contrary, the search should be strictly limited to men who have been clever enough not to go to prison. That's the whole point. They must be outwardly blameless. But how many leading men are inwardly so?'

'Not very many, you appear to think.'

'Probably the majority. But fewer than you seem to believe. And at the end, blame is mine saith the Lord.'

'I should hate to be an accountant. It must be horrible to have no illusions.'

'There's no room for any in figures. Mathematics is an exact science; they can never be right or wrong, but only correct or incorrect. Mathematically, I should not hesitate to sign Farmingham's balance-sheet. It's very favourable. If there is anything wrong in it he has contrived to conceal it in transactions known only to himself and his god.'

'And his god is, you think, his ambition?'

'Do you still mistrust that fearless and irreproachable man, Geoft?' he said mockingly.

'Not now, I think, until I talk to you about him,' I said. 'I never knew a man speak so ill of another in speaking well of him. I believe that he might become a valuable force in our affairs until I listen to your praise of him, when I feel that the devil with his two horns may be on the way to becoming Prime Minister.'

'The odd thing,' he said, 'is that thousands of other people probably talk about him in just the same way and that his popularity and his prospects become better and better. It's a case of irresistible force overcoming the insensible object.'

'What insensible object?'

'The inert and plastic thing we call public opinion,' he said, moulded by such as Barnard Poop, God help us.'

The by-election at Mallerton (like everything else in Colonel

Jack's career, I reflected) was eventful and sensational from the start.

The seat was so safe that his occupation of it might well have received as little public attention as the sight of a man going to his club. But it was Farmingham's first chance to make a spectacular entrance in the drama of politics, and he took it.

First he introduced himself to the electors as the candidate of his party at a meeting in Mallerton Town Hall. From curiosity Craft and I drove down to it, and from a glimpse of Barnard Poop, drinking beer in the lounge-bar of the King's Head with several other writers, we saw that Fleet Street had received ample warning of the event. The Town Hall was crowded and an overflow meeting in the square heard the speech from loud-speakers on the balcony.

There were two reasons for this exceptional public interest. First, Colonel Jack's renown was enough to fill any hall, and this was his first big appearance on a political platform. All were anxious to see him. Second, the permanent European crisis of this century was just exploding at one of its local detonation points, so that the newspaper posters were proclaiming 'A Crisis' and the people accordingly thought that there was a particular one.

Had the moment been chosen by supernatural powers it could not have been better selected for Colonel Jack to offer himself as the man, or one of the men, who would save the country. Even Granger Craft agreed with me that luck ran with him on his way. An election in which no second candidate appears is normally a dull affair, but on this occasion the government, most vulnerable to attack, took the place of this absent adversary and Colonel Jack flogged it unmercifully.

We saw that he had been wise, or lucky, enough to choose a chairman who, after announcing that he would only say a few words, said a few only and sat down leaving the limelight to Farmingham. He had not spoken long when I decided, from the feeling of the audience, that he was taking exactly the right line, not only for that evening and for Mallerton, but for the morrow's great daily newspapers. He was, at that time, just a little ahead of what appeared to be the general feeling, if it could be judged from most of these journals and their leading articles, which still harped on the wanton mischief of ' war talk' and published letters from their readers applauding these sentiments.

Farmingham's text was: 'We must be prepared. We must re-arm. This thing has gone far enough. We must stop the rot. Democracy and law among the nations are in danger. Civilization must be saved. We owe a debt to the gallant dead.' The applause began early and grew as he went along and soon he played the part of a massive cheer leader, who knew just what to say and when to pause for the cheers to break out again and carry him on.

The phrases he used were the worn veterans of a hundred years of politics, or possibly of a thousand, I do not know, but he paraded them as if they were fresh and shining guardsmen and his hearers found them delightful. For that matter, they were true and apt enough, and I rebuked myself for an irritable displeasure I felt in listening to the loud applause. They were such obvious things, so tritely said. However, they had made enough ministers and reputations in the past and, like good soldiers, would no doubt do their duty more than once again. It was plain that his hearers thought they needed saying and when he wound up with a vociferous demand for the government's resignation the plaudits were enthusiastic.

We saw Barnard Poop and his colleagues hurrying towards telephone booths and agreed with each other, as we drove back to London, that the speech would prove to be of great political importance. It took the lid from something which had been simmering beneath the surface, and its reception was in the nature of a clear warning to the government. Farmingham had done more than present himself as a candidate in an insignificant by-election. He had publicly offered himself as a member of any new government; if policy were changed, by this one or the next, his name would appear on the chart at the point where the course was ehered. I wondered whether Manspring and Hawes had wanted him to steal so much of the thunder I thought they had in store. Whether they wished it or not, they had been forestalled.

The next morning's newspapers, and the letters which followed, confirmed our opinion. At Mallerton, Farmingham, warmed by success, began to drive round outlying villages and repeat it. He wanted, he said, to get to know his constituents. He did not believe in the sleeping or absentee Member. He rode on a rising wave of popular approval.

Then a cloud appeared in Farmingham's sky, so small that at first it hardly seemed one. A second candidate unexpectedly arrived at the Town Hall, with his backers and his deposit money. He was publicly unknown outside Mallerton, where he was a building contractor and a councillor. This Smithson stood as an Independent candidate. From brief allusions, which appeared to be good-natured, at the tail ends of Barnard Poop's and others' reports, the newspaper-reader may have gathered that he was a crank. I fancy that it is not hard to suggest this about a man who stands in an election with small hope of success (Smithson clearly had hardly any hope at all against such a figure) and perhaps the reporters did not much underestimate the general opinion.

Smithson appeared, from these scanty references, which subtly suggested that he was too unimportant to be taken seriously, to be without any interest in the great matters which Farmingham invoked to rouse the enthusiasm of the electors. Smithson never mentioned the crisis in Europe. He confined himself strictly to home affairs, and largely to those of Mallerton. He seemed to have bees in his bonnet; he went a lonely way, tilting at windmills. His circulars and posters asked people to vote for such vague things as 'honesty in public life', 'clean local government', 'company-law reform' and, more specifically, 'a Mallerton man for Mallerton'.

Only gradually did it dawn on me, and I suppose on a few other newspaper-readers, that Smithson was standing solely as an anti-Farmingham candidate. His central conviction was that Farmingham was not fit to represent Mallerton. When that suspicion broke on me I felt enough interest in the matter to go down to Mallerton and look round. By listening to some and talking to others I soon learned what was locally well known, though not nationally.

Smithson was a poor man. His financial straits were largely due to losses in Farmingham's company; he was one of the sufferers from the misleading advertisement and there were many more in Mallerton, where Farmingham's name had exercised an especial appeal for the small investor. Some of these people were deeply dissatisfied with Colonel Jack's famous victory in the libel action and had quietly banded themselves together to pit themselves against him, and express their opinion of him, in this way. They were helping Smithson with the cost of his committee-room, an empty shop rented for a few weeks, and of his printing bills.

There was a second aspect of the business. Farmingham had been for several years Mayor of Mallerton, and Smithson had also a grievance about the award of contracts for the building of a new power-station which served the factory-township a mile away. In this matter suggestions of bribery and corruption were being freely made.

I made a friendly call on the Town Clerk and through him met two or three local notabilities. I did not need to express any interest in the election, for all discussed it, and I found that the feud was understood by everybody and was being talked about with keen enjoyment. I also met a fairly general opinion that no harm would be done by Smithson's campaign, for at the least it might put a check to practices which many suspected. It seemed to me, after this, that, although Smithson clearly could not win, he would poll more votes than anyone outside Mallerton anticipated and that the implicit challenge to Colonel Jack's reputation would gradually make itself clear. I wondered if his sins, supposing that he had committed any, were beginning to seek out their master.

Before returning to London I went to one of Smithson's meetings to see what he was like. I saw a small, elderly man of frail physique, who seemed nervous, but was tenacious in his purpose and skilful in his argument. He plainly knew what he had to avoid: libel. He spoke strongly but prudently, well aware that his hearers would understand his allusions, about the need for having men of unimpeachable character in Parliament; for sharper supervision over tender-and-contract methods in local affairs; and for protecting investors against certain loopholes in company law.

'My friends,' he said, 'I know nothing of Germany and Europe and foreign affairs. Let us leave them to those who understand them. I stand as an independent candidate concerned only with the need for reform in a few domestic things which affect our daily life. There are enough men in Parliament to represent the big parties and deal with foreign disasters. There is none to represent the small business man and small investor. It won't do them any harm to have one man at Westminster who hasn't been elected on a party ticket and who has been sent there specifically as a watchdog over company frauds or municipal corruption. These are important things in our own country. I do not pretend to know the rights or wrongs of international politics, but if there is to be war the home fires will have to be kept burning and I am for a clean hearth. Why should we neglect these evils at home because there is one more crisis in Europe? If there is to be war, we shall be told we are fighting for certain "things" and against other evil "things". But the good "things" need to be fought for in peace, and I am fighting for them. I was born in Mallerton and have lived here all my life. I am not a rich man, but if I am a poor one some of you may know that it isn't my fault. I mean, of course, that it isn't because I haven't worked hard enough.' And when a man has worked hard he ought to be protected by the law against fraudulent practices, either in the great markets or round the parish pump. I propose certain definite reforms in these important matters and you will find them in my programme. . . .'

There were approving nods and fairly cordial applause from a comfortably filled room. I came away realizing that Farmingham's spell did not bind all men in Mallerton. A few quiet people kept their opinions under control and were not convinced by what they held to be a public whitewashing.

Smithson's speeches were so little mentioned in the great newspapers that he seemed nationally almost a joke. Nevertheless, there was some time to go and I foresaw that as polling-day approached, and special correspondents were sent to the scene of Colonel Jack's election, and reports grew longer, something of all this would inevitably seep into the mind of the larger public outside Mallerton. The first sign of that came when one of the great newspapers, in mentioning that 'Mr. Smithson stands among other things for reforms in company law,' added, [1]It is understood that he suffered heavy losses in the Mallerton Investments affair some years ago.'

A few days later I had cause to reflect that I was a bad judge of men, if my judgment of Farmingham were the test, because he took me completely by surprise, when Granger Craft and I ran into him at the club which we all used, by bringing up the matter of Smithson's candidature. I had assumed that, knowing the strength of his position, he would ignore or belittle it, or even profess to be unaware of its implications. It could not, I knew, do him much harm at this stage. I remembered his impressive air of calm and conscious rectitude during the lawsuit. His self-control then had been one of his most powerful weapons. With that great victory behind him, and far behind him, I expected him to be even surer in his use of it.

Instead of that he used angry and menacing words about Smithson and the veins in his neck swelled as he abused the man and threatened what he would do to him. There was no need for his expostulations, for at this time the meaning of Smithson's candidature had not travelled beyond Mallerton. He could not guess that I knew as much of it as I did, and I saw that Craft was ignorant of it. He gave his inner mind away, which was unlike Farmingham as I had come to think of him.

'I suppose you've heard that I have an opponent at Mallerton,' he said, in so ugly a tone that Craft looked up attentively. We both said yes, we had heard that.

'A little rat,' he said. 'He's a builder or something. Calls himself an independent.'

'Isn't he a sort of freak candidate?' asked Craft. 'A holy roller, or the world-is-flat faddist, or something?'

'Oh, he's as mad as a hatter,' said Farmingham. 'But he's a rogue with it. He's attacking me personally. He's going all round Mallerton and raking up that slander about Mallerton Investments. Saying I'm not a fit person to sit in Parliament. He needs his rotten little neck wrung.'

'He must be a foolhardy sort of chap if he's doing that,' I said. 'Is he a man of means? Could he stand a libel action?'

'He hasn't got two pennies to rub together,' said Farmingham with red-faced contempt. 'I don't know if he has somebody behind him. If he has I'll soon find out who it is. He'll find he's taken on the wrong man.'

'You say he is attacking you personally?' said Craft curiously.

'He's one of those little runts who thinks he's very clever,' said Farmingham. 'He doesn't use my name. He works by innuendo. He thinks that if he throws enough mud some of it will stick. It's a scandal that such a man should be able to put up for Parliament.

He wouldn't be able to find a party to back him. He's careful in what he says. He's evidently a little local cleversticks and thinks he knows the law. He'll find I know more about it.'

'Why not challenge him to a public debate?' I said.

'What, and make it look as if I take him seriously?' said Farmingham angrily. 'He'd like that. No, I'm not worried. He'll slip up if I leave him alone. I've got men watching every word he says at his meetings. Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself. Let him say one false word and I'll break him. Why,' he added, as if this were a thing awful beyond description, I've never even seen him!'

'Well, what do you think of that?' I said to Craft as we left the club together. 'I've never been so surprised. I thought Colonel Jack was far beyond getting excited about such small matters. It can't possibly affect his chances. Why on earth is he in such a state?'

'You do not understand the man, Geoff,' said Craft. 'He's not worrying about the election. He's a good man wronged. He's virtuously indignant about a slur on his rectitude. It has been proclaimed in a court of law. He has publicly proved himself above reproach. It maddens him that anyone should attack his character. To him Smithson is a criminal, and the fact that it may be difficult to bring the man to book infuriates him.'

'But suppose he knows in his heart that Smithson is right, and that he himself *is* a swindler?' I said.

'That would make him all the more indignant,' said Craft. 'That isn't the point. The point is that he has been publicly pronounced an honest and honourable man. He cannot stand the thought, now that he has achieved so much, and in future may never have any cause to be other than honest, that anybody should be allowed to slander him. And remember, mathematically it *is* slander, but apparently too subtle for him to do much about it. How furious he was! He'd like to flog Smithson. I wonder if his end will be apoplexy. Did you notice the flushed face and bulging veins? God moves in a mysterious way.'

Then I told him about my visit to Mallerton, what I had learned there, and my impression of Smithson.

'That's most interesting,' he said, with his usual air of happy entertainment. 'There are all sorts of possibilities, evidently. We might see an incident yet, as the election warms up. Now, I wonder what the effect on Farmingham's future would be if he were to punch Smithson publicly on the nose. It's a fascinating problem. It might finish him. It might make him more popular than ever. All would depend on the circumstances and the way it was done. Can't you imagine the newspaper reports? Take your choice between them. "We fear Colonel Farmingham allowed himself to be carried away; a public display of fisticuffs is not the proper way to enter the British Parliament." Or, "None will take it amiss of Colonel Jack if, on the eve of going to Westminster, he chose an unparliamentary but British way of dealing with an un-British method of electoral campaigning." I wonder what Smithson will do next.'

What Smithson did next, however, was something far beyond our conjectures. Ten days before the vote he disappeared.

6

NOTHING in Farmingham's career, people felt during the next week or two, became him so well as the manner of Smithson's disappearance from it. This occurred one night when he was addressing a 'Pensions for Unmarried Women' meeting in London. He was beginning to enlarge his repertory, presumably in the reflection that the 'Wake Up, England' song, though unfailing in its appeal, was not itself enough for the many political entertainments at which he would be called on to appear, or for the diverse audiences from which he hoped to obtain votes and a following. He clearly did not overlook the importance of the woman's vote, and these enfranchised ladies no doubt found it natural that so fine-looking a man should hold spinsterhood to be a pensionable misfortune.

The reports of this speech, in the next evening's newspapers, were accompanied by the first hints that some anxiety was felt about Mr. Smithson, who had not returned home the previous night. The following morning's editions contained, together with long reports about the Smithson mystery, references to Farmingham's concern for Smithson and his hope that nothing serious had befallen him. 'Colonel Jack Farmingham, to whom I spoke on the telephone, said he was dismayed at the news. He had never met Mr. Smithson personally, but had been looking forward to a good hard electoral fight. "I don't care for uncontested elections," said Colonel Jack, "they're not healthy, and I was glad when I heard about Mr. Smithson's candidature. I am most distressed on Mrs. Smithson's account," he added, "but I am confident that the matter will soon clear itself up. People don't just vanish off the earth nowadays." ' From this moment on, while the newspaper accounts of the affair dwindled from columns to half-columns, and then to paragraphs and odd sentences, and finally ceased, from simple lack of anything to report, allusions continued to be made to Colonel Jack's troubled mind on behalf of his missing opponent. Being in opposition to the government, he was able to add a sharp word about the authorities, saying he wondered if everything possible had been done.

Smithson, however, *had* vanished off the earth. I knew from my professional work that the number of people who disappear without a trace is much larger than is commonly supposed. It is, however, rare, and difficult, for a man so completely to dissolve into nothing when he is in the public eye and when the entire machine of investigation is turned on to his discovery. I could only recall one similar instance: that of Hector Cray ton, a Member of Parliament who had suddenly vanished in London many years before. This case was now recalled by the newspapers, possibly more to find something to say than from any other reason. In both affairs there was the same complete absence of clues, or of any discoverable motive why the man concerned should either wish to hide himself or be spirited away by others.

What the newspapers printed reduced itself, when the padding and the reminiscences about Crayton were removed, to this: that Smithson had spoken at a meeting in a village hall some two miles from Mallerton, and had apparently disappeared somewhere on his homeward way. That is, he was seen going in that direction; whether he had later turned back or aside none could know. It was a dark and rainy night, a fairly lonely road, and he went afoot, as was his habit. His friends at the meeting had noticed nothing unusual in his manner. He was at all times a quiet and reserved man and, they said, would not have shown anything he might have had on his mind, but they had no reason to think there was anything. One or two reporters, intent on making the most of hardly any information, hinted importantly at 'new developments', but none followed. The trail ended where it began. Where a man called Smithson had been, was now a question mark.

I thought a good deal about him. He had seemed a dogged man, if a slightly harassed one. He looked the last one to run away from trouble, if he were in any. True, he was a man with a grievance, and that sometimes causes rational human beings to do strange and unexpected things, especially if the matter has long preyed on their minds. I felt curious enough to send for the police report.

It told me little that the newspapers had not printed, save that it described a call on Mrs. Smithson, who had refused to see the reporters. Although the police themselves offered no opinion, and merely recorded what she had said, I felt that the conversation was reproduced in such a way as to hint at what the police themselves believed: that Smithson had disappeared for his own reasons. Mrs. Smithson said he had gone out in the usual way, saying he would not be late. The bald typewritten words somehow gave me a sudden, vivid picture of Smithson going out, never to return. Had he known that he would never recross that threshold? Had he known what awaited him in the night outside? I read on.

'Was Mr. Smithson worried, to your knowledge?'

'No, not more than usual.'

'He was worried, then?'

'Well, he had business worries, but that was nothing new.'

'Can you tell me what kind of worries?'

'He lost a lot of money several years ago and he hadn't been able to get properly straight since.'

'Do you think he might have had any reason to disappear?'

'Oh no, it wasn't as bad as all that. We are hard up, but he wasn't in money trouble in that way. He just felt he'd been badly treated.'

'Do you know if he had any enemies?'

'Enemies! No, I don't know what enemies he could have.'

'Can you tell me anything at all that might be helpful? Have you noticed anything unusual about him lately?'

'No, I don't think so. Of course, he's been a bit worried about this election. I didn't want him to go into it, but he thought he was doing right.'

'Do you think he may have had some kind of breakdown?'

'I don't know what to think. I know he wouldn't go away and leave me like this. He must be ill, or have had an accident, or something.'

'Well, thank you, ma'am, if there's nothing else you can tell me.'

I'm sorry I'm sure, but I don't know what to think.'

It was clearly a household accustomed to worries. I pictured Mrs. Smithson as an elderly, bewildered body, mystified by and incapable of understanding her husband's concern for company-law reform and honesty in public life. The typewritten pages left her in her little house, confusedly waiting for Smithson to be restored to her, some day, somehow.

During this time I saw Farmingham again in the club. 'This is a queer business about Smithson,' I said, casually.

'It's a shocking thing,' he said gravely, with no trace of his former rancour towards the man. 'It's extraordinary that a human being should be able to disappear so completely, in these times.'

'Well, at any rate, it's put an end to his attacks on you,' I said.

'Oh that,' he said. 'That's a trifle. I don't bear him any malice on that account. You can't hold such things against a man when you don't know whether he's dead or alive. I'm only sorry for his poor wife. You can judge the sort of man he must be from the way he's treated her.'

'Why, do you think he has deliberately gone into hiding for some reason of his own?' I said.

'How should I know?' he said. 'But that's the general talk in Mallerton. He seems to have been up to the neck in money troubles, from all I hear. He may have got wind of a libel action looming against him, too, for that matter. He was evidently the kind of irresponsible man who rushes into things without looking where he's going.'

'Had you issued a writ for libel, then?' I said.

'He may have heard that I had,' he said, without directly answering. 'But what does it matter now? I've nothing personal against him. I only hope that he's wandering about somewhere suffering from loss of memory and will turn up. I hope he hasn't just lost his nerve and run away and left his wife to get on as best she can. They tell me that's the kind of thing he would be likely to do. Think of that poor woman.'

The election was cancelled and when a new one was called Colonel Jack was returned unopposed. His sympathy for Mrs. Smithson was generally remarked and credited to his public account. A little later, Smithson remaining obstinately undiscoverable, a fund was opened for her and Barnard Poop wrote that he believed 'a well-known newcomer to Westminster' was the 'wellwisher' who subscribed a thousand pounds to it.

Few men ever entered the House of Commons with better chances or a happier reputation. I could not forbear to watch the event and secured a seat in the crowded gallery on the day when Colonel Jack, a head taller and much bigger than the sponsors who marched beside him, made his bow to the Speaker. Cheers accompanied him from his own side of the House and a cordial murmur from the other.

He had come a long way from the *dorp* on the edge of the Free State and from the foul shanties of the poor whites and coloured folk, I thought, looking down as, with deliberate self-possession, he took his seat between members who gave him a friendly smile. I reflected that if the story of his earliest days were publicly told now it would greatly increase his popularity with the newspaper-reading masses. 'Jack Farmingham's early struggles — hard days in the colonies — pioneer blood tells — a frontiersman at Westminster': I pictured Barnard Poop happily mixing his colours for such a portrait and wondered that Farmingham had not prompted him to paint one for 'a Sunday feature'.

It occurred to me too that ill fortune for others seemed always to tread in the shadow of Farmingham's good luck. The dead man among the shanties, Haynor and his wife, the ruined shareholders of Mallerton Investments, now Smithson: perhaps, I thought, such things were as inseparable from the career of a powerful man as the track of a heavy vehicle that climbed a difficult ascent.

Anyway, there he was, now near to the seats of the mighty. From the government seats Camerair looked across at the newcomer with interest; from the Opposition front bench Manspring and Carlton Hawes turned and smiled a welcome to him.

7

IN the next year or two the shape of Colonel Jack lost any blurred edges it may still have had in the minds of a doubting few up to the time of his entry into Parliament. It became that of a tower of strength and probity, both in public affairs and in finance. In the City, I knew from Craft, men no longer spoke of him with the ironic smile they kept for the newest comet in their sky; he was a planet of definite dimensions and position. Even the shares of the company concerned in the ancient panic stood now at a fair price, and it was clear that holders who had put them away for ten years would not have suffered much loss, even if they bought them at the peak, while they might reasonably have expected a substantial profit, had they kept them for another ten. Craft's opinion of him was high, though it may have rested on the calculation that Farmingham was now much too wealthy to feel any impulse towards dubious transactions. Colonel Jack was chairman of one huge concern with factories in all the Dominions and in America, and director of a dozen others. His name was a guarantee of prudent management and a fair return. He might well have aspired to become Lord Mayor, but Craft and I agreed in judging that his eye was on larger affairs.

This seemed clear from his activity in Parliament; his business matters were clearly subordinate to it and were arranged to leave him time always to be in his place in the House when some topic was under debate in which he could show his qualities. Such subjects were not few. His legal qualification stood him in good stead; the lawyer's training showed particularly in his choice and phrasing of questions, and at question-time he quickly became a tormentor much disliked on the government bench. He was used by his party as one of its leading speakers in matters of industry, finance, taxation and law, and the House usually became flatteringly full when Colonel Jack was on his feet, Ministers having learned that it was dangerous to miss what he said and Members gathering to see the fun. Though not an orator of the classic mould he was a first-rate House of Commons speaker, who divined from the start that loud or impassioned words defeat themselver there, while the House dearly loves to listen to good conversation. His great size, deep and deliberate tone, and the suggestion of reserves of strength which emanated from him combined to make him an outstanding figure. Craft and I, watching his prowess, wondered what office he privately hoped to reach; we wavered between the Exchequer, Board of Trade and Home Office.

He was so patently a candidate for some such place that, from respect and affection for my own Minister, I took a little care at this time not to see too much of him, and particularly not to put myself needlessly in the way of another invitation to Mallerton. Having reached the senior ranks in my Department I felt this was only proper, and I rarely lunched at the club where Craft and I had often encountered him. One day, however, the unfortunate affair of Decirnus Pound broke into the open and my duties brought me in daily contact with Farmingham for several weeks, during which time I saw him in a new capacity.

Pound, who was affectionately known to all at Westminster as The Decimal Point, because of his small size, was a mere unpaid private secretary to a Cabinet Minister. He could hardly be held to belong to the government at all, save by watchful critics who sought any stick whatever to beat it with. He was too artless to make a successful politician and the prevalent feeling was that he was an innocent scapegoat in the trouble that came on him; if there were any villains in the piece, they suffered no harm.

Most unwisely, he expressed an opinion, in a letter, about certain changes in taxation which he expected from a coming Budget. It was almost certainly a casual allusion and a random guess, for he was not important enough to have information so carefully guarded. The guess was right, however. Large operations on the stock market, just before the Budget, then attracted suspicious attention in the City when its contents became known. Next, by means which were indicated in the subsequent inquiry, the letter came into his Minister's hands. There is no compromise in such matters at Westminster and the hapless Decimal Point found himself the centre of a public investigation.

My Department took its proper part in the preliminary research and I was deputed to attend the meetings of the Select Committee of the House which was set up. Its chairman was an elderly, courteous Minister of long public service and retiring ways. I felt that, if he had been able to guide the inquiry in his own way, he would have softened its severity as far as this could be consistent with the clear needs of the matter; an expression of disapproval, following Pound's resignation from his modest post, might have met the case, and I thought most of the other members of the committee would have agreed.

Farmingham, however, was the chief member appointed by his party and he became the real arbiter. I wondered, as I watched him, whether he was out to make political capital from the affair or whether he genuinely acted from a stern sense of public duty; I knew that Craft would smilingly insist on the second explanation. His face, impassive and severe, and his bearing were those of a judge. He lacked only the robes and wig.

The Chairman was in a difficult position. Whatever his private feeling he could not prevent Farmingham from asking questions. In fact, Pound stood, not before a committee and a chairman, but on trial before a judge. Those pitiless questions, so gravely and quietly asked, began again each time the Chairman paused, and as they were to be contained in the published report of the inquiry, and Pound was his own sole counsel, he was, if anything, in a worse position than a man in a dock.

It was Farmingham who elicited from Pound the information, which an experienced defender might have prevented him from giving, that he was in debt. He was too truthful a man to deny such a thing if asked. Although he warmly added that if the suggestion were that he had made any money from the business it was untrue, the question and answer remained in the record, with others of damaging implication.

'Mr. Pound, did not it occur to you that this information could be turned to financial gain?'

'No, it did not. I see now that I was foolish, but such a possibility simply never occurred to me.'

'You know the very strict rules that exist about giving information?'

'Of course I do. I never dreamed that I was giving any information. I was just guessing about something that kept everybody guessing.'

'Did you not reflect that your guess might be taken as advance information?'

'No, I had none, and I thought everybody knew that I could not have any.'

'But you know now that it was in fact assumed to be authentic information and that some person or persons acted on it?'

'I don't know that at all. I know it is the suggestion, but it seems to me that, if anything of the kind happened, other people must have made the same guess as I did. After all, the newspapers were discussing all possibilities.'

'Did you yourself back your guess?'

'Certainly not. I have never speculated in my life.'

'But this payment of a thousand pounds into your account, about the time in question; how do you explain it?'

'I have already explained that. It was a loan, which I unfortunately needed.'

'Ah, a loan. And made by the person to whom you wrote the letter.'

'He is a close friend and has made me loans before, which I have repaid. It is merely an unlucky coincidence that this loan was made at the time in question.'

I see.

And so on and so on, while the Chairman moved uncomfortably in his seat and some of the others fidgeted gloomily with their pencils, and I regretted that my official duty had entrusted me with the material on which Pound's ordeal was based, for I held him to be honest. I thought that, if a trick had been played, he was the unwitting instrument of it and had been used by others sharper than himself.

Farmingham's personality and incisive mind dominated this inquiry to the end. It was reflected in the published report and the findings of the committee, which were much graver than any expected when it first met, and which led a government, already much harassed by the Opposition and in search of ways to impress public opinion, to take the extreme course of recommending Pound's expulsion from the House, a proceeding to which many men, of both parties, gave reluctant assent who later regretted it when it was past undoing. The strength of Farmingham's will reached into their outer ranks and seemed to have a mesmeric effect upon them.

The expulsion of a Member, by that ancient House, is an. act nearly as poignant as the pronouncement of sentence of death in a court of law. I found myself hardly able to remain and witness it as Pound walked out, after his apologia, leaving himself to the mercy of a vote which, taken in dead silence, contained none. I saw Farmingham listen silently to the debate, and troop out with the others, massive among them, into the lobby, and take his seat again while the tellers brought the result. When it was announced I thought, 'Yet another! His wheels have passed over Pound.'

I pictured Pound, wandering disconsolately towards a shadowed future, as I had once thought of Smithson.

8

POUND passed quickly out of the public memory and was forgotten. Of Farmingham's part in the affair the masses received no particular impression, other than that he had, as usual, been on the side of right and rectitude, as they expected. He had only appeared in the newspaper accounts of it as a member of the committee. The verbatim report of the inquiry was read by few, and still fewer of these had the training to comprehend, from the mere record of questions and answers, the decisive turn he had given it towards Pound's public humiliation.

Yet I had the feeling that this episode may first have awakened in him the appetite for power, in the larger meaning of the word. Obviously he had always sought power for himself, in his dealings with other men, and ruthlessly thrust aside or broken any who stood in his way, but that is common enough in successful men of business. As a member of that committee, and its real head, he first knew the sensation of power that comes from the control of the great machine of state. He did not yet command any of its mechanism, but he saw what it could do, and how officials and departments could be set to making inquiries, collecting information, supplying documents and the like. Anything that was needed, to incriminate Pound, was at the committee's service. When he watched little Pound withdraw miserably from the chamber, and afterwards listened to the solemn reading of the figures, he must first have felt that he had handled the levers of mighty wheels, even if they only crushed a fly on this occasion.

Power exercised through the control of public affairs is, if I read my history correctly, the deadliest of all intoxicants. I have always been glad that I was born in a country where many subtle and interlocking restraints have been devised to prevent ambitious men from acquiring too much of it, and have felt that the misfortunes of many other lands may have been due to the lack of these. No likelihood occurred to me that Farmingham would ever get too much public power, but when I now watched the hardening lines of his face and the overstressed clamp of his lips I thought him resolved to acquire all he could. Had he been born a Russian or a Prussian, I reflected, he might have come to wear dictator's clothes; he had the physique, the mien, the relentlessness and the unappeasable ambition. Good man he might be, I thought, but it was well that unbridled power over his fellow men could never come within his reach. I imagined such a face as his on the shoulders of Judge Jeffreys, or on Cromwell's.

When the General Election in due time came along he was among the leaders of his party's campaign and shared in its victory over the government. He was opposed at Mallerton, but won easily, and in the next few days Craft and I watched with keen interest to see whether he would get as much as he clearly wanted. It proved to be less. He was made Under-Secretary in my own Department; the new Minister was Carlton Hawes, whose qualifications for the highest post were found fewer, by his party, than those of Tom Manspring. It seemed either that Manspring did not rate Farmingham quite so highly as we had thought, or that a period of heel-cooling was held to be good for his impatient soul.

With much private regret I took leave of my former chief, for whom I had great regard, and turned to welcome the new Minister and his Under-Secretary, reflecting on the prank of destiny which thus brought me into daily association with the man I had first seen in Natal thirty years before. I had reckoned with the possibility that he might be thrust upon the Department I was in, though I had pictured him in the higher post there, if any, and had wondered if I ought to recall those distant days to him. On consideration I decided that it was too late for that, since he would wonder why I had not mentioned the matter long before, and I could not tell him, because I myself hardly knew. If by any chance he learned that I had been in South Africa, and even in Natal, in those days, he still could not guess that I had seen him, far less that I knew anything about him.

About this time I noticed that 'Colonel Jack' was disappearing from the newspapers, which now spoke of him as Mr. Farmingham. Either they thought that the earlier soubriquet was too familiar for a man so prominent in public affairs, or he had given Barnard Poop a hint that he no longer desired the use of it. Now that he was my superior I was freed from my earlier constraint about meeting him outside the office, where I saw him every day. He seemed to attach value to my official services and to like me personally. It was not long before I was invited to dine at the house in Belgrave Square which he bought immediately after the election and his appointment; obviously it was more important to him now to be in London than to be near his factories.

Mrs. Farmingham again presided over his table, though not with ease or content. I guessed that she regarded her social duties as the inescapable penalty of having married a great man whom she would have liked, but would never have, for herself.

Some of the other guests were of a new type and I saw that Farmingham cast the net of his ambitions ever wider. Two, in particular, I met without surprise, for I knew my rising politician, but with regret. My Department's information was extensive and I knew more about them than most.

They belonged to the class called intellectual. One was Fenton Curthwaite, the editor of a journal which claimed to be 'progressive', though its creed was as old as Judas. I put him down as a man of perverse and warped mentality, a renegade masquerading as a liberal humanitarian. His seemed to me an unclean mind in a body none too healthy. His real obsession, though like such men all through history he dressed it in the robe of a passionate love of humanity, was a hatred of society, perhaps of mankind. He was as prolific a writer and talker as Marat. If he was socially dangerous this was only because, in England, the humane motive, if loudly enough professed, is too easily accepted and the claim to hold liberal opinions too readily believed.

If Curthwaite was a jackal, the other man was a tiger. He was at least not bogus, for only the foolish would have expected, without proof, a love of this country in one whose citizenship was so newly acquired. His books, the articles he wrote for Curthwaite and his conversation always suggested, with some skill, that his adopted country ought to surrender control of its affairs and forces to some mysterious and supreme body which he sanctified with the mesmeric word 'international'. Among the simple islanders there has long been a vogue for such men; they have come so far (people think) that they must be good. Dr. Jules Mittelburg, who occupied a chair at some Institute with a high-sounding name, the nature and prompters of which were veiled from public understanding, was seldom to be avoided at functions and receptions. He was in fact the agent of a foreign government, though he would have liked to be a commissar in England, and Curthwaite was one of his native tools or dupes.

We permanent officials knew these men, and others like them, and hoped our transient superiors saw through them. We sometimes helped to that end by unostentatiously putting before our masters the Department's information about them, and often found that the political gentlemen thought they knew better than we. The desire to be thought well-informed and in the van of enlightened thought is a dangerous thing.

Nevertheless, not long before this time a man in Farmingham's place would have been cautious about mixing with such as Curthwaite and Mittelburg. For that matter, however, Farmingham himself would not have been in that place twenty years earlier. Only in this generation could so much have been taken for granted in the private career of a public figure. The Common Man was coming to the fore and would soon be put to the test. Farmingham, I saw, was venturing into deeper waters than he had ever known: those where the big-game fish of international politics hunted. He meant to be among the hunters, but he swam in seas and among company new to him, and might find others there wilier than he.

I wondered, as he talked to these guests, which was right, if he thought he was using them and they, that they were using him. For Farmingham had reached a point, in the pursuit of power, where he was becoming interesting to others who, if they could, would wield power through him. He was a marked man in circles much wider than he knew. I had watched too many politicians' careers not to recognize that, and I knew that the men themselves seldom realized it. Imperceptibly to them, they come under the scrutiny of watching eyes. Foreign ambassadors and agents write reports about them. Foreign governments and groups collect these. All sorts of ambitious coteries, open and secret, study the Farminghams from distant places, where the dossiers grow. Their private lives are scrutinized and their weaknesses, especially, recorded for future reference. If they have debts or clandestine love affairs or drink too much, these matters go into the files. If they have allowed incautious letters or notes of hand to remain in circulation, these will find mysterious purchasers. If they are beyond reproach in such things, they may yet be susceptible to flattery, a great corrupter, and it will be lavished on them. One day, if they come to wield great public power, they may find they have mortgaged it to others whom they still cannot clearly identify, and that these stand ready to exercise power through them.

The conversation showed me an interesting thing: that Farmingham seemed to be changing his mind in one respect where I had formerly found him reassuringly obstinate. He was toying with the glittering idea of international police forces and armies, of some supreme world authority, which Curthwaite and Mittelburg presented as a sublime one, empowered to issue ultimatums, dispatch punitive expeditions, scatter bombs or bacteria, and generally scourge the universe. It seemed to me a satanic ambition, and the files of my Department contained ample information about the sinister folk at the back of it; but I knew how easily it could be presented to the simple-minded as a godly one and judged that Farmingham, in this dark jungle, was still a simpleton.

I thought I perceived who was using whom, and what half-formed thoughts moved in Farmingham's mind. New paths, to undreamed of powers, beckoned. He dimly foresaw a new turn in fortune's tide. The uniform of a commander in some inter national force, or the title of a minister for some department of world affairs — who knew, perhaps the highest post of all: what vistas spread themselves! Farmingham was not a man to imagine himself being left among the ruled and the outlawed. He would see himself among the rulers. If some despotic world-government were coming out of the century he lived in, and these clever people told him this was inevitable, his ambitions must lie much further from London than London was from Mallerton. I may have erred, but I thought I knew the way his mind was turning as Curthwaite and Mittelburg dropped into his ear words that flattered and enticed.

'We must go forward,' said Curthwaite. 'There can be no going back to the past. There will have to be a supreme world authority if we are ever to have peace.'

'Isn't that going back to the furthest past?' I said. 'All the tyrants of history wanted to be supreme world authorities.'

'Ah, you are confusing the issue,' said Mittelburg. 'There can be no comparison between the Genghiz Khans and the Napoleons and a properly constituted world authority with a constitution accepted by all peoples.'

'Backed by force?' I asked.

'Of course the world state will have to have an army to enforce its decisions,' said Curthwaite

'Why, if the constitution is accepted by all peoples?' I said.

'There are always lawbreakers, umong peoples as among people. That is why you maintain your excellent British police/

'We don't use the police to invade other countries, or even to defend this one,' I said. 'That's the point. Would your world state leave us the right to defend ourselves against attack?'

'Ah, you arc still talking in terms of obsolete national sovereignty,' said Mittelburg. It is inevitable that these old ideas, which have plunged the world into one war after another, will have to be abandoned if we are to have peace.'

'But I thought you were talking of the world stat'es right to make *wan?'* I said.

'No, to enforce the rule of peace.'

'I hope the difference will be plain to the victims,' I said.

'I see what you mean, Dr. Mittelburg,' said Farmingham. 'A supreme council of the nations with departments for all public affairs and a sufficient army, navy and air force to enforce its decisions, once these had been approved by majority vote.'

'Broadly, yes,' said Mittelburg.

'Where would the seat of this august body be?' I asked.

Mittelburg spread his hands. 'We cannot tell yet,' he said. 'Possibly in America or the Near East. Wherever was found besel'

'But not here, by any chance?' I inquired.

'This island,' Curthwaite explained quickly, 'has had its day as the centre of world affairs. It is strategically indefensible. In any new war it would be laid waste in a few days. That is why our own interest, apart from anything else, must prompt us to work for a world state. We must move with the times. The thing is inevitable.'

'In my experience,' I said, 'nothing so seldom happens as the inevitable. Of course, it's a useful word in debate.'

'My dear Geoffrey,' said Curthwaite, in the manner of a snake implanting a kiss, 'you have the reactionary outlook of the civil service.'

'You must not belittle the civil service,' said Mittelburg, a subtler man. 'I have a great admiration for it. It is one of the strongest pillars of this country.'

Farmingham was listening more than talking and I guessed him to be cautious enough not to say much in the presence of one of his senior officials. He threw in a casual word now.

'It knows how to tame political Ministers, doesn't it, Geoffrey?' he said with heavy humour. 'Perhaps it will play the same part when the world government comes.'

'We must hope for the best,' I said. 'I shall not be there to see.'

'You don't expect a word government in your time?'

'I don't expect one to last in any time,' I said. 'Though the experiment may be tried, who knows? But I didn't mean that. I meant that I wouldn't serve one.'

'Why not?'

'I have an incorrigible preference for the service of my own country.'

'There you see what we're up against,' said Curthwaite.

'Well, we must not be too sure that we are right,' said Mittelburg. 'But believe me, world government is inevitable, Mr. Browne.'

'Oh no. Anyway, I'm only interested to know if it's right or wrong.'

'What's wrong with it, Geoffrey?' said Farmingham. 'I don't say I'm convinced by any means, but I like to hear all arguments for and against. Do you see any other way of ensuring peace?'

'You presume too much,' I said. 'Those who would like it naturally say it would ensure peace. I think it would mean permanent war, or the penalty of a lost war: surrender and servitude.'

'How do you make that out?' he said curiously, while Curthwaite permitted himself an impatient exclamation. 'I don't see that. After all, we should still have a word to say in the Supreme Council, or what have you.'

'Not *we,*' I said. 'Possibly our few delegates might have a small word to say. And who would control them? Not their permanent civil servants, or our parliament or people, any longer. I think the world would really be governed, in a most ruthless way, until the trick became clear, by a few mysterious and assiduous people behind the scenes of this distant assembly.'

None deigned to argue this contention. It was dismissed with facial grimaces of superior disapproval in which Farmingham, by changing the subject, implicitly joined. I wondered if I had said too much, but on the whole was glad. I was biding my time to see whether Farmingham was open to conviction in the matter of Curthwaite and Mittelburg; I knew where to lay my hand on some fairly impressive information about them and hoped that increasing experience in his office would open his eyes about such denizens of the political big-game country in which he now roamed.

My feeling towards Farmingham was now rather like that of a specialist towards a new and important patient who is also an interesting case. The senior official is, much more than is generally realized, the warden of his Minister's mind, and even of his soul. It is not to be expected that a man who is carried into office by some gust of public popularity should at once comprehend all the intricacies of his post, or its dangers, and sometimes such a man may change his responsible place several times in a dozen years. I had seen a dozen Ministers bring with them at the start an alarming ignorance of the affairs they were to handle, modulate their inexperience under the unobtrusive guidance of their permanent helpers, and ripen into prudent and excellent administrators. I hoped to see the same development in Farmingham; but I knew the little more about him which made me think he might be a wilful man.

About six months after the dinner-party in Belgrave Square came Manspring's sudden death. Once more the next rung on the ladder was open to Farmingham's foot. The King sent for Carlton Hawes and in the new government Farmingham succeeded to Hawes's vacant place at the Home Office. He was now in the succession to the highest office, and not far down the list. I reminded Granger Craft one day of his light forecast, many years before, that Farmingham meant to be Lord Mayor or Prime Minister.

'Yes,' he said, with his habitual air of the zestfull playgoer. 'But I think I also said that he wouldn't stay the course. It will be fascinating to watch him now. Near the summit the footholds are most precarious, and one false step means a long drop. How do you find him nowadays?'

'A little short-tempered, perhaps,' I said. 'He's apt to be more irritable with his juniors than most ministers. Otherwise he's a model of decorum and prudence.'

'Ah! He'll have to watch the temper. I wonder what's on his mind.'

'Oh, nothing more than a little impatience, I should think,' I said. 'The suppression of his earlier impulse to use a sjambok on the slow-witted.'

'I hope you and your colleagues are exercising the usual subtle restraint on him,' he said.

'Oh, we do our best,' I answered.

There are tides in the affairs of politicians which they do not seize, because the tide seizes them. What I had previously felt, and Craft had denied, to be Farmingham's luck, now carried him to a new peak of public attention and even, in the issue, of popularity, though at the beginning he was, for the first time in his political career, much attacked.

He had only been Minister for a few months when a wave of railway and dock strikes throughout the country brought about a grave threat to food supplies. In the Department we knew that these strikes were organized by a subversive organization with its roots abroad, in the same places where such men as Curthwaite and Mittelburg found the source of their liberal philosophies. We also knew, what very few of the strikers suspected, that they were political in motive, and that the intention was, if the government showed itself weak, to enlarge them into a general strike, with the attendant disorders and privations. After that point, the planners, in the manner of generals in war, divided their operation into a lesser and a greater objective, the second to be pursued if the course of the first seemed favourable. The first aim was to challenge the use of force; the second, to overthrow the government if it wavered in accepting the challenge.

The government proved unexpectedly firm. Farmingham was the Minister chiefly concerned, by virtue of his office. His advice was followed by the Cabinet, and his permanent officials supplied the information on which his advice was based. Thus I was constantly at his side during his crisis and found that, when he was called on to deal with visible and urgent menaces, not merely with abstract arguments, his eyes very quickly opened to the real nature of the business and of the men behind it. It was a relief to find him so clear-minded about the need for swift and unyielding action to maintain order and food supplies, and so responsive to the information we had to put before him.

This first lesson in the practice of constitutional government, and in calmly meeting threats to it, was, I thought, an invaluable one if Farmingham was going to continue on his upward way. The affair brought out his best qualities, of strength and calm decision. He was a man of action and now proved that he was also a man of the constitution. Nevertheless, a small doubt remained in my mind: was he an admirer of the constitution or of himself as a spectacular defender of it? Did he see the greater principle or only his own figure dominating the drama?

I took part in preparing his speech in the House and his broadcast to the country, the same evening, when he announced that the government, if the strikes expanded, would declare a state of emergency, use troops to move food supplies, firmly suppress any disorder. He was at his best during those hours, when he was at the Ministry from dawn till midnight. Obviously he loved a fight. The sense of crisis put him in good humour, and that of high responsibility kept him cool and prudent. Only once did he flounder during our discussions.

'Geoffrey,' he said, leaning back in his chair from the draft of his broadcast speech, 'all this talk about the constitution. Like most people, I've done a lot of loose talking about it in my time. I know its importance now, if I didn't before. But I must confess I've never read it. I don't like talking without knowing what I'm talking about. Get me a copy. I'll run through it.'

I was not taken aback, having enlightened many ministers in such mysteries. I explained that the constitution was a thing not much more tangible than the spirit of the Holy Ghost or the majesty of the King.

The big man was like a schoolboy caught in a howler. 'It's a good thing this talk isn't being broadcast,' he said, in a growl. 'You must think me a fool. What a country! How can you expect people to respect a non-existent constitution?'

'It isn't non-existent,' I said. 'Merely unwritten. The written ones cause most of our troubles. I suppose the spirit of it is more important than any letter, and it's difficult to put spiritual things in clauses.'

He thought for a moment and then took up the typewritten pages again. 'Well, I'm hanged,' he said. 'Very well, then.' Grinning broadly, he read a phrase or two. 'Constitutional government. . . unconstitutional action ... the government will use all constitutional measures . . . good, I think we'll leave it as it is. Now that I still don't know what it means I shall know what I'm talking about. Do you want to come and hear me broadcast this evening?'

I was very glad to go and shared with the broadcasting officials high admiration for the way Mr. Farmingham delivered that speech. He was without fear of the microphone and I saw that he greatly enjoyed himself. It was an historic moment and he rose to it with historic words impressively spoken. The reassuring strength of his personality reached out to anxious people throughout the country, and when he was done I felt sure that another brick had been well and truly added to the ever-unfinished wall of the British Constitution. The next day, which brought the clear marks of overwhelming public approval in the morning and the sudden calling-off of the strikes in the afternoon, left Mr. Farmingham with his first great national service to his credit. He had proved himself a strong but prudent man and a trustworthy steward of the general interest. Of such stuff are great statesmen sometimes made. He had a distinct claim, if he continued like this, to be borne in mind for the Prime Minister's office at some future date.

My private, and slightly paternal, feeling towards an improving Minister, who seemed less and less likely to do harm to the country or cause his permanent staff misgivings, grew a good deal warmer. The effect of this success was visible in him, in a still further increase of his self-sureness; he seemed bigger and bigger. I judged that his confidence had received greater reinforcement than ever before and that he now stood at his last crossroad. If it did not over-inflate his egotism and destroy him, if Le kept that deep instinct towards an overweening ambition under control, nothing could now stop him. If he had sins in his earlier ledgers, they could not now catch up with him. He had gone too far for that and been absolved by achievement and acclamation.

That was my judgment, I told Craft. He nodded, without comment.

9

IT was in these days, when Farmingham stood high and bright not only in the gaze of his fellow-countrymen but of the whole world, indeed I think it was during the week following his famous broadcast, that I noticed him, at a diplomatic party, talking; in a corner to a woman whose face seemed vaguely familiar to me. That meant nothing: these functions are always full of faces which one has seen at other similar ones, without necessarily meeting their owners; some skill is needed in keeping out of the way of people whose identity one may have impolitely forgotten.

I only gave her a second glance because Farmingham showed a marked consideration in his manner towards her, so that I assumed he knew her well. He was no longer the Farmingham who hailed all comers as well met and possibly useful to him. He had gone far beyond that and was now very much master of any company in which he found himself, choosing with effortless ease those he wished to meet, allowing none other to dominate the conversation, and never suffering it to continue too long. So much he owed to his position, and I and other of his officials were glad to see it. We took some private pride in his advancement, knowing that his recent achievement was greatly due to the information and guidance we had deferentially given him. The permanent official is always happy if he sees his Minister shaping well, especially if he is so difficult a man as Farmingham.

Thus any person to whom Farmingham showed especial attentiveness was of interest to many eyes. I stood on the other side of the room, intentionally; a Minister sees enough of his subordinates during the day and they do not thrust themselves near him when they find themselves in the same company socially. I saw that this woman was probably about fifty, though dressed, with great taste and clearly at much expense, as one in the twenties. In that she was like many others there. I noticed only, at this first glimpse, that she had a somewhat strained and hard expression, which was also not uncommon.

I doubt if I even wondered who she might be, and would never have thought of her again but that, in the way these things happen, I saw her again a few days later at another similar affair. I was moving around, carefully avoiding more than one cocktail, when I turned and found myself near a woman who stood, for the moment alone, between two groups of people. I was passing her with a slight smile, which I hoped would convey that I held her in pleasant recollection, if we had fleetingly met, or that I was of friendly disposition, if we had not, when she spoke.

'Well, how is Mr. Browne?' she said, not in a tone of eager interest. I said I was very well, hoping for a clue from her next remark.

'I suppose you are working as hard as ever?' she said.

I answered that I tried to keep myself occupied, and wondered how I could learn her name.

There was a slight pause while she glanced about indifferently. Then she said, 'Well, have you read any good books lately?'

I was a little puzzled by her manner, which seemed ironic. There appeared to be some small joke against myself, and though I would willingly have smiled at one, I could not yet see it. Then it occurred to me that she might be telling me, in a rather crude way, that I was a dull fellow without conversation. She was past the age for badinage on the note of sexual challenge, but many women do not realize that and habitually talk in this way when it no longer becomes them. I wondered if she had the third cocktail inside her; it is the one, I find, which frequently emboldens such ladies to an embarrassing familiarity. Then a kinder explanation dawned on me: she was somewhat heavily reproaching me with having quite clearly done her the discourtesy of forgetting her.

'You must forgive me if I have forgotten your name,' I said. 'I know we have met before, but these affairs are so noisy, and introductions are so casually made — you know how it happens.'

'It wouldn't mean anything to you,' she said, again with harsh indifference. I was preparing a smooth rejoinder, which I hoped would at length ease this stupid duologue, when my wife, who had arranged to pick me up at this place, entered the room, saw me and came across to join us, bearing that bright smile of happiness which (like many wives) she always wears on such occasions to brighten the dull reserve of an official husband. She directed it towards the woman I was with, saying, 'Hullo, Mrs. Ross, how are you?'

Susan is the perfect helpmate for a man in my job. She talks easily and well and makes the greatest bore feel that he is delightfully entertaining. I needed only to offer an occasional smile, which I hoped was not too vacant, while she handled Mrs. Ross, whom I was able to observe more closely.

I saw that her manner towards me was her usual one with others. She spoke always in a tone of mockery. I judged it to be a form of self-defence. She was, I thought, an embittered woman. Her face was that of dissatisfaction. I reflected, watching her, that such women underline their discontents in everything they do to conceal them. The laboured accentuation of youthful lines in eyes and mouth proclaims the advance of age. The over-emphasized bosom no longer stirs admiration, but faintly repels. She wore golden hair, which I dislike; however, it was well done. The grooves beneath her eyes seemed more those of tears than of years. Perhaps one jumps too quickly to unkind conclusions, but I put her down as a woman who for many years had clung to youth, entreating it not to leave or deceive her, and for many more had been asking herself how life, probably in the form of a man or of a succession of men, could treat a poor maiden so.

I was awakened to sharper attention than I had been paying when I heard her say, looking towards the door, 'Ah, here comes our Right Honourable Farmingham.'

The words were said in the same curious tone. They might have conveyed a sarcasm, which was out of place without further explanation, or merely an empty flippancy. They might have implied that it was a joke to call Farmingham honourable. Whether they meant anything or nothing, I saw at once that, though she knew my name she did not know who I was or my association with Farmingham. Susan, with a quickness which none but myself could have detected, smoothly drew Mrs. Ross's attention to something else; a little later others joined the group and we moved away.

As we drove home I said, 'Who is that odd woman, Mrs. Ross?'

'I don't know,' she said. I've met her three or four times at these affairs in the last few months. She seems to go about a lot. I think she must be a widow. I've never met a Mr. Ross. She's very nice.'

This is Susan's invariable judgment and it is meant, I fancy, as a subtle check on my own more cautious building of opinions about others. She would like me to like more people than I do.

'She's not,' I said. 'She's mutton dressed up lamb fashion.'

'Oh, that's a weakness in many women,' she said. 'You shouldn't even mention that, it's not worth it. It doesn't mean anything.'

'Sometimes it means a great deal,' I said.

'Nothing that concerns you, anyway,' she said.

'I knew I'd seen her before, but I can't for the life of me remember actually meeting her. Yet she knew my name.'

'Oh, that's easily explained. I was talking to her at one of these shows a little while ago and she asked me casually if my husband were there and I pointed you out.'

'So that's it. She presumed rather far on that. When you arrived she seemed to be hinting that I was a boor for forgetting her.'

'She's obviously wealthy. Those clothes, and those rings! She never wears the same things or jewels twice.'

'You shouldn't mention that, it's not worth it,' I said. 'It doesn't mean anything. What an extraordinary manner she has, as if she alone knew all the secrets of truth and wisdom in a world of fools. Look at the weird way she spoke about Farmingham. I saw him talking most courteously to her the other day. I was grateful to you for shunting her on to another track, tactful one. It was awkward. She looks to me like a woman who-for years has huddled her secret soul over the embers of dead love affairs, until she's as cold as ashes.'

'What a beastly thing to say! If she's lost a husband she may be huddling over his embers. She may have had illnesses. I hate you to think the worst of people like that. She may have had money troubles.'

'She doesn't have any air of money trouble now.'

'She's a nice woman, I'll wager, if you can get to know her. I think I remember seeing her at that Home Office do when you were away.'

'Did you though!'

I made a mental note of that and from curiosity looked up certain lists the next day. I found that Mrs. Ross's name was down for invitation to a few lesser affairs, and that Farmingham had had it put there. I could not discreetly make any further inquiry, but when I saw her again at a minor legation party a few weeks later I asked a colleague if he knew her. Yes, he said, but only as a widowed lady who seemed to go about a great deal and obviously had friends in the lower levels of the diplomatic group. I saw that her address was in a quiet square in South Kensington and assumed that she had a house there.

The slight curiosity which her challenging and provocative manner aroused *in* me thus subsided into a vaguely dissatisfied disinterest at the back of my mind, and would not have revived but for the circumstances in which I saw Mrs. Ross a third time. Susan and the children were on holiday by the sea and to spare myself the daily journey from and to an empty house I was staying at my club until they returned. One evening I went to some friends in Earl's Court for a glass of sherry and when I left their house, which I had reached by taxicab, I found myself wandering, unsure of my way, among the dim and labyrinthine squares and crescents of that neighbourhood.

I was in no particular hurry to reach my club, which I found too much like an annexe of my office, both in the furniture and the company, but I was hungry. These quiet streets are full of small private hotels and boarding-houses, and every second or third window revealed people at dinner. I came to one with a small illuminated sign which said 'Restaurant open to non-residents' and on an impulse went in. It would be a change, I thought idly, and the longish walk to St. James's afterwards would be pleasant.

It was a modest and unpretentious place, peopled with soft-spoken, elderly folk who evidently liked a still backwater in the busy stream of London's life. As I walked into the dining-room I felt a man look up who sat at a table with his face towards the door. Instinctively I glanced at him and saw it was Farmingham. He was with a woman whose back was turned to me. He nodded cordially, but without invitation to join him. I bowed and followed the beckoning of a decrepit old waiter to a table in the far corner. As I went I felt the woman's eyes on me; it was to be assumed that she would look to see to whom he had nodded.

I sat down with my back to the room and then found that I faced a small mirror which, by some trick of oblique reflections, gave me a plain view of Farmingham's back and the woman's face. It was Mrs. Ross. He bent across the table towards her and as they spoke she glanced towards me. What they were saying was clear and natural to guess, I thought. 'Who is that?' 'Oh, that's a man called Geoffrey Browne, from my department.' 'Oh yes, I've met him. Is he from your department?'

In future I reflected, Mrs. Ross would know better than to make inanely ironical remarks about 'our Right Honourable Farmingham' if she met me. She would be feeling rather silly at this moment. Then, as I appeared to study the menu but in fact, from native curiosity, continued to observe them in the mirror, an uneasy sensation crept into my mind.

These two people, I saw, did not drop an unimportant topic and talk casually of other dungs, or eat their food. **It** was **quite** explicit, in their attitude and manner, that they continued the same subject, that it was a serious one and more, that I was it. I saw Mrs. Ross twice glance in my direction, once with a slight movement of her head towards me, while Farmingham leaned towards her. She spoke rapidly and he seemed to ask sufficiently important questions, for she nodded as if in emphatic and impatient confirmation when he appeared to doubt something she said.

I could feel no doubt that they were discussing me and wondered if she were merely telling him of our brief meeting a little while before, and possibly complaining that I was dull or disagreeable. She had made the impression of a quarrelsome, trouble-making woman. Whatever it was, a hostile vibration came from her reflection in the glass and sharply struck towards me.

The old waiter was fidgeting and I glanced at him. Smiling, he nodded towards the mirror. He had caught me watching them. He only attributed to me, however, an amiable inquisitiveness about the great in which he was ready to share.

'Important company tonight, sir,' he said. 'Do you know who that is?'

'The face seems most familiar,' I said.

'That's Mr. Farmingham,' he said, 'the politician.'

'Oh yes, of course,' I said. 'Does he often come here?'

'Oh no, I've never seen him before. We don't often get gentlemen like that here.'

I kept my eyes on my food after this, though from the corner of them I presently saw Farmingham and Mrs. Ross go out. When I was finished I began my lazy homeward stroll, thinking with a vague disquiet of her nod in my direction and of the disagreeable expression of her face as she leaned over the table and spoke, almost angrily, to Farmingham.

I was passing the Duke of Wellington's statue at Hyde **Park Corner** when, *in* one of those unaccountable convulsions of the mind, all the mists of memory abruptly rolled away and I recalled who she was. Mrs. Ross, despite all the years and the golden hair, was Marjorie Haynor; but if I had not caught that surprising glimpse of her in the mirror, when she did not know she was watched, I might never have recognized her.

PART THREE

I

AFTER the episode in Earl's Court those nearest to Farmingham began to notice slight changes in him which, when I now look back, I think were the signs of a sudden quickening in his story. The graph of his life, of which I knew the earlier course and the public the later and greater peaks, had moved slowly upward during many years, and between these peaks lay long and gradual gradients of uneventful progress. Now his destiny seemed to tread on the accelerator, as if impatient to know its climax. That at any rate is how the events which quickly followed look to me in retrospect; the picture was not so clear in the unfolding.

First, his officials remarked a rising irascibility. Until this moment his earlier tendency to angry outbursts had progressively diminished as he improved in the practice of that self-mastery which we admired in him. Now small failings in his junior subordinates produced wounding and contemptuous attacks, often in the presence of others, while, in discussing public matters with his senior ones, he fell into a habit of speaking in terms of sarcasm or disdain about certain other Ministers. Some truculence also appeared in his manner when he answered questions in the House.

It is all too easy for a big man, and a successful one, to fall into this trap. He may mistake the silence of those who feel they should not answer back for respect, and the nervous smiles or plaudits of the weak for admiration. Many politicians have made this mistake, often, in other countries, at dire cost to their nations. No doubt some of the humorous talk, in the corridors of the

Ministry, about 'the old man's paddies', came back to him. He may have read into it more affection than it contained and have come to think that what was a weakening in self-control was an effective method, good for further use. Perhaps he dramatized himself and did not see the dangers of a part in which he began to like himself. These tantrums became first a frequent and then a regular occurrence.

Such things are eagerly observed, studied, discussed and translated into facile judgments by those who surround a man, so much the cynosure of interest as Farmingham was. They may mean that he is merely yielding too much to the ordinary wine of human vanity: but they may also indicate that some illness is creeping upon him, or that he has private anxieties hidden from the world; all theories are debated. I wondered of which development another foible, which he displayed, might be the symptom.

He was concerned about his weight, which now must have been over sixteen stones, and in the manner of such men rather laboured this joke against himself. 'My word, Geoffrey,' he would say, patting his stomach, Til have to do something about this. I shall have to push it about in a wheelbarrow soon.' For this reason he began to ride in the Row every morning before breakfast. One day a newspaper photographer caught him, just dismounted, and the picture, showing a huge and impressive figure with riding boots and whip, was published in the evening editions. I found Farmingham roaring with laughter over it. 'Look, Geoffrey,' he said, 'the fat boy of Peckham.'

I felt that he secretly admired it, nevertheless. It was later published in the illustrated weeklies and certainly was of great value to Farmingham's public popularity. The strong features, massive frame, stomach and boots quickly prompted the words John Bull from those of limited vocabulary, and Barnard Poop used them in his paragraphs.

It was fairly obvious that this new character part would not displease Farmingham and I thought I detected his liking for it when he began to ride down through the Mall to the Horse Guards each morning and appear at the Ministry, in these clothes, for an early glance at the papers on his desk before he rode home to change, later appearing in the clothes of formality. When we realized that this was to be a daily occurrence we quietly arranged that one of us should usually be about early; it is not good for the smooth working of an official Department that a Minister should steal a long march on his officials in running through the day's affairs.

We could not know whether hidden worries troubled Farmingham, or whether his liver objected to the exercise, but he was generally in a bad temper when he made these premature appearances, in breeches and high-boots. He carried, in place of the customary riding-crop, the sjambok I had seen on his hall-table and had a trick of banging on the desk with its heavy metal grip at anything which annoyed him among the documents. One day some bright spirit dubbed John Farmingham, thus attired, 'Farmer John', and from then on he was always so known among us. He learned of that too, and liked it.

Among the innumerable tales we exchanged about him was a fragmentary anecdote which hooked itself on to my attention, though it might have been without any significance. One of my senior colleagues told me that Farmingham had instructed him to send over to Scotland Yard for information about a man who was under sentence of deportation; a Member had raised the matter in the House and complained that this man was being unjustly treated, and Farmingham needed material for his reply.

'They must have a lot of information in their files,' said Farmingham. 'I've often wondered how they find room to store it all.'

Benting, my colleague, said yes, he believed Scotland Yard's records were as complete as any police department's in the world, and mentioned the case of a forger who had been identified and convicted from fingerprints taken in Mexico thirty years earlier.

'But I'm told their records go far beyond the criminal classes,' said Farmingham. 'Don't they keep files about everybody in the civil service or in public life? It would be a joke, when there's nothing much doing, to get out all the dossiers about Ministers and have them read at a Cabinet meeting.'

Benting smiled and said that the practice had been introduced, many years before, of destroying the dossiers of Ministers when they took office. This, I knew, was incorrect. What happened, I believe, was that an earlier High Commissioner at Scotland Yard was asked by a new Foreign Secretary, as if in joke, 'I'd like to see what you people at Scotland Yard think about me. Why don't you send across my earlier records?' The Commissioner, having his own idea of a joke and of his duty, smoothly invented the answer about destroying files, which now stood as a precedent among the many unwritten parts of our constitutional procedure, available for use if it were ever needed, while the dossiers remained in their proper place.

I do not remember how quickly the feeling grew in me that, apart from the marked change for the worse in Farmingham's temper, which was remarked by all, there was a subtle alteration in his manner towards me personally. For some time I thought that an uneasy conscience might have led me to anticipate one, for I could not quite acquit myself of a lack of candour towards him, in having concealed for many years the fact that I had at least known of him long before. He must now have learned that I had been in Natal in his day, from Mrs. Ross; so much the mirror had plainly told me. And yet: she knew just as well that I had not recognized her. For that matter, why had she not recalled herself to me? Had she only fully remembered me when she saw me in the hotel, and at the earlier cocktail party identified me merely as the husband of the Mrs. Browne she knew? In any case, what did it all amount to? Neither she nor Farmingham knew of the one small thing which might stand between us, which my memory for more than thirty years had stubbornly refused to lose: that stolen handclasp. They could not have any reason to fear or dislike me, or even suspect that I remembered either of them. Mrs. Ross, whom I had met in those far-off days, must think she knew for certain that my memory had forgotten her. Farmingham, whom I then had never met, could not expect me ever to have known him. Even if they both now knew that I was the Mr. Browne who had spent three days with Lance Haynor half a lifetime before, what did it matter?

Nevertheless, I felt, or thought I felt, a hostility towards me in Farmingham. I cannot now recapture all the small, intangible things that made me think this. His manner towards me remained the same, unless it became a little more affable. Farmer John did not include me in his intemperate outbursts; I and a few others were too senior for that. But in my presence he no longer waxed sarcastic about other Ministers. As he continued to do so in that of others, and became even freer in his remarks, I felt that he kept a guard on himself when I was about.

Possibly one of the most difficult things a man may set himself to do is to conceal an aversion from someone with whom he has long been in daily contact. His very effort to hide it may betray it. He called me 'Geoffrey' more heartily than before, but I noticed that he now never expressed an opinion before me, but always invited mine, and also, that he sometimes asked questions which, whether they were so intended or not, might have led me to talk about my earlier life. He gave nothing away and was alert to learn. More than anything else, I noticed, in a man whose custom was to look at all with a masterful, unflinching stare, that he frequently spoke to me while looking at some paper in his hand, or if he turned his gaze on me seemed to have some veil over it.

By imperceptible degrees I became sure that he no longer trusted me. Perhaps the strength of his personality gave me an uncomfortable feeling that he might have some cause for this, for when I examined myself I could not find that I had ever had any unfriendly intention towards him or done him any disloyalty beyond one act of unwitting eavesdropping, which he could not possibly suspect, in a past distant beyond recall.

The thing was vague, intangible, a shadow much less sharp in its outlines than it now appears on paper in the light of later events. I had a feeling about him that he had a feeling about me: that was all. It troubled me, however, for I thought him a man of great qualities, who might do well for his country, and with whom I wanted to stand well in our daily duties. I was glad when Farmer John appeared one morning, apparently in much good humour, and after a casual glance at his desk began to talk cheerfully of the coming recess and of holidays.

'There's nothing here that can't wait, Geoffrey,' he said, pushing some papers aside. 1 was going down to Mallerton tomorrow but I think I'll go today. I need fresh air.'

'How long will you be away, sir?' I said.

'Oh, I'll come back just before the House meets,' he said. 1 want to get in some good hard riding. I've got to do something about this,' and he patted his paunch, which was now understood to be an object of affectionate interest to us all.

'It will be lovely at Mallerton now,' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'And I've a couple of new horses I want to try out. Come down for a long week-end, the third from now, Geoffrey, and bring your wife. We'll ride every morning.'

I was unprepared for this but such an invitation was almost a command. I parted with a pleasant private idea of pottering about my garden and said I .knew my wife would be very happy.

'Good,' he said, smacking his heavy boots with the sjambok and moving to go. 'That's settled, then. Just a family party; only the four of us. I'll look in again later, before I go.'

2

DURING those weeks the thought of Marjorie Haynor, or Mrs. Ross, implanted in my mind by my recognition of her, had been spreading like couch-grass, each creeping root of which throws up new blades, so that you soon cannot tell where the central root began. It was an involuntary exercise of the mind, not a deliberate one. It recurred like some snatch of music, which I could not put out of my head if I wanted to. Each time I uprooted and threw away some patch of doubt or conjecture, others appeared and the tangle thickened. At first it was something separate from my thoughts about Farmingham. Only gradually, and again without direction from me, did the two merge.

The first irritating question, from which all the others led, was, had she recognized me at the cocktail party? Had she done so, I should have said, 'How come you here, and what has been happening to you all these years?' With her answers a matter of no great moment would have been ended. She had married again, been kept busy, was a bad correspondent and in any case hardly knew me: there was the natural finish. I decided that she had not at that time recognized me, but felt certain she had done so when I watched her in the mirror. But as she had not then claimed acquaintance, and Farmingham had not referred to the subject, I could not very well recall myself to her now, should we meet again. For some reason, it was fairly plain that she did not wish this; by reminding her of our bygone meeting I should evidently say something better left unsaid.

That seemed to answer my mind's questions as far as they could be answered. But then doubts returned. Had she not, after all, recognized me the first time? The few words she had said to me could be dismissed as the idle chatter of such an occasion; were they not, perhaps, carefully chosen with a set purpose? 'How is Mr. Browne?' a woman might say that who wished to find out, before admitting an acquaintance, whether the other party to it was aware of it.

Suddenly my random thoughts put a new light on another of her questions. 'Have you read any good books lately?' It was the most commonplace remark, frequently used to suggest that conversation might be brighter and that the person to whom it was addressed was a dullard. But out of the empty soil of memory appeared a new thought, first faint and then growing plainer. I dimly recalled my talk with her about *Madame Bovary.* Laboriously I disinterred the fragments and pieced them together. I remembered the motive, and the things I had said. At the time, I recalled, these seemed to make no impression on her at all, but she was a guarded woman; perhaps they had sunk deeper than I could know. Indeed, if her later life had been like that of Emma Bovary's, they might have remained with her and accompanied her on her way, like unwelcome but persistent counsellors, wagging unheeded fingers of caution. In that case an association of ideas might link them with me. If she wished to jog my memory, or to make sure that she was not contained in it, she might think such a question a good test. I wondered what she might have gone on to say if Susan had not at that moment joined us.

Thinking of her hard, embittered face, and the tormented soul it suggested, it seemed to me likely that her life had indeed been much like that of Emma's. I should have expected *Madame Bovary* to wear such a countenance at fifty, when the soft nights and the perfumed breezes and whispering waters had lost magic and scent and falsely extenuating sound.

If she had gone the way of an Emma Bovary I supposed this Ross might have had something to do with it. Who and where was he? Was he dead, or had he left her, or she him? How long had she been in England, and when had she met Farmingham again? Farmingham! At that point the two main lines of my thoughts began to converge. It was perfectly natural that he should be polite to so old a friend, and dine with her. But that curious remark, 'Here comes our Right Honourable Farmingham.' It might have been the idlest phrase from a woman putting on an air of self-importance. It might have meant, 'The world would not call him honourable if it knew him as well as I'.

These disturbing thoughts about Mrs. Ross became too persistent to keep to myself, and I told Susan the whole story one evening. I had never mentioned it to any other, save for the brief allusion, so summarily discounted, which I had made to Granger Craft many years before.

Susan listened with keen interest. At the end she made the irrelevant comment, 'I told you she must have been very beautiful when she was young. Was she?'

'I can hardly remember, you know. I have a faint impression of an attractive woman and a strong impression of a dissatisfied one.'

'Tut,' she said impatiently, 'men always forget to notice the important things. Poor woman.'

'Why?'

'I feel she must have been very unhappy all her life, or most of it.'

'What about her holding hands with Farmingham?'

'From the way you describe it that may have meant nothing at all.'

'Oddly, although I've forgotten so much else, the memory of those two hands, and the white knuckles, is as vivid now as on the day I saw them. If that meant nothing, then nothing means anything.'

'Well, now she's a perfectly respectable widow lady who's put all such things behind her. You should forget about it.'

'But if she recognized me, why didn't she say so?'

'I don't think she can have done. She didn't give a sign of knowing you when I pointed you out. Don't imagine things about people, Geoff.'

I had been on the point of asking Susan, if she met Mrs. Ross again (for Susan sometimes goes to these numerous functions without me), to sec if she could learn something more about Mrs. Ross, how long she had been in this country, and the past or present Mr. Ross. I refrained, however, thinking that it would be a difficult thing to do, an unfair one to ask of her, and that she would in any case promptly say no. Some persistent impulse kept these matters alive in my mind, so that they reappeared at intervals of many years, but on the few occasions when I discussed them with others, that is, with Susan and Craft, I met such weighty rebuffs that I felt foolish.

A few evenings later I had occasion to put in a telephone call, about an official matter, from my house to Farmingham at Mallerton. There was some delay and the bell rang while I was upstairs. I heard Susan answer it and when I came down the stairs saw her standing with the receiver in her hand, listening. She had the raised eyebrows and parted lips that show the delighted listener and as I came down she made an O of her lips and put her finger to them. She listened awhile longer, making the facial grimaces of suppressed mirth, and then put her hand over the receiver and said to me, 'We've got on to somebody else's line and somebody else is getting a good talking-to. Listen!'

She put the receiver to my ear and I heard a woman's voice, talking rapidly and angrily. It was either that of a vulgar woman or a distraught one. 'If you think you can go away for weeks at a time and leave me alone like this, you're wrong,' it said, in a tone of envenomed jealousy. 'I've told you before, I'm not well enough to be left. I shall expect to see you here tomorrow and I don't care what excuses you make, so you'd better look out for yourself

'And I've told you a dozen times not to ring me here, Marjorie,' said Farmingham's voice. 'If you do it again I shall ring off without answering you.'

'I warn you . . .' said the woman on a rising note of hysteria. I put Gown the receiver quickly. Susan. was watching with impish glee.

'Eavesdropper,' I said.

'Oh, you are a. spoil sport,' she said. 'What harm can it do, when you don't know the people? It was like a very exciting radio play. I was having a lovely time. I think she was going to threaten to kill him. Now I shall never know.'

'What did you hear?'

'It sounded like a very jealous wife nagging her husband because he wouldn't come home. She *was* furious. I could almost feel the hatred burning its way through the wires to him.'

'Hatred!'

'Oh well, with a woman in some circumstances there's hardly any dividing line between hatred and love. They don't know themselves quite which side of the line they're on.'

'Suppose it wasn't his wife. It might have been his mistress.'

'Ooh,' said Susan, 'in that case we listened to a very guilty secret. I wouldn't care to think what hold she has over him in that case, from the way she was talking. She sounded to me like a jealous wife threatening the usual revenge: if you don't come back I'll sell up the house, or overdraw you at the bank. That sort of thing.'

'How did he sound?'

'He couldn't get a word in edgeways. He kept on saying "Marjorie ..." but she wouldn't let him speak.'

'H'm,' I said. A little later the exchange rang, asking, 'Did you have your call to Mallerton?' and when I said no I was connected. Farmingham came to the telephone with an impatiently growled, 'Hullo, yes; what is it?' I mentioned the matter that needed attention and after a few sentences he broke in, saying, 'Look, Geoffrey, I'm rather tired now. I'm going to run up to town tomorrow anyway. I'll look in for half an hour during the morning and we'll talk about it then.'

3

THESE exchanges overheard left me in a state of irritable and troubled perplexity. They revived all sorts of doubts which I had more than once dismissed, and, while giving these suspicions yet another form, no more clarified them than ever before. Of one thing, however, I was sure: that I would not tell Susan whose voices she had heard. That was unthinkable. Farmingham was my chief and a Minister. If the matter were as unpleasant as it had sounded and were ever to become public, it must make itself known through somebody else and in some other way. Could I have guessed that such a thing might happen I would not even have told my wife, those few days before, the earlier story which she dismissed as trivial. For that matter I held her capable, if she knew of this fresh development, of immediately finding it harmless; Susan dislikes to think ill of any of her acquaintances.

Farmingham, when he looked in the next morning, was irritable and absent-minded, hardly able to give his mind to the mater in point and impatient to have it done with.

'Can't it wait, Geoffrey?' he said. 'After all, I'm on holiday.'

I said I supposed I could find some way of postponing it, that would not reflect on him, if he wished.

'Yes, keep it on the hob for a few days,' he said. 'I've rather a lot to think about just now and I want to have an absolutely clear head for it.' It was a question of a reprieve for a man who **had** been sentenced to death. There were the beginnings, not yet very large, of some public outcry for the exercise of mercy.

'Of course, it can't wait very long,' I said.

'No, no, that won't be necessary,' he said. 'Just a week or so. I must be able to give a matter like this deep and long consideration. I can't make up my mind without carefully reading all the papers and studying every aspect. Give me the file: I'll take it with me and go through it quietly at home.'

He was clearly harassed, and I could not help jumping to an obvious conclusion about the cause of his preoccupation. I too went home that night to give a matter deep and earnest consideration; it was not the one covered by the papers he had taken away, yet may have been the same that was in the forefront of his thoughts.

I was worried by mine, which would not leave me alone. The echo of Mrs. Ross's voice and ominous words rang through them. I suspected blackmail, a grave thing for a man in Farmingham's place. Whether it might be blackmail for gain or to hold a man, I could not guess. In a woman of Mrs. Ross's age, both motives might occur. Whatever they were, the great question remained: what did she know about Farmingham that enabled her to threaten him so confidently and imperatively?

At that point, an older question recurred and grew bigger in my mind. How long had this association been going on? Had she once been his mistress? Could she conceivably be so now? Was it possible that this was a clandestine relationship that went right back to the sugar plantation in Natal? If Farmingham, intent on his public reputation and progress, had begun and maintained it, while refusing openly to break with his wife, that would account for the viperish embitterment of an ageing mistress. But that theory broke down on the mysterious Ross. The liaison, if there were one, must have been broken and resumed, or only begun after Ross's departure, dead or alive. How long had Mrs. Ross been in England and what had she been doing? That was the first thing to find out.

But was it my business to find it out? I would not care to judge now whether my motives were pure or impure or to guess what an impartial jury might decide about them. So many considerations were involved. Possibly a curiosity, now insatiable, was among them, but the reasons for it may have been intrinsically good. After an evening, during which my wandering attention called forth several remarks from Susan, I decided on a certain step.

I telephoned the next morning to the Commissioner at Scotland Yard and asked if I could run over to see him. Thorpham was at school with me and is a good friend of mine, which means just two things: that he will always see me if I wish and he is able, and that he would do any small thing I asked within strict limits of propriety and duty.

'Well, Geoffrey,' he said, 'what is it this time?

'I wonder if you would do a little personal favour for me,' I said.

'Oh, personal!' he said, slightly smiling. 'Most certainly, if I can. What is it?'

Now, my object was to obtain some information about Mrs. Ross, but I knew that he would think this strange and would promptly refuse if he thought that I was troubling him with some trivial matter, or one which might have an ulterior motive, or could not be properly asked of him. I had decided on an indirect approach.

'Over thirty years ago,' I said, 'my only relative, a man called Lance Haynor, was killed in Natal. He was head of a big sugar concern. I don't know exactly what happened. As far as I know the case was never cleared up. It seemed clear that he was murdered and a native was suspected, but to the best of my knowledge nothing was proved against him.'

'Murder!' he said. 'That's serious. Well, what next?'

'I made what inquiries I could,' I said, 'but it was difficult at a distance, and Haynor was dead, and there seemed nothing to be done, so that in time it more or less dropped out of my mind. However, I've always wondered about it and wished I knew just where the matter ended, if it ended in anything but a blank trail. Now that I have sons of my own and the family seems to be taking root and branching out again, I'm making a little family history for them and I'd like to fill in the gaps about Haynor, if

I can. It's a curious and interesting episode and adds a touch of frontier colour to the story.' I paused.

'What do you want me to do?' he said.

'I wondered,' I said, 'if you could get the Natal police to send me over the papers of the case, so that I could make sure of what facts there are. It would be a personal satisfaction to me. Frankly, I've long felt that I should have done something about it before, if only from a sense of family duty. Also, it would make my records complete. I have everything else.'

'I see,' he said, thoughtfully, 'more than thirty years ago! That's a long time. Heavens, the file will be dusty, if they still have it. So that's what you want?'

'Yes,' I said.

He smiled, like a man who thinks there may be a little more to it, but that a reasonable request has been put in such a way that he may properly grant it. 'Well, I think I can do that for you,' he said. 'Yes, I don't see why not. At any rate, I'll make a polite request and see what they say. Is it urgent?'

'Well,' I said, 'perhaps hardly that, but the seamail takes a long time. Do you think you could write by airmail?'

'Why not?' he said again. 'If I'm going to do it at all I might as well do it quickly.'

'There's just one other thing,' I said. 'I hardly knew Haynor's wife. They were married not long before he was killed and after his death I lost touch with her. Do you think you could ask them if they know whether she is still in Natal, and if they have any address for her? I'd like to find out if she's still living if I could.'

'Reasonable enough,' he said. 'I'll do that. I'll say that I'm inquiring on behalf of a relative. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything.'

I thought I had gone as far as I could in the matter of Mrs. Ross and hoped the answer from Natal might supply the information I mainly wanted: when she had left South Arrica and come to England. I made a telephone call from a public box in Whitehall as I came away and that evening, before I drove home, met by appointment in a teashop in Victoria Street an invaluable man whom I had known, in the course of my duties, for many years.

This Henry Stalling was a retired detective-inspector whom we have occasionally used for inquiries needing much experience and discretion. He is indeed a private inquiry agent, but not of the, kind that offers keyhole services in the advertisement columns of the Press. He does not need to do that, nor does he handle small affairs of matrimonial espionage. He is implicitly trusted by the civil authorities and the police and by many eminent and respectable firms of family solicitors. His memoirs, which he will never write, would be of great interest.

'Stalling,' I said, 'this is a personal matter.'

'Personal!' he said, and like Thorpham he slightly raised his eyebrows.

'Entirely personal,' I said. 'I want you to find out everything you can for me about a Mrs. Ross,' and I added her address.

'I suppose this is in my line, sir?' he said politely.

'Absolutely,' I said. 'If you will take my word for that'

'Very good,' he said. 'Is this lady young or elderly?'

'Somewhere around fifty,' I said, and he nodded, as if reassured.

'What do you want to know about her?'

'As much as you can learn,' I said, 'for a special reason, but chiefly these things. When she came to England. I believe she lived in South Africa as a young woman,' I explained. 'Her name then was Mrs. Haynor, Marjorie Haynor. I'd like to know when she married this Mr. Ross, who he was, and when he died or they were divorced. I'd like to know anything you can learn about her way,of living. Don't be surprised at anything you come across.'

'Oh,' he said sharply, Van you give me a clue about that?'

'None whatever,' I said.

'I see,' he said, slowly. 'Ah, this is not official, sir?'

'This is strictly personal, between you and me.'

'I see,'he said again. 'Very well, sir, if you wish it. I'll let you know what I can learn.'

For good or evil, I reflected as I drove away, I had taken a decisive step. None would ever know of it, for Stalling contained more secrets than the Bank of England's vaults contain bullion. But I knew of it, and I suddenly had a feeling of discomfort at having yielded to an impulse too strong to be further restrained.

That week-end, a fortnight before we were to go to Mallerton, was incessantly wet, and from inactivity I decided to do something I had meant to do, in the manner of such intentions, for perhaps twenty years. My big desk at home, the bureau beside it, the filing cabinet and the long oak chest in the hall were bulging with my unsorted papers, the relics of a quarter-century, for I am of those men who love their mementoes and keepsakes and cannot bear to throw anything away. 'I *must* sort my papers' was a phrase, now grey with age, much used to taunt me by Susan and the children.

Now Susan joined enthusiastically in the dusty business of going through this great mass of letters, newspaper clippings, menu cards, invitation cards, membership cards, certificates, diplomas and seed-merchants' catalogues. All through a Saturday and a Sunday we worked, and still were not done.

At the bottom of the oak chest, in horrible disorder, we came on quantities of old snapshots and even more negatives. I had quickly outgrown my early passion for photography. The well-kept albums I had once envisaged had never been made. The only one I ever started now lay among the litter; a later fondness for my garden had always directed my footsteps towards it when reminders about 'sorting your papers' were given me.

Many of these negatives had never been printed and as I held them to the light and looked at them, before trying to put them back and having them firmly taken from me by Suson, who put them in the wastepaper basket, I had to ransack my memory to recall the vanished people and places they showed.

Then I held up one which I recognized at once. I remembered developing it, one evening many years before, soon after my return to England, and also remembered how I had always meant to print it, with many others, and always failed to.

'This is an interesting one,' I said. 'Look at this.'

Susan took it and tried to hold back its curling edges as she put it against the light. 'What is it?' she said. 'It looks like a scene in a play. What is this big man doing?'

'Believe it or not,' I said, 'that's Farmingham, whacking a kaffir. Do you remember, I told you about that?'

'Oh, that's an interesting one,' she said. 'Do you think it would print?'

'It looks very old and yellow,' I said. 'I suppose I could get some kind of print from it.'

'Oh, you must,' she said. 'It might be very valuable one day, when Mr. Farmingham's Prime Minister, or something. We *must* keep this one.' And she carefully put it aside, among the small residue of my treasures which was spared destruction.

4

SUSAN, a woman of practical mind, showed a high, and possibly exaggerated opinion of the material value of trifles which I had kept for sentimental reasons and which, from a tidy housewife's horror of my littered desk and bursting drawers, she had often urged me to throw away. She kept me firmly to the plan of the family album now that this side of her interest in it was awakened. Among my letters were a few from youthful friends who were now fairly famous men. These she held in great respect, saying that you never knew how valuable they might he one day. There were one or tw,o newspaper cuttings about my earlier prowess at cricket, including a record of the three runs I had made and the catch I had dropped when, the country being in sore straits, I had been chosen, for the first and last time, as eleventh man in a Test Match. There were school photographs of myself, which also included one or two school mates now publicly well known, wedding groups in which both she and I appeared as supporters of the one or other party, and the negative showing Farmingham.

"Let's get down to it right away and make a really interesting album. I always knew you must have some things worth keeping among all this rubbish. It will be so nice for the boys to have one day,' she said with maternal forethought. 'People are far too careless about passing on family relics to their children. They mean a lot with the passing of time.'

But for her the picture of Farmingham would, I am pretty sure, have gone into the basket. It was a dingy scrap of film. At her insistence, however, I took it and a few others to the chemist to print, while she bought her album and began fixing letters, cuttings and groups into it.

The prints, when I collected them, were a mixed lot, some fairly clear and some too poor to keep. Farmingham's was among the better ones, but it was not good. The growing sugar, and the mass of cane strewn about the ground, made an incomprehensible mass in the little snapshot, while the figures of the two men were too small and indistinct to mean much. I could not imagine Susan, even if Farmingham were one day to become lord of the earth, being able greatly to impress her friends by pointing to the tiny, dark form with upraised arm and saying, 'This is a photograph Geoffrey took of the great Farmingham when he was young.'

On this picture, however, Susan had set the snob's corner of her heart, and she is a determined woman. She was much disappointed when she saw it, for she had privately given it pride of place in the collection. She studied it with peevish face for a while and then said, 'I wonder if it would enlarge?'

'I shouldn't think so, by the look of it,' I said. 'I imagine it would be just one of those mazy blurs that you get when you attempt to squeeze more out of a poor negative than it contains.'

'Well, I'll take it and try,' she said, and she did.

I was astonished, when she triumphantly showed me the post-card-size enlargement, to see how much that aged fragment of film had recorded. The vague mass resolved itself into a clear and comprehensible whole, with each piece of cut or growing cane distinct and a wheel of the derailed truck showing beneath the debris. The chemist had cut out much of the wider background to give more of the central figures, and these emerged in dramatic postures. There was the gleam of the sun in the native's shining mahogany back, and the expression of fear on his face, turned towards the camera, as he looked round at the blow. Farmingham was recognizable, to me at all events. The buttons and the folds of his shirt showed, and his powerful neck rising from its open throat. Into the clear sky above the sugar rose his arm with the sjambok in its hand. Above the hand showed two inches of the heavy, ridged metal hilt. I looked at it closely and saw that it was either the same one that he habitually used in riding or one very much like it.

'What do you think of that?' said Susan. 'Isn't that worth having?'

'It's astonishing,' I said. 'It's certainly a good picture. I didn't know I had it in me.'

'What a great strong man he is,' she said. 'It's no wonder he's been so successful in his life.'

I was a little surprised. 'You admire it?' I said. 'But isn't it a little . . . repellent? Don't you feel brutality in it?'

She took it from me, as if perplexed. 'But I suppose the man deserved it,' she said. 'And isn't it more or less the usual thing in those places? Isn't it what they understand? Isn't it rather like a schoolmaster caning a naughty boy? They *are* children, aren't they?'

'Well, I've heard it argued like that,' I said, doubtfully. 1 don't know if the theory is universally accepted. Don't you think Farmingham would dislike the picture now, if he knew of it? I wonder if we ought to keep it.'

'Oh, nonsense,' she said, impatiently. 'Of course we'll keep it. We shan't show it to all and sundry anyway.'

'We won't show it to anyone,' I said.

'Anyway, it's there in the book and I think it will be of the greatest interest. I think Mr. Farmingham would be proud of it. If it were ever published I'm sure he would be able to give a good reason for what he was doing and it would add to his popularity. After all, it shows that he was strong and resolute and manly and knew what he wanted and wasn't frightened of anybody. Those are the sort of qualities that make a man great. If you're going to be a ruler of men I expect you have to have a streak of . . . er . . .' She paused, seeking the work she wanted.

'Brutality,' I suggested.

'No, that's too strong.'

'Ruthlessness?'

'Well, that's nearer. That and a passionate belief that you're right.'

'You certainly make a good case,' I said, 'but Farmingham isn't going to be a ruler of men. At least, not in the sense you seem to imply. He can only be a constitutional minister in this country, however far he rises.'

'Oh, that's humbugging about with words,' she said impatiently. 'You know what I mean.'

'Well, I can't see that flogging a native is a commendable part of the early training,' I said. 'Which was what you seemed to mean.'

'I meant that I don't see anything bad for him in this picture, in the circumstances.'

'Ah, you assume certain circumstances?'

'Oh, all right, then. You were there and you know the circumstances. Were you horrified at the time? Was anyone else?'

'No, I don't think I was,' I said, reflecting, 'I think I was a bit taken aback. As far as I remember other people held rather strong views for and against. It seems to be a division of opinion that goes right through mankind. I recollect that one man I talked to very warmly contended that Farmingham was right in his methods.'

'There you are,' she said conclusively. 'I told you so.'

I looked at the print again. 'It really is a remarkable picture,' I said. 'Look at the strength in that forearm, and the expression on Farmingham's face. He might be going to murder the man.'

Susan came and leaned over it. 'Yes, he does look like that,' she agreed. 'He could easily kill a man, couldn't he? I wonder if he ever has, in war, or fair fight, or something?'

'Not in war, as far as I know, anyway.'

5

AT no moment in my life have I been taken so much off balance as I was, the next day, when the woman who had been so much in my thoughts telephoned to me at the office. At first, when her voice said, 'This is Mrs. Ross,' I did not think of her, for a communication of any kind from her was among the last things in the world which I could expect. I instinctively tried to recall some Mrs. Ross, whom I should know and might have cause to hear from, among the women secretaries of the Department, or of another.

'Mrs. Ross?' I said hesitantly.

'Yes. I met you and your wife at the Verona's the other day.'

Verona is the Latin American diplomat whose party I had attended. Immediately the picture of her flashed into my mind, on that day, at the quiet hotel in Earl's Court, speaking bitter words into a telephone mouthpiece. With it came a lively sensation of unease. I could not imagine what she could want of me, but felt it could not be anything good.

'Oh yes, of course, Mrs. Ross,' I said, as non-committally as I could, and waited.

'Mr. Browne,' she said. 'I have a request to make. Don't think it terribly odd; after all we are not strangers.' She spoke in the tone of a nervous woman forcing herself to appear at ease and I felt she had rehearsed her words. Quicker than they can be put on paper different meanings chased each other through my mind. 'We are not strangers'; was she merely referring to our meeting at the cocktail party, or was there a deeper import? Could she be about to recall herself to me? I had convinced myself, after watching her face in the mirror, that for some reason she was resolved not to do that. Had she changed her mind, and why? What on earth was she at?

'Certainly we are not strangers,' I said, politely. 'What can I do?'

'I want to see you urgently,' she said. 'And I cannot very well call at your office. Will you please come and see me at my house?'

'I'm afraid that is awkward,' I began. 'I am very busy.

She broke in. 'I know all that,' she said. 'But this is a most important matter and I particularly want to see you for an especial reason. Please do come. You can drive here in ten minutes, I am not very far away.' She gave me the address, and added, 'I beg you to come this afternoon.'

'What is this matter?' I asked.

'If I could tell you on the telephone I should not ask you to come to Earl's Court. It is of the greatest importance,' she repeated.

I sought for a smooth excuse and found myself confused.

From any other importunity I should quickly have disengaged myself, but with her I was taken off my usual guard. The truth is, I think, that the relationships between human beings are complex beyond understanding. What I knew about her, even if she did not know that I knew it, established some communion of our minds that was strong, if obscure. Although we were on the surface only casual acquaintances, the deeper truth was in my mind and made it difficult for me to say no to her.

Weakly I said I would come at five o'clock. Five minutes after I put down the receiver I suddenly realized that I was pacing my room in open agitation. I was much troubled in my mind and could not think why I had agreed to go. I felt the greatest distaste for this interview and would have gladly avoided it, yet I could not bring myself to take up the telephone and make an excuse, or, more cowardly still, to have someone else do that for me.

As I drove to Earl's Court, however, I found I could not deny the chief reason for my reluctance to go. Conscience may not habitually make cowards of men, but it quickly does so when they fear to be found out. Suddenly the thought of my instructions to Stalling lay heavy on my conscience, which had not felt any weight before. Was it conceivable, I wondered, that Mrs. Ross had in some way learned that I was having inquiries made about her? No, I told myself, that was beyond belief; I knew Stalling. Nevertheless, this anxiety remained and accompanied me into Mrs. Ross's house and drawing-room, and made me feel unpleasantly small and apprehensive. If by some mischance it were the case, I could not foresee the further consequences. I can now see nothing wrong in my motives or conduct *in* the business, yet at that moment I was ready to feel myself convicted beyond appeal as an inexcusably insolent meddler, had she pointed an accusing finger at me as I came through the door and said, 'I know what you have been up to!'

So disconcerting was the prospect of this humiliating moment, that my first sensation was one of great relief when I saw that she was going to say no such thing. Whatever was on her mind, it clearly was not an infuriating knowledge of my action, and I am still a little shocked to recall how much nobler a man I felt when I realized that she had not discovered it. That fear once removed, and anything she had to say, I thought, could only be by comparison pleasant.

She met me with the excessive composure of a troubled woman who tries to make an unnatural situation appear a natural one. I said, when she inquired, that I would have a glass of sherry. She poured for herself what she had offered me, some whisky, and something in her manner made me wonder if she had already been fortifying herself for this interview. A glance at the bottle told me that this was possible, if not sure.

As we sat down, together in a quiet room again after very many years, I saw more plainly what time had made of Marjorie Haynor. Of what I remembered only the exceptional bosom, now fuller, remained, and the figure, still good and, I conjectured, carefully preserved. The golden hair, now uncovered, the pencilled eyebrows and bright lips could not conceal, indeed they made more legible, the tale of disappointments and discontent. Behind her hard self-control lurked the perceptible sense of injury and wrong, of complaint against her lot. Whatever she had done and wherever she had been, she had not found peace or content *in* the populous places for which she had longed in that bygone day.

Her laboured calm made her inner disquiet more evident. She looked like a woman who was forcing herself to some difficult, if not distasteful, step, and during the first exchanges I waited to learn what it might be with some uneasiness on my own account, as I have shown. She inquired about my wife and thanked me for coming and then said abruptly, 'Mr. Browne, do you not remember me?'

So that is all it is, I told myself, and immediately I felt much better. She had decided to resolve an awkward situation by recalling herself to me. In those circumstances it was not unnatural that she should ask me to call, though she had perhaps overstated the urgency and importance of the matter. I could not, however, reveal that I knew what she meant; that would call for more explanation than I could give.

'Remember you, Mrs. Ross?' I said, as if at a loss. 'Of course I do. We met not so long ago.'

'You have forgotten me, then. I thought you had. I am Marjorie Haynor.'

I still felt like a man treading near quicksands, and picked my way cautiously. 'Marjorie Haynor,' I said, as if baffled for a moment. 'Good heavens! Is it possible? Do you know, I felt sure I knew you when we first met but when my wife joined us I thought I must simply have seen you talking to her somewhere. You must think me a dolt. It was inexcusable. But it was so very long ago, and your name gave me no clue, and we have all changed.

'Go on, talk about my hair,' she said, with the crude familiarity I had noticed before, and once more I wondered about the bottle; her harsh brightness always gave hint of something unpleasant below, or to come.

'Why did you not recall yourself to me?' I said.

'I wasn't sure either at first,' she said. 'I think I only made up my mind as I was going away from that party. You have altered a good deal yourself.'

I suddenly found myself feeling much warmer towards her. The bonds of old acquaintance, I notice as I advance in years, are strong; one discovers an unsuspected affection even for people one disliked, if one bnly knew them long enough ago. On top of that, two of the intangible but formidable barriers between us were down. We had declared our acquaintance and I could no longer suspect her of some mysterious motive for wishing to deny it. She patently did not know of my own action about her;

this gave me at once a feeling of comfortable virtue and of some regret at having undertaken it. However, it would have harmed none, even if it were now to prove unnecessary. My forebodings almost vanished.

'I am so very glad we have met again and that you knew me,' I said. 'I wrote to you once or twice but you did not reply.'

'Didn't I?' she said, somewhat casually. 'I'm afraid I can't remember now. Perhaps your letters didn't reach me. I left Natal soon after Lance's death. There was nothing I could say, anyway. It was a bad business.'

I noticed that she did not say 'a sad business' and again felt vaguely repelled by her apparent callousness, which seemed to be her nature, unless it was a garment given her by hard experience and time. She finished her drink, all too quickly, and poured another, while my small glass was still nearly full.

'Was nothing ever ascertained about Lance's death?' I asked.

'No, nothing conclusive,' she said, 'They put it down to some native but couldn't prove it against any of them. Such things happen fairly often in those parts or they did at that time, and the police were pretty helpless in such a jungle. Of course, they weren't up to European standards, anyway.'

She may have been unaware how little interest she appeared to me to show; after all, I was Lance's kinsman. There seemed no gain in pursuing it, and as she did not offer further remark I threw in one.

'You married again?' I said.

'I'm a widow,' she said, without direct reply or further information, and again in the tone of one talking about unimportant or even irrelevant things.

'And have you been very long in England?'*

'Oh yes, a long time now,' she said.

'I remember that you had a keen desire to know the older countries and their cities and people,' I said.

'Did I?' she said. 'Well, I've had my fill of them.' Once more she spoke in a coarse and ironic voice and I reflected that the cool and enclosed young woman had deteriorated with embitterment, or whatever acid was in her soul. She took another large and impatient mouthful of her drink. I was for an instant at a loss to continue, when she spoke again. 'And so you are an important man now and Mr. Farmingham's right hand?' she said.

'Mr. Farmingham?' I said. 'Well, hardly that. I'm one of his senior officials.'

'And don't you remember him either?' she asked.

'*Remember* him!' I said, as if perplexed. 'How do you mean?'

'Don't you know that he was on the plantation when you were there?'

'Mr. Farmingham?' I said. 'You mean in Natal?'

'Yes,' she said.

'But it's impossible,' I said. 'I can't be forgetting everybody. You make me feel a congenital idiot. Did I meet him?'

'No,' she said. 'But I'm almost certain you saw him.'

'Do you mean that I may have had a glimpse of him?' I said. 'Well, I suppose I can't be expected to remember everybody I've ever laid eyes on. What was he?'

'He was an overseer. Don't you remember Lance complaining about his methods with the natives?'

I looked as if I concentrated my thoughts. 'Well, when you mention it I could imagine that I faintly recall some such talk about someone,' I said. 'But really it's so very long ago, I may only imagine it because you put it in my mind.'

'Anyway,' she said, in an unpleasant tone, 'he remembers you.' Immediately the scene in the hotel flashed into my mind and I thought I knew how Farmingham had come to remember me. Why was she lying to me, for this was implicitly a falsehood?

'Does he?' I said. 'What an extraordinary thing, if we never met. He's never mentioned it to me.'

'Well, he does,' she said, 'and he distrusts you. He doesn't like people who know things about him.' The words were said in an unmistakably hostile tone, but whether their edge was against me or Farmingham I could not judge.

'Know things about him!' I said. 'What on earth do you mean? What do I know about him save that, as you tell me, we were in the same place at the same time?'

'That's just it,' she said. 'He won't forgive you that. He'll think you know more than you do.'

'I can't imagine what you mean,' I said. 'But why are yon telling me this?'

. She stood up. Suddenly her self-control broke and I saw a distraught woman, ravaged and desperate, a little drunk, bursting with her grievances, who was ready to carry out some hysterical purpose.

'Mr. Browne,' she said. 'That man's not fit to be where he is. He's not fit. He's done things... it isn't right. I won't stand by any longer and watch him posing as the great and honourable public man.

'Mrs. Ross,' I said, 'if this is the important matter you wanted to see me about, I fear I must go. I cannot listen to any more... .'

'Why not?' she said, and she began to cry and raise her voice, 'After all, you were Lance's cousin.'

I had stood up to go and now stopped in my tracks. 'Lance!' I said. 'What has Lance to do with this?'

'I told you,' she said, leaning her ruined face towards me and beating time with her head to her almost incoherent words, 'he's done things ... I can't bring myself to say them aloud, but I know .. . Who else could I go to? I couldn't walk into Scotland Yard or your office and just ask to see somebody. It seemed like a miracle when I heard that you were in his Department. You're the only man who could do something about it. . ..'

'Mrs. Ross,' I said. 'If you mean that you know something about Mr. Farmingham that the police ought to know, you may have forgotten that you have made yourself equally liable by concealing it . . .'

'I don't care,' she snapped back.

'. . . and I suppose you realize that I shall have to tell Mr. Farmingham of this interview.'

'I don't care,' she shouted again. 'He's made me suffer all these years and I'll make him suffer now. I'm not afraid of him, even if everybody else is, and he knows I'm not.

As I came down the stairs, even sorrier for going there than I had ever feared to be, I heard her shouting after me through the closed door. 'And you'd better look out for yourself,' I thought she said.

6

I DROVE away from that house a deeply worried man. I no longer had any doubt about one thing: I felt sure that I was unwittingly caught up in some tangled process of human affairs, still unclear in shape, which was certainly about to reach a climax, and the nature of that I could even less foresee. I was inextricably involved in it now and if I were not lucky it might seriously affect me personally. I might have to resign and ruin a career which was become part of me, as the only means of escape from an official relationship with Farmingham now insupportable; I could not much longer wear a mien of candid innocence towards him when I answered his call to discuss some departmental matter.

I do not know whether a native tendency towards indecision prevented me from resolving on any such step, or whether some instinct bade me wait a little before making up my mind. At any rate I determined that I would not immediately do two things which were in my thoughts. I would not cancel our visit to Mallerton, for if Farmingnam were suspicious of me that would only make him think he had better grounds for distrust than any I could imagine in his mind now. I would not tell him of my interview with Mrs. Ross. The more I thought of it the more painful and even inconceivable such a course appeared to me. I felt a strong sense of duty towards him, which Mrs. Ross had if anything reinforced, but I simply could not picture myself describing that scene or repeating her words. Some things are impossible, at all events for some men, and of these I am one. I decided that a situation beyond my control was developing and must find its detonation point as inevitably as the thunder of gathering storm clouds. Whom the lightning struck, if it came, or whether it buried itself in harmless earth, were things outside my power to choose.

Having such anxieties, the journey to Mallerton was even more disagreeable than that to Earl's Court. I could not guess where the matter might embroil me next, or whether Farmingham himself might now make me the third party in a triangle where I had no business. I felt aggrieved at its persistent inclusion of me, telling myself, as I looked backward along the years, that I had never intentionally done anything at all to intrude myself in it; repeatedly it caught me up. The only exception to that was the order I had given to Stalling, an impetuous move which I regretted now though I believed I had good cause at the time; and anyway neither Farmingham nor Mrs. Ross could know of it.

I could not unburden myself to Susan, who was worried by my apparent moodiness. Most men may share business or other vexations with their wives, but an official has an especial duty of discretion, and in this case, where vague but alarming assertions about my own Chief were at issue, I was doubly bound to prudence. My mind was chiefly exercised with Mrs. Ross's cryptic allusion to Lance Haynor, which might have meant much or little. It might have been a frantic woman's way of saying that I could not refuse to listen to the troubles of a dead relative's wife; it might have implied that Farmingham had something to do with Lance's death. I tried to remember if such a possibility had occurred to me at the time and could not recapture any thought of the kind; if it had, it had at once disappeared beneath the general assumption, often stated as almost a fact, that a native was the culprit. The effect of her remark, however, was to make me look forward with a new and different impatience to the arrival of the papers from Natal. I was much more interested now in what they might tell me of Lance's death than in any news they could give of Mrs. Ross.

In a mood of troubled anticipation, then, I entered Farmingham's house, while Susan smiled happily at the prospect of a delightful week-end, and indeed, as she was unsuspecting of the things I knew, I think she was not disappointed. Farmingham, who knew her slightly from crowded functions, welcomed her with heavy courtesy; his wife, who had not met her before, fussed in a motherly way about her.

I soon felt that Farmingham was not going to advert to my visit to Natal; after all, his position in that matter was nearly as difficult as mine in the one of Mrs. Ross. I was sensible, however, of an uneasy atmosphere in the house. It betrayed itself to me first in Mrs. Farmingham's nervous and fluttering energy. She was, more than before, the woman ever striving to soothe or mollify a difficult man, and her anxious glances at him caught my eye, if they escaped that of my placid Susan.

Whatever cloud hung over the place revealed itself more clearly in Farmingham himself, who for all his practised courtliness could not quite conceal an air of troubled preoccupation. I thought I knew the reasons, but to Susan or another the thought might merely have occurred that he was unwell.

Indeed, that may have been the cause, or another cause, for at dinner that night I suddenly remarked how much his weight had increased and how heavily it bore on him. A mountain of a man he was, I realized, as he sat slumped in his chair, talking deeply and slowly, breathing hard and nodding ponderously. From the way he played with minute scraps of food it was clear that he strove hard to reduce his bulk and could not succeed. He might very well be ill, I thought, watching this, and wondered if some glandular process were at work in him. To an unusually big and powerful man, long accustomed to feel himself exempt from the ills or fatigues of weaker beings, this might seem an especially exasperating affliction, and cause him to rebel with the greater impatience against private worries. If the pump of his blood by nature worked too rapidly, this excessive flesh would increase the stresses on his mind and body. I looked at his great neck straining its collar, the heavy jowl hanging over it, and the protuberant eyes, and understood the nervous concern in Mrs. Farmingham's glance.

Even Susan observed something of this and said, as we went to bed, 'Isn't Mrs. Farmingham a nice woman? Geoff, do you think Mr. Farmingham isn't very well?'

'He doesn't look too fit, does he?' I said.

'I do hope he isn't going to get ill,' she said. 'Did you notice, he ate hardly anything?'

'Yes, and that's not good,' I said. 'For it means that he's feeling his size and that it doesn't respond to treatment. Sometimes these very big men, who have never given a thought to illness, suddenly find their bodies failing them in the late fifties.'

'Oh dear,' she said. 'It would be tragic if anything like that happened now. The country can't afford to lose men like Mr. Farmingham.'

The next day and Sunday brought continual rain, so that we were constantly indoors save for the visit to church, which Farmingham allowed nothing to prevent. Susan was perfectly happy chatting to Mrs. Farmingham and playing a little bridge, and managed now and again to rouse Farmingham to a paternal and benevolent geniality. For the remainder of the time, however, I found the air of the household oppressive. When I was alone with Farmingham, especially, I felt a malevolence in him.

It seemed to me more than an irritability which poor health could explain and because of Mrs. Ross's remark I could not suppress the reluctant feeling that it was directed against me. Had he been well he might better have disguised it, but as he now was I thought she was right; for whatever reason, he distrusted me. I concluded that there was too much between us, though it was little enough and once might have been dissipated by a few candid words, and decided that I would have to make some final decision about resigning my post without much further delay.

This thing, so strongly felt by me, was too subtle and intangible clearly to describe. It was a mere something in his eyes and manner, in the tone of words which in themselves were harmless or even idle. I noticed it particularly when, on Sunday evening, after Mrs. Farmingham and Susan left us alone, he spoke of a matter which, had I not suspected other things, would have seemed above all else to preoccupy his thoughts.

This was the case of Joseph Penchurl, the man sentenced to death, for whose reprieve a considerable clamour was now waxing. Penchurl's story was bleak and complex. He lived in poverty with his wife and two infant children. His wife had gone mad and been put in an asylum. After a little while Penchurl had murdered the two children. His explanation was that he feared they would inherit the mother's taint and that he had meant to commit suicide. He made no attempt, however, saying on arrest that his courage had failed him. His counsel's plea of insanity failed, the prosecution's specialist witness maintaining that he was responsible for his actions. The jury found him guilty and made no recommendation of mercy; the killing of the children was sufficiently horrifying. Nevertheless, some public objection to the verdict made itself heard and quickly grew into a loud campaign for the commutation of his sentence. Ready sympathy was found for the argument that, in a wider interpretation, the man had been insane from distress and poverty at the time of his deed. A petition received many signatures and

Farmingham had been forced to agree to receive a deputation, which was to call on him during the week following our visit to Mallerton.

The responsibility was his and his alone, and it lay heavily on his mind; indeed, i' appeared to obsess him. For some time now he had been poring over the papers, discussing them with his subordinates, and balancing the for and against. He was the model of a constitutional Minister in this matter. If any thought ever occurred to him (and politicians are not always immune from such, even in so grave a business) that a decision one way or the other might help or harm his public popularity, we never had reason to suspect it. In his growling way he seemed intent on coming to one decision only: the just one. Only he could now temper justice with mercy. He was clearly resolved, whichever course he took, to uphold the highest tradition of the post at which he had been stationed.

No more difficult dilemma can fall on the holder of a political office. The temptation to court an easy public reputation for compassion is near at hand, and perhaps the very fear of yielding to it may have led some men, in the same situation, to decide against reprieve; possibly this fear was in Farmingham's mind too. He knew what the jury and the public, under the rules of British justice, had not been told: that Penchurl had on an earlier occasion been charged with a murder and acquitted. He also knew that the police on that occasion felt their evidence of Penchurl's guilt to be conclusive, and that a previous conviction for violent assault had been similarly withheld from the knowledge of the court.

Now Farmingham, as we sat together with the port, broached this subject again. He rose laboriously from his chair, fetched a briefcase from his study, sat down, pushed glass and decanter aside, and spread papers, which he began to turn over.

'What do you think about this?' he said. 'You're an expert in such matters.'

I was struck by the rasping sneer in his voice. I supposed I was an expert in discussing such matters with my Chiefs; it was my job and I had often done it. But his tone suggested either that I knew nothing about them or that he did not care what I thought. Again I felt, in a matter which did not affect either of us personally, a personal edge turned against myself; such was the inflection.

'God forbid, sir,' I said. 'I've had to do with a good many cases of the kind and the more there are of them, the less I feel I know.'

'Do you ever remember one like this?'

'Just like this, no,' I said. 'It's about the most complicated I recall.'

'H'm. You wouldn't like to be in my place, eh?' Again that strangely provocative note.

'I certainly would not. I can't imagine a more harassing responsibility.'

'Well, it doesn't worry me,' truculently. 'I'm not going to be jostled into anything by a lot of namby-pamby talk in newspapers looking for cheap circulation.'

This was cruder talk than I had heard from Farmingham for a long time and incongruous in so serious a matter. I wondered if he were yielding to the temptation to watch himself making a grave decision, rather than the business itself, or whether bis bodily condition was weakening his prudence.

'You have made up your mind, then?' I said, guardedly.

'I didn't say that,' he said gruffly. 'I said I wouldn't let anybody else make it up for me — and I won't,' he added looking up and at me. I had attempted no such thing, but once more he seemed to indict me personally.

Clearly this difficult conversation was to continue and I sought for some remark that could not give offence. 'What do you think arc the main issues, sir?' I asked.

'What do *you* think?' he countered.

There was no escape from that. 'Well, it's not for me to sum up,' I said, 'but I suppose your thoughts are given chiefly to Penchurl's past record, which is not publicly known, and to the plea that he was in fact insane at the moment.'

'Exactly!' he said, thumping the papers. 'That's what it all boils down to. Is he a murderer? Was he insane? There's no doubt that he's a murderer. That isn't in dispute, even on the known facts. He murdered his children. In my humble opinion' (even these words appeared to contain some mysterious rebuke to myself) 'he was a murderer the first time.'

'But he was acquitted.'

'He was acquitted only on a point of law. There was no real denial that he was guilty. And the jury didn't know of his earlier record. Look at it!' He took one of the sheets of paper and flourished it. 'The man has been a violent character all his life. If ever there was a murderer, he's one. Am I to let such a man loose on society again, perhaps in fifteen years time, because of a lot of ignorant clamour!'

I did not know what to say. Whatever the strength of the argument, it was strongly presented, and objections were clearly not desired. Farmingham appeared to be coming to a clear perception of his duty to society.

'Then there only remains the question, whether he was insane,' I said.

'Insane!' he said with a heavy mockery. 'Was he insane the first time, or the time before that? You couldn't have a better or more merciful man than Ambery. Could he bring himself to deny that Penchurl was responsible? No! He would have done if he could but his duty wouldn't let him. Insane! Who's not insane? We're all insane! Everybody's a bit queer save thee and me, and even thee's a bit queer!'

There was no mistake: he was talking, not about Penchurl, but to me. His jaw was thrust pugnaciously towards me and his eyes were plainly hostile. His words and manner were not normal.

Suddenly the suspicion came to me, with the effect of shock, that Farmingham *was* a hit queer. He looked it and behaved like it, and I had never seen him so before. His expression was more than disagreeable, it was dangerous. With his great head slumped into the shoulders of his massive body he looked like some large and venomous toad.

It was only the revelation of a fleeting instant, and then I saw caution return to his eyes. He shuffled the papers heavily into the briefcase, and said more equably, 'Well, that's neither here nor there. I know what I have to do. Shall we go into the other room?' and led the way there. Mrs. Farmingham watched us enter with uneasy relief.

Farmingham, in her and Susan's presence the courteous host again, chatted pleasantly enough and before we went upstairs clapped me cordially on the shoulder, saying, 'Well, I'm sorry about the weather, Geoffrey, but if it's fine in the morning we'll have that ride yet. I want you to try Simpleton.'

The next morning was dry and I went down early to find Farmer John heaving himself stertorously into the saddle. Once in it, he looked half his weight; his horsemanship was superb. I mounted Simpleton. I had been shown this beast in its stable and was resolved to be cautious in forming a judgment about it. I had once or twice before been given some strange mounts by friends too generous in their estimate of my powers.

We took the horses at a walk down the drive, across a field and through a gate, which Farmingham opened, into another, a stony one which rose slightly towards what looked like a low brick wall some distance away. Farmingham seemed to have some trouble in closing the gate and I was well into the field, still walking my horse, when I heard hooves and he flashed by me at a full gallop, whipping his horse, and shouting: 'Come on, Geoffrey! Come on, Simpleton!'

I felt Simpleton vibrate and shoot forward as if she had *received* a galvanic shock of high voltage and knew at once that

I was on something much more than I was accustomed to. At the same instant I felt something wrong with my saddle. Fortunately I had the reins short and taut and by using all my strength was able to hold her before she could get clear away. As she fought against the bit I felt the saddle slipping and before she quite stopped I was off, half-dismounting and half-falling; I came down rather painfully on my shoulder and gashed my chin on a stone, but I was almost thankful to have these small hurts when I thought what I might have received, had I parted with Simpleton at her full speed.

I saw Farmingham clear the brick wall without looking back and reflected that he had not told me of any jumps. Then I walked to the saddle, which lay on the ground while Simpleton careered after Farmingham. I examined the girth and found that the tongue of the buckle was broken off. While I was looking at it Farmingham's silhouette broke the sky over the brick wall and he came galloping back, with horror and inquiry large on his face.

'What on earth happened, Geoffrey?' he said. 'Did she throw you? Are you hurt?'

'No, I'm not hurt,' I said. 'The girth slipped. The buckle's broken,' and I showed it to him.

'Good God!' he said. 'What a dreadful thing! I'll sack Grimsby for this.'

'Oh no,' I said. 'I don't suppose it was his fault.'

'Are you sure you are all right?'

'Yes, perfectly. I managed to slow her down and fall off.'

'My dear fellow, you might have been killed. I shall never forgive myself. Are you able to walk? Shall I go and get help? Would you like to take my horse?'

'No, I think I'll walk,' I said. 'I'm as right as rain. You'd better go after Simpleton.'

Susan was much alarmed, but quickly reassured, when she found that I really had suffered small harm.

'You men ought never to be allowed out alone,' she nevertheless said, on our way back to London. 'Something always happens. Thank goodness it wasn't worse. That would have been a fine ending to our nice week-end.'

7

THE thought did not occur to me at the moment of this episode that it could be anything more than unlucky chance. I was in that instant too much shaken, and too thankful for a fortunate escape, to think of anything else. But it did obtrude itself in my mind during the day, as memory began to piece together the fragments of a strange week-end. Farmingham's unpleasant manner towards me, never before so pronounced, had left a taste I could not lose. I was puzzled by the jump of which he had not warned me. I am no steeplechaser and it was not the part of a host to assume that I was equal to clearing a difficult and unsuspected obstacle at a full gallop. And then, the broken buckle; that could have happened to anybody, but I wished I had examined it more closely.

However, these doubts would never have come to me had it not been for the impalpable but strong unfriendliness of his manner, and for this, the more I thought of it the less I was able to account. I could not but connect it with Mrs. Ross's mysterious allusions, but they remained a riddle. If some shadow lay over Farmingham's early life, of which he felt he could not rid himself, why should he associate me with it? As I recalled his strange mien and words I began to entertain serious doubts about his mind. I wondered if he were approaching that dangerous state in which a man sees more menaces and enemies round him than there are. If his senses were clouding, it was conceivable that Simpleton, the jump and the broken buckle were not all chances.

During the day Stalling telephoned and asked if we could meet in **the** late afternoon at the same place as before. He **was there** when I arrived and I thought he was a little more serious than usual.

'Well, Mr. Browne,' he said. 'I've a good deal to tell you. I don't know how much of it will be new to you.'

'Possibly not much,' I said. 'By chance I've learned a few things myself since I saw you. What have you found out?'

'Mrs. Ross came to England about twenty-five years ago,' he said. 'And she's been living in London all the time, most of it in the house she now occupies. Now, you asked me to find about Mr. Ross.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Who is he, or who was he?'

'There is no Mr. Ross,' he said. 'She changed her name by deed poll soon after she came here. She was Mrs. Haynor before that.'

'Good lord,' I said. One trail, which I had thought promising, seemed to find a blank and baffling end there. Then it occurred to me that if her association with Farmingham had continued from the time of Lance's death, and had indeed begun before it, this might have been a way of covering up its early origins. 'Of course, you don't know why she did that?' I said.

'That's something nobody is likely to find out,' he said. 'There's always a reason in such cases, but who can guess what it is? She seems to be wealthy, and goes about a lot.' He stopped.

'Are there any men in her life?' I said.

'I was just coming to that/ he said. 'Mr. Browne, you told me not to be surprised at anything I found out. Did you have anybody particular in mind?'

'I may have had,' I said.

'Ah!' he said. 'Well, in that case I needn't mention any names. Do you think you should have put me on to this job?'

'I told you I believed I had good reasons,' I said. 'And I still think that. I have no cause to doubt them, nor need you reproach yourself.'

'Well,' he said, guardedly, 'you ought to know better than anyone. I was worried when I found out what I *was* getting into, but if you knew where the matter would lead I suppose it's all right. As I say, I shan't name any names. You must judge whether what I say is what you expected and whether we have the same person in mind. There is one gentleman who seems to have been connected with Mrs. Ross right from the time she came to England, and for all I know before that, and only one.'

'Yes,' I said, 'that doesn't surprise me now. Go on.'

'She owns the house she occupies,' he said. 'But she didn't buy it. He bought it and made it over to her by deed of gift many years ago. As far as I can learn, they have always been inseparable, in a very quiet and discreet way, with one exception. He visits her regularly, usually two or three times a week. They often dine out together, but seldom in the same place twice, and they generally use some quiet private hotel out of town. Of course, at their ages there is absolutely nothing to cause remark in such a friendship.'

'But they weren't always of their present age,' I said.

'No, sir, they were not,' he said. .'And, as I say, the matter goes back a very long way.'

'It might have been a passionate affair when it began,' I said.

'Oh yes. But you know how it is, sir, such liaisons become almost respectable when they go on long enough.'

'Even when the man concerned is married?'

'Is the person you have in mind married?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, then it may be the same.'

'It's also possible,' I said, 'in that case, that the affair is one to which he would long since have put an end, if he could, but that Mrs. Ross is not the woman to allow that.'

'Well, yes,' he said slowly. 'That is also a possibility which I had in mind. I mentioned that there was one exception to their discreet behaviour.'

'Yes, I was going to ask you about that.'

'Well it's a good many years ago now, before this gentleman was as prominent as he now is. On that occasion they were staying at a country hotel together, or at any rate at the same hotel. Now Mrs. Ross, from what I can learn, sometimes drinks a good deal. She is apt to become excitable when she does and her servants don't stay with her for that reason. On the occasion I speak of she seems to have had too much and made a scene in a public room of the hotel. She was heard by other guests to tell this gentleman that she would make him pay for his treatment of her and to jeer at him for posing as a respectable married man. They were asked to leave and the matter came to the notice of the local police. That was how I came to learn of it.'

'I see,' I said. 'Well, it all fits in. You don't know,' I added, recalling that Lance had been a poor man and that Marjorie Haynor had not made the impression of having substantial means of her own, 'where her money comes from?'

'No,' he said. 'But the matter of her house suggests an obvious explanation.'

'Well, thank you very much, Mr. Stalling,' I said. 'You haven't told me very much that I didn't either know or at least suspect. Do believe that there was good ground for my request to you?'

'Oh, I do, sir,' he said. 'But I own that I have an unhappy feeling about the business, and I have a request to make to *you*. In all the circumstances I think I ought privately to tell Mr. Thorpham about it. He would expect it from me in such a matter. Have you any objection?'

I thought for a moment. This was awkward, although to inform Thorpham was merely like putting a third copy of a secret document in yet another safe. I could fully understand how Stalling felt. His position was a unique one: he was so much used by authority that he was almost part of it, and I saw now that I had expected much of him in launching him *on* this inquiry without clearer hint of the way it might lead him. I could see, too, that Thorpham would be shocked, and that my own position would become much more difficult. Nevertheless, I realized that I could not prevent Stalling from putting himself in what he saw as the right.

'Very well,' I said. 'I'll have a word with Mr. Thorpham, if you will wait a day or two, so that he is not taken by surprise.'

He suggested that he should see Thorpham the next day and I agreed.

8

THAT evening Farmingham telephoned to me to say that he had returned to town, and the following morning I drove up early, anticipating that Farmer John would make one of his premature appearances, riding down the Mall from Belgrave Square to look at the papers on his desk before breakfast.

There was good reason to suppose this. The matter of Joseph Penchurl was now at its climax and on the morrow Farmingham was due to receive the deputation organized to demand his reprieve. A large sheaf of further documents about the case now lay on Farmingham's desk. The newspapers, perceiving an opportunity to support a cause that had wide popular support and no political implications, were giving leading articles and long reports to the business and the public mind was being whipped into a state of somewhat morbid expectancy, waiting from edition to edition to know whether Penchurl was to die or live.

I had not seen the morning newspapers before I left home. Now, after running through departmental documents about the matter, and checking the names of the members of the deputation and the time of their appointment, I turned to them, marking in pencil everything they wrote about Penchurl so that this might be cut, arranged and laid before Farmingham when he arrived. When I had done this I glanced rapidly through the other contents, to see if there was anything of particular interest to him, when I noticed in the stop-press space of one of them a small item which said briefly that a body had been found which was believed to be that of Mr. Albert Smithson, who had disappeared during a parliamentary by-election at Mallerton some years ago. I was quickly on the telephone to the police and jotted down what they had learned since this report had been sent off to the newspaper the evening before.

The only thing they could add to the report was that the body was undoubtedly Smithson's, whose manner of returning to the world was as strange as that of his departure from it. This was a year marked by great floods, worse than any remembered in England, and the waters were now subsiding, leaving havoc and debris behind them. Smithson was found in a field, not far from a river, from which the floodwater had fallen; the place was about twelve miles from Mallerton. It was impossible to tell whether it had lain in the river and been carried by the floods into the field, there to remain; or whether it had been washed out of some resting-place further away, brought down and left where it was found by the ebbing waters as they made their way to the river. It was no more than a skeleton and what injuries it showed might have been caused by bufferings in the torrent.

The one certain thing was that it was Smithson. By a wonder his false teeth were still in place and they fitted neatly into the • mould which the Mallerton police, with all possibilities in mind, had taken from his dentist there at the time of the disappearance. In effect, they said, as if the dead man himself had spoken, 'Here I am, I'm Smithson.'

The police told me they were making a close search of the ground near the place where he was found in the faint prospect of finding some further relic which, even at this length of time, might give a new lead to their old investigations, but they frankly had small hope of this. In the absence of some clearly alarming indication, such as a bullet hole or a major injury to the skull, they still inclined to their old theories — a voluntary disappearance ending in mischance or suicide, or loss of memory leading to an accidental death. Though Smithson had returned, nothing about him pointed to any new opinion in this matter. I put down the telephone and reflected that the newspaper reports about his reappearance were likely to form but a brief and uninformative sequel to the long dispatches of their special correspondents during the nine-days wonder of his vanishing.

Farmer John, as I expected, stumped heavily into his room soon after eight o'clock, red-faced and breathing hard. He was, however, even more courteous and considerate to me than I might have anticipated from a man on whose land and horse I had nearly suffered severe damage. I had already been surprised by this demonstrative concern (he had telephoned to my house the evening before to ask if I were quite recovered) and was again wondering if I had misjudged him for a livery mood.

Now he threw his sjambok on the desk and before looking at his papers turned with an almost apologetic smile to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. 'How are you, Geoffrey ?' he said. 'Did you have that chin stitched?'

'Oh no,' I said. 'It wasn't worth it, really. A small piece of plaster meets the case.'

'Tut,' he said. 'I told you to have it stitched. And your shoulder?'

I said that was also of no consequence, and was merely a little sore.

'My dear boy,' he said (although few years lay between him and his senior officials he sometimes used this address towards them and he was so much bigger than most of us that it seemed not incongruous), 'I can't tell you how sorry I am. I'm thankful it was no worse. I've given Grimsby the fright of his life. He sweats the girth was all right when he saddled Simpleton. I suppose these things must happen sometimes, but I don't like them to happen to my guests.'

'Please don't think any more about it on my account, sir,' I said. 'There's simply no need.'

'All's well that ends well, eh?' he said, laughing and turning to his desk. 'Well now, what about Mr. Penchurl? How is he going to end?'

He sat down and took the papers, reading and putting aside one cutting after another. 'I see the compassion of the Press is being lavished on him,' he said after a while, on a note of sardonic contempt. 'How they love to echo the cry of the mob if it doesn't touch their pockets or clash with any interest of their proprietors. This man,' and he waved a leading article, 'almost makes Penchurl appear a public hero. He seems entirely to have forgotten those children. Geoffrey, don't you think some of these editors ought to be given a hint about Penchurl's past record? Some of this stuff is nauseating.'

'I don't think we could do that,' I said. 'It is such an old rule that a man's past misdeeds must not be brought up to cause prejudice against him in a matter of murder.'

'I wonder if that rule isn't carried too far,' he said, thoughtfully. 'It makes matters very difficult for the man who stands in my shoes at such a moment.'

If Farmingham himself had ever done anything outside the law, I felt certain that he had forgotten it now and was completely absorbed in the duty of his office. 'Perhaps I might mention,' I said, 'that I believe the crime reporters of the newspapers often get an inkling from the police of such a past record as Penchurl's. It is given them in strict secrecy, of course, and may only be published after execution, or reprieve, but I expect they generally tell their editors about it, in confidence.'

'You mean that this fellow' (he waved the cutting again) 'may know the truth and be writing with his tongue in his cheek? Well, I can't say I'm surprised. But it's deceiving the public.

That's how popular agitations are made. How can the public form an opinion if it doesn't know the rights and wrongs of the matter?'

He read through the papers for some time and then shuffled them together. 'Good,' he said, 'at any rate I know what these windbags think my duty to be. When is the deputation, Geoffrey?'

'Tomorrow afternoon at four,' I said. I hesitated a moment and then added, 'Have you seen the papers this morning?'

'I just glanced at a couple,' he said. 'Why, there's nothing particular in them, is there?'

'Did you see the report about Smithson?'

'Smithson?' he said. 'What Smithson?'

'The man who disappeared at Mallerton during the by-election some years ago,' I said. 'You remember? He's been found.'

He turned his head towards me and looked at me for a long moment without speaking. Once again I saw the curious, half-veiled reflection of some inner deliberation in his eyes. *'Found!'* he said, slowly. 'What do you *mean, found?'*

'His body has been found,' I said, and passed him the report. He took it and, although it was but three lines, like the first long-forgotten item about Smithson's disappearance, he read it as if it were quite a lengthy matter. When he raised his head again he seemed almost confused, as if he could not understand what he read.

'What does this mean?' he said. 'Are there any other reports? How was he found and how do they know it is he?'

'This is the only report,' I explained. 'But I recalled that you were much upset on his account at the time and thought you might wish me to learn if there was anything new. I telephoned the Mallerton police.' I told him of the receding floodwaters, the skeleton in the field and the false teeth. He listened, still as if he could not wholly comprehend what I was saying. When I finished he was silent for a moment, and then said, as if to himself, 'Identified by his false teeth! A little detail like that! What an.extraordinary thing!' He paused, and. then added, 'And the police see no hope of learning anything more?'

'Not much,' I said. 'They've found Smithson, after all this tune, but they don't see now how they can ever find out how he came there.'

'Poor fellow,' he said, slowly. 'Well, they must leave nothing undone.' He gazed into space for a moment and then stood up, laboriously. He did not immediately move and I noticed that his breathing was heavy and that he looked unwell. Then he put one hand to his heart and leaned heavily on the other, which was on the desk.

'Is anything wrong, sir?' I said. 'Are you not well?'

'It's nothing, I'll be all right in a moment,' he said. 'I've had one or two turns lately. My wife wants me to see a doctor. I've never yet seen one in my life and I won't begin now. But I think I'll have to stop this riding. Perhaps it isn't as good for me as I thought it was. Geoffrey, is there a car downstairs?'

'Yes,' 1 said. 'Shall I send down word for it to take you home' ?

'Yes, do,' he said. 'I don't feel equal to leaping into the saddle just now, and I don't want to fall off in the Mall. That would be a ridiculous end to the career of Mr. John Farmingham. I'll send Grimsby down for my horse.'

'There's really nothing that needs you here today,' I said. 'Wouldn't it be a good idea for you to take it easy at home for the rest of the day, and be in good form for the deputation tomorrow?'

'Thank you, Geoffrey,' he said, gratefully. 'That's very friendly of you. I think perhaps I'll take your advice.'

A little later I found him drumming on the desk with his fingers and gazing absent-mindedly before him. 'The car's ready,' I said, and he stood up, heavily. I went downstairs with him and looked after him as he was driven away.

9

EARLY in the afternoon Thorpham telephoned and asked if I would go across the road and see him. 'I have those papers from Natal that you wanted to see,' he explained. The telephone, however, brings out inflections of voice, of which the speaker himself is unaware, and I received the impression that his tone was graver than the mere arrival of the file from Durban could explain. My conscience was not quite at rest and I assumed at once that Stalling had already called on Thorpham. I went over in the expectation of some difficult questions and possibly of serious criticism.

Thorpham received me with his usual friendly smile and bade me take an armchair. It was one of those too-comfortable and too-low ones, in which the visitor can neither sit upright nor recline at full length, which men in such a place as his quite rightly keep for their callers. Only the pure of heart or exceptionally strong-minded can feel at ease in them, especially as their host, at his important desk, occupies a sort of high throne from which he looks down on them with inscrutable official mien. If he wishes to learn something from them, and they have any cause not to be candid, the advantage is from the start all on his side.

'Well, Geoffrey,' he said, 'the people in Durban were as nice as they could be.' He came round to me and gave me a thick file of papers in a folder. 'Here are the records of the case. I'm afraid I can't very well let you take them away, in the circumstances. Just you sit there and browse over them.' He went back to his magisterial seat.

'Thank you very much,' I said, 'and do please let them know how grateful I am for their courtesy.' I opened the file and was about to begin reading when he spoke again.

'Geoffrey,' he said, 'Stalling was in to see me this morning.'

'I know,' I said. 'I meant to telephone you about that, but the Minister was taken unwell and we had to send him home. I'm afraid the one thing made me forget the other '

'Oh,' he said in concern, 'is it anything serious?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'It might be that his heart isn't as it should be. He ought to see a doctor, but he's one of those men who won't let a doctor near them until they're on their deathbeds.'

'In that case, if his heart is the trouble, he may never see one. Well, now Geoffrey, about Stalling.'

'Yes,' I said.

'He's very much worried and thinks you should have told him the facts before you started him on that job. He doesn't want to get mixed up in some sordid matrimonial dispute affecting such a man; it isn't in his line, as you know.'

'Since no names have been mentioned, he has no cause to worry at all,' I said, 'and I shouldn't think there's any question of a matrimonial dispute.'

'Do you feel happy about your own position in the matter, Geoffrey?' he said, gravely. 'Did you fully reflect before you acted? You seem to me to have done a very odd thing, placed as you are.'

'Well,' I said, 'perhaps in this one very odd business I didn't think as long as I should have done. But I don't see that anything I did need have any consequences and I don't regret it.'

'Consequences!' he said. 'You never know, when you start digging up high-tension cables, unless you are an expert. What bothers Stalling is the thought that you may have been acting on Mrs. Ross's behalf, when you started him on this inquiry. Did you have any idea of finding out something about the man in question, which she could use against him?'

That Stalling might suspect that, had never occurred to me. 'Good heavens, no!' I said. 'I was interested solely in Mrs. Ross.'

'Ah,' he said, 'well that's one thing out of the way, and I'm glad of it. I may tell you that Stalling did find out one or two things about this man which he didn't tell you. They weren't much, but might have been made much of. Well, then, you were interested only in Mrs. Ross. That's the point I'm coming to. Stalling tells me that she changed her name by deed poll a long time ago and that before then she was a Mrs. Haynor. Now, Geoffrey, that's the name of the lady you asked me to inquire about in Durban, the wife of your dead cousin. You must have known that. Why did you not tell me, and mention her relationship to this man? I don't know at all whether I would have sent for these papers. I should have had to think about it seriously. You see, one cannot always control the consequences of a process, once begun.'

'You'll hardly believe me,' I said, 'but when I saw you I had only just realized that Mrs. Ross was Mrs. Haynor. All the rest was a blur of confused thoughts and doubts, and to have mentioned them then would have been beyond my powers. You would have thought me a ridiculous meddler. As a matter of fact, at that time I was possessed with curiosity to know who Ross was.'

'I see,' he said thoughtfully. 'Well, tell me now the full story of your cousin's death and everything you had in mind about it.'

I told him the whole disjointed tale of impressions and glimpses and fragmentary episodes as it reached back down the many years: Marjorie's discontent, Lance's dislike of Farmingham (whom I still did not name) and the reasons for it, the handclasp I had seen, the talk about aggrieved natives and the rather bitter controversy about the best way to deal with them, the incident at the hotel in Earl's Court, and Mrs. Ross's words to me. When I had finished he was silent for a minute, and tapped with a pencil on his desk.

'This man,' he then said, 'is the same that we both have in mind, I suppose?'

I hesitated before answering. Then I said, 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'What an extraordinary thing,' he said. 'Geoffrey, whether you wanted to or not, you may have been playing a very dangerous game of consequences. I hope it will all work out. Tell me, was this man ever suspected of having anything to do with Haynor's death?'

'As far as I know, never, in any way whatever,' I said.

'There's certainly nothing to indicate it in those papers,' he said. 'You go ahead and read them now. Oh, by the way, I'd like to see that photograph you mentioned.'

'If you like I'll bring it up tomorrow,' I said.

'Yes, do,' he said again. 'I'd very much like to look at it. Now take a look through that file. I don't think you'll find anything in it. You'll see from the letter that they know nothing about Mrs. Haynor's movements after she left the neighbourhood.'

He turned to other matters on his desk and I began to read reports of inquiries and interrogations. The examination, through interpreters, of the two natives who had been held was long and tedious and got nowhere at all. They were either childishly simple or impenetrably crafty. The murder weapon had never been found, which made the whole business much more difficult. The cause of death was given as a deep wound in the forehead, apparently caused by a heavy metal bar or some ot'her blunt instrument. There was no mention of any suspicion reaching outside the natives. The long records of interlocutions tailed off into shorter and shorter ones and then left the matter where it began: at the place among the sugar-cane where Lance's body was found. After half an hour I closed the file, rose, and put it on Thorpham's desk.

'There's nothing there,' I said. 'It just says, at length, what the newspaper accounts at the time said, and what I've told you.'

'Yes,' he said, 'there's absolutely nothing there that I can see. There's one exhibit which they sent with the file. I suppose I can show it to you. It's rather gruesome. It's a picture of your cousin as they found him.' He handed me a large envelope, and I took from it two photographs, the replicas of each other.

The picture was a lifesize one of Lance's face, which I now saw again with strange feelings. It was unexpectedly calm and the eyes were open; the blow must have come on him too quickly for his features even to register a last expression of horror. Running from his left eyebrow to the hair was the wound, a deep indentation between two parallel lines, with three faint lateral lines running across it at regular intervals. I could not think why the shape of it seemed vaguely familiar to me, as if I had seen the picture before.

I looked at it for some time and then laid it down without saying anything more, for any words, I felt, would have rung false, like counterfeit coins dropped on a gravestone. This seemed the meaningless end of something, the beginning of which was equally lost in obscurity. I moved as if to go.

Thorpham rose. 'Wait a minute,' he said, and paced about the room. 'I'm trying to get something clear in my mind.' He went to and fro for perhaps a minute and then turned to me. 'Geoffrey,' he said, 'did you see the report about Smithson's body in the paper this morning?'

'Yes, I noticed it,' I said.

'Do you know if the Minister saw it?'

'As a matter of fact I showed it to him.'

'What did he think of it?'

'He seemed amazed at first, until I told him how it had been identified.'

'By the false teeth? How did you know that?'

'Well, I remembered how upset he was about Smithson's disappearance at the time, and I telephoned the Mallerton police.'

'Was he taken unwell after you told him, or before?'

'After, but I think he looked seedy before that. He hasn't beer looking too good for some time.'

'I see.' He began to pace the room again, while I waited and wondered what would come next. Then he stepped and said, I'm trying to decide what I would have done had you not come to me with this request about the papers from Durban and gone to Stalling with your inquiries about Mrs. Ross, but it's very difficult to know what one would have done in different circumstances. As far as I can see I should have been a completely untroubled man this fine morning, easy in my mind and at peace with the world. I don't know whether you are the instrument of destiny, Geoffrey, but you are a confounded nuisance, and I wish I could see the end of all this.'

'What *do* you mean?' I said, bewildered.

'Well, it seems to me you've got yourself up to the neck in your game of consequences now, and you'd better stay in it,' he said. 'Sit down. I want you to listen to something which must remain strictly between us. When you've heard it, we'll discuss it and see if any daylight shows.' He turned to the telephone and said into the-mouthpiece, 'Send Mr. Clump up to me again, will you please?' While we waited he said to me, 1 only hope that two heads *are* better than one, Geoffrey, and that yours is a good one. For once in my life my own is utterly unequal to its duty.'

The door opened and a woman secretary showed a man in and withdrew. I looked at him in surprise. He was a rough fellow, nearly as big as Farmingham, with the pulverized features of the former prizefighter. Most remarkable about him, however, was his state of abject and cringing fear, which was. almost comic in a man of such strength and size. He looked pitifully at Thorpham and then suspiciously at me.

'Sit down,' said Thorpham, and the big man sat uneasily on the edge of a small chair, looking from the one to the other of us. 'Clump, this is Mr. Browne. I want you to go over the whole story again, just as you told it to me.'

Clump immediately looked at me. 'I don't want to tell it to any other party, Mr. Thorpham,' he said. 'I told you it was only for your ears. I wouldn't say a word to the police, ro matter how much they questioned me. If I'd talked to them I'd never have got to you; they'd have had me inside in no time, and everything taken down and altered. I wouldn't have had a dog's chance. I've told you, and I can't do more. I don't see what's gained by going all over it again now.'

'Well, you've put yourself in my hands, Clump,' said Thorpham gently, 'and I think you did the wise thing. If you want me to do the best I can for you now you'd better follow my advice. As a matter of fact I don't want you to say a word about this to anybody until I've decided what to do. But there's an especial reason why I want you to tell Mr. Browne everything you've told me. You can take my word for it that it won't make matters worse for you than they are.'

Clump looked miserably from Thorpham to me, like a baited animal. I saw that he was sweating hard. 'Well then, sir, if you say so, but I hope you'll bear it in mind that I come here of my own free will and try to make it all right for me. I've got my wife and children to think of. Does Mr. Browne know anything about this?'

'No, nothing at all. Begin right at the beginning. Perhaps I'd better explain, Geoffrey, that Mr. Clump is a former convict on ticket-of-leave who, most wrongly, hasn't been reportins to the police lately. He thought they might arrest him in connection with a matter of burglary with violence recently of which, of course, he is innocent. He makes the common mistake,' added Thorpham blandly, 'of thinking that the police like to arrest men in his unfortunate position without cause. He has in fact been in hiding and his conscience, most creditably, has now caused him to come out of it, and call on me. The reason is that an older matter, in which he says he *was* concerned, has just been taken up by the police again, when it seemed forgotten. Having much on his mind already, Mr. Clump felt that he ought to come forward and make a clean breast of his part in it. He feared otherwise to be put in the wrong. It was the item in this morning's paper about the discovery of Mr. Smithson's body that brought him to me.'

'Smithson!' I said.

'Smithson,' repeated Thorpham. 'Now go on, Clump.'

Clump looked at me with the fawning, yet injured air of a man called on to justify himself to another, who has no apparent jurisdiction in the business at all. He shifted and wiped his forehead and then began to tell his tale in the voice of a direly wronged man, whose fault, if he had been led into any, had been cleansed by confession.

'Well, Mr. Browne,' he said, 'I've got some things on my slate, Mr. Thorpham knows about that, but I've never had anything to do with murder, nor wanted to, and I'm not going to have one planted on me now, not if I can help it, so when I saw this news about Mr. Smithson this morning I come straight down here and asked to see Mr. Thorpham. It's been in my mind to do ever since he. .. ever since his disappearance... .'

'Just a moment, Clump,' said Thorpham, 'don't rush it. Remember that Mr. Browne knows nothing about the case. I'll help you along. Oh, and don't mention any names. When you come to the person you told me about, just say the gentleman. There's no need to say who he is. I only want Mr. Browne's opinion about your position in the matter'

'But how will he know what it's all about unless I say who it is?' asked Clump anxiously. 'That's the whole point.'

'Don't worry, I'll make it clear enough for him to judge how you stand. Now go on.'

Clump now addressed himself to me with eager volubility, as a man who might help him. 'Well, sir,' he said, 'I was there the night Mr. Smithson disappeared.'

'You were *there?'*

'I was with him. You see, Mr. . . . er, this gentleman, he wanted a quiet talk with Mr. Smithson, anyway, that's what he told me. He said Mr. Smithson was blackmailing him and he wanted to get him alone somewhere so's he could make him sign a paper saying there was no truth in his charges. . . .'

'You knew this gentleman before that, didn't you, Clum ? Thorpham put in.

'Well, yes, I've told you about that, sir.'

'Then tell Mr. Browne.'

'The fact is he'd used me for one or two jobs, nothing very much as a rule. Sometimes I'd act as his chauffeur if he didn't particularly want it known where he was going or what he was doing. He was very good to me and the missus.

'He paid well?' asked Thorpham.

'Well, yes, sir, that's what it come to, but he was kind, too. We liked him. He didn't seem to look down on me as a habitual criminal. Of course, I was scared of him as well, he knew a lot about me. That's why he felt safe. There couldn't be any blackmail from me. Who would have believed me? I'd have been the one to pay, if I'd tried anything like that. He's a very clever man.'

'Among these jobs you did for him, there was a bashing, wasn't there?' said Thorpham.

'Yes, sir. That was another case where he said he was being blackmailed. He seemed to have a lot of trouble of that kind unless he imagined it. Anyway, he pointed this chap out to me and I waited for him one night, near his house, and pushed into him as he came along, and then I pretended I was bottled and I said, "Who are you shoving?" and I bashed him — nothing much, just enough to make him think twice who he pushed about in future.'

'You were paid for that?'

'Yes, a tenner.'

'Did this gentleman know any ladies? No names, mind.'

'There was only the one lady he was always with —apart

from his wife, I mean. It was generally when he was going off somewhere with her that I drove them. She knew me well.'

'Was she young?'

'She was fairly young when I first met him but that's a long 'me ago. She wouldn't be young now. She was good looking in those days, but she had a rare temper. She was the only one who never seemed afraid of him. She drank a bit, too. Sometimes when I was sitting in front, driving them, she'd let off at him in a way that surprised me. She must have had something on him.'

'Well, now tell us about Mr. Smithson.'

'Well, as I say, he was more worked up about this Mr. Smithson than I'd ever seen him. He said the man was a rogue who was being used by other people who wanted to do him down. It seemed a shame, I must say, just when Mr.... when this gentleman was doing so nicely. The way he put it, I felt it personal-like, for him.'

'What did he ask you to do?'

'He wanted me to get hold of this Smithson in some quiet spot, tie him up and bring him to a place we'd agreed on, where he'd make him sign this paper. I didn't like it much, but as he put it to me it was only a matter of a little persuasion, and,' added Clump virtuously, 'it was a dirty trick what this Smithson was playing on him. And I was in a bad way at the time, didn't know where to turn for an honest living, with the police always smelling round. He gave me two hundred pounds to start me in a garage business. That was how I got the car I used for the job.'

'This money, Clump, it was paid in notes, of course.'

'Oh yes, he didn't use cheques. He's too wise for that.'

'Well, then, you did the job. What happened?'

'I watched this Smithson and saw it wouldn't be hard. He was a little chap and used to walk about alone at night, to his meetings. I waited for him once or twice but there were people about. Then 1 got him one night when it was raining and dark. I knew the way he'd be coming. I had the car and I was standing by it and as he came along I said, "Excuse me, mister, can you give me a light?' and he stopped. I gave him a little rabbit punch, just enough to quiet him, and had him in the car, with a sack over his head and all tied up, before you could say knife. But,' and he leaned forward with the air of a man desperately anxious to make the decisive point, 'he was alive and struggling a little, then and all the time I was with him, sir.'

'What came next?' said Thorpham.

'I drove him to my little garage, where I'd arranged to meet . .. this gentleman when he came back from London, late. He had some appointment there that evening. You can imagine how I sweated on the top line while I was waiting there, with him tied up in the car, and my old woman asleep upstairs, and me imagining he wouldn't come. But he came, about midnight. This Mr. Smithson was alive, I'd been watching him move and telling him, in a threatening kind of whisper, to keep quiet. When this gentleman came I went out to look up and down the road, to see if anyone was about, and then I went upstairs to see if my wife was sound. I wasn't away more than two minutes. When I came down, the gentleman said to me, "You fool, Tom, he's dead. You've killed him." But he wasn't dead, sir, when I left him, I know he wasn't. He was breathing and moving.'

'But he was dead now?'

'Yes.'

'How do you think he died?'

'His heart must have given out on him, unless. . .

'Unless?'

'No, I can't say it, sir, I don't know any more than you do. If you'd been there you wouldn't have known, and I don't know.'

'And then?'

'I can't hardly remember how it all happened then. I was in such a sweat of fear, I don't think I knew what I was doing.

He said we must get rid of Smithson somehow. He seemed quite calm, almost as if he'd thought it all out before. He said to bring a couple of spades and come on. We drove out to a place I'd never been before, an old quarry it was, about fifteen miles from Mallerton. He knew about it and showed me the way. I've been past it many times since and it's always the same, never been touched, until now. We dug and dug. I was trembling so much, for fear of someone coming, I could hardly hold the spade. But that's a lonely place, you'd never meet anybody there at that time, least of all on such a night as that. -At last we had him buried, and the rain pouring down as if it was sent to wash away our tracks. Then I drove him back to London, where he had a bachelor flat in those days, that he sometimes used when he was kept late in town. I got back to my garage about five o'clock in the morning.'

'Did he give you any more money?'

'Yes, another two hundred pounds.'

'And you've had this on your mind all these years.'

'Ah, if you only knew, guvnor,' said Clump with a sort of simple eloquence. 'I wouldn't want a dog to go through what I've been through. I hope nobody thinks it's clever to get away with something like that. I wouldn't have minded dying to clear it up, or get it off my mind. What nearly drove me mad was the thought that if it ever came out I'd swing for it. I could see that as clearly as I can see you. They'd have hanged me, an innocent man,' he went on, in the tone of wonder. 'I never killed him nor had anything to do with killing him.'

'Did you continue to do jobs for this gentleman?'

'I never saw him from that day. But when I read that in the paper this morning I was out of my house and on the tram, coming here, so quick you'd hardly have seen me go. I'd never have had a chance, if it had come out at the time. What chance have I got if it comes out now, with him in the place he is? He can fix it as easy as winking. I wasn't going to wait for that, not me. He's too clever. I wonder now he didn't think of taking those false teeth out of Smithson's mouth.'

'Where did you see that?' said Thorpham quickly.

'It's in the midday paper, sir,' he explained. 'I bought it to read in the tram, coming here. I'll go and tell Mr. Thorpham every thing, I says. That's the only thing to do now.'

'How many convictions have you against you, Clump?' asked Thorpham. 'And how many for violence?'

'Six, sir,' said Clump, 'three for violence.'

'And were you not for a period in a mental home?'

'Yes, I had a year in there. But that was all doctor's nonsense, sir. I'm not mad.'

'I merely wanted to know,' said Thorpham, standing up. 'Well, Clump, I can say one thing. Placed as you arc, you have done the best possible thing by coming to me. I can't tell you now what will have to be done in this matter, or about you. We shall have to go very carefully into your story. I think you can be quite sure that what you have done will count to your credit in any further developments; more than that I can't say. For the present, I want you to go home and stay there. If you are wanted I shall send for you personally. You need not fear any visit from the police until I have seen you again. In the meantime, there is one thing you must not do. You must not breathe a word of this matter to any other soul.'

'Trust me, sir,' said Clump, thankfully. 'I'm not likely to do that.'

'Have you ever told your wife or anybody else?'

'Nobody. Never.'

'Then don't, or you may undo any good you've done yourself now. I'll tell you when and how to give yourself up. You'll have to answer for the other business, of course, if the police really have evidence against you. But that's a small matter.'

'I won't let that worry me, sir, if I can only get out of this one and have my mind at rest. He wasn't dead when - left him, sir, and I had no part in his killing, if he was killed. You'll do your best for me, won't you, Mr. Thorpham?'

"I'll see that you get the fullest possible credit, within the minits of the law, for any help you may have given the authorities now,' said Thorpham soothingly, as he touched the bell. And don't forget: you must not say a word of this from the moment you leave my office.'

Clump, shuffling and cringing, was shown out, and Thorpham went to the window, where he stood looking out on the Thames. For a long time he was silent, then he turned to me.

' Well, Geoffrey,' he said, 'do you see what I mean now? About your part in the game of consequences?'

'Not quite,' I said.

'Consider,' he said, 'a man with a long record of violent crime and a term in a lunatic asylum. I should have sent him home and forgotten about it, but for you and your instructions to Stalling.'

'You don't believe Clump?' I said, in surprise. 'He can't have invented all that! It sounded like truth to me.'

'I didn't say I disbelieved him,' he said. 'I was merely picturing to myself what a good barrister would do with him. He has no supporting evidence. We here deal in evidence and the law. Would you, if you were a judge, hang a rat on Clump's word?'

'But a matter like this can't be allowed to rest there!' I said.

'Can't it?' he said, rather wearily. I'm not sure. I very much doubt if you could tell me what I ought to do next. Geoffrey, we won't talk about it any more now. I want to think about it quietly at home, this evening, and to sleep on it. Come and see me tomorrow morning, and bring that photograph. Damn you and Clump!'

I recrossed Whitehall and found myself unable to attend to any of my office business. I walked up and down in my room, thinking, and then went out into the corridor, which gave more room for this form of mental exercise. Idly I turned into Farmingham's empty room, to see if anything were there which could not be postponed. Only two or three unimportant memorandums and reports lay on his desk. I took them up casually, glanced at them, put them down again, and just as casually picked up Farmingham's sjambok, which he had Left there.

Thinking of him, with agitated and bewildered mind, I swished it absently once or twice. The heavy thong made a snaky hiss as it cut the air. Then I took it by the thong and felt the weight of the heavy metal grip tauten it. Inattentively I took the grip again and rolled it over in my palm.

Suddenly I knew where I had seen its impression before.

10

I WENT to bed very late that night, slept only as a castaway might doze in an open boat on a stormy sea, who even in his sleep wonders what the dawn may bring, and woke early with a feeling of troubled apprehension in my stomach. For a second I groped after the cause of it and then all the events of the previous day suddenly assembled themselves, in ominous postures, in my mind. I thought of Clump and Thorpham and Lance Haynor and Mrs. Ross and Smithson, and saw them all, and myself with them, grouped around and gazing at Farmingham's huge central figure, like the chorus of some Greek tragedy moving now to an inevitable climax. Haynor with the wound in his forehead and Smithson with white teeth gleaming from his death's head; Mrs. Ross mouthing threats, Clump cringing, and myself with a scrap of film in my hand. I rose and dressed, waited impatiently for my household to stir and give me a cup of coffee, and then, parrying Susan's curious and anxious questions, set off for town, taking with me the negative and print of farmingham's picture.

I found on Farmingham's desk a note for his officials, taken down and left there by the telephonist, to say that he was fully recovered but would rest during the morning and come to the office in the afternoon to receive the deputation about Penchurl. After one or two failures I reached Thorpham on the telephone and said I would come across at once. I took with me the sjambok from Farmingham's desk.

Thorpham looked tired and worried. I felt that he, too, had slept little. His usual smile was absent and he wore a grave air as we shook hands.

'Sit down, Geoffrey,' he said. 'You look as if you'd had a bad night. So have I. I'm even more at a loss than I was yesterday. God may know what my duty is, but he hasn't yet made it clear to me. What have you there?'

'It's a rhinoceros-hide whip, called a sjambok,' I said. 'I've brought that photograph for you to see. But first, may I have another look at the one of Haynor?'

'Yes,' he said absently, and reached into a drawer, 'here they are,' and he handed me the envelope with the two prints.

I took them out, laid them on the table side by side and studied them. They confirmed my belief, even before I made the final test. While Thorpham watched curiously I fetched the sjambok from the chair where it lay beside my hat, held it by the thong and placed the metal butt on the wound in Lance's forehead. It fitted perfectly into the two parallel lines and the faint lateral marks in the wound occurred at the same regular intervals as the cross-ribbing of the hilt. Without words I passed the photograph and the sjambok across the table to Thorpham. He took them, looked closely at the sjambok, and repeated what I had done, putting his head close to the table to peer at the reunion, after many years, of weapon and wound. Then he sat back and tested the weight of the thing, swishing it gently in the air. He walked across the room and struck the back of the armchair, in which his visitors sat, a fairly heavy blow with it. In the dark, mellow leather an impression remained, identical with that in the photograph. He turned to me.

'Good God, Geoffrey,' he said, 'where did you get this?'

'It belongs to the gentleman in question,' I said. 'He uses it as a riding-crop. He left it in his office yesterday.'

He looked at me for a long time without speaking and then turned and went to his favourite place, the window overlooking the river. He stood there, gazing thoughtfully down, and after a while spoke, with his back still towards me.

'Geoffrey,' he said, 'I can't think. Let's take a stroll along the Embankment and talk this over.'

'Don't you want to see my photograph?' I said.

'Oh, I'd forgotten all about it,' he said. 'Yes, let me see it.'

I handed over the enlargement and negative and he examined them closely, taking a magnifying-glass from his drawer for better scrutiny of Farmingham's face and the sjambok in his hand.

'Yes, I think I can just recognize him,' he said in a minute. 'Geoffrey, I'm going to borrow this for an hour or so,' and he nodded towards the sjambok and then said into the telephone, 'Send Mr. Forbes up to me, please.' When this man entered he said, 'Forbes, I want you to do something for me quickly. You see this photograph. I want you to enlarge the part showing the whip and the hand and see if you can get it to the same size as this whip.' He handed Forbes the sjambok. 'I think they may be the same. Can you rush it for me?'

'Yes, sir,' said Forbes, looking from the picture to the sjambok with the professional detachment of a man accustomed to such work, 'I'll get on with it right away.'

'Thank you,' said Thorpham. 'Come on then, Geoffrey, we'll take a walk.'

We strolled in silence for some time beside the river, where placidly moving barges on the grey water and serenely wheeling seagulls above it and the reverend bulk of old St. Paul's in some way combined to make our anxieties seem smaller and the inscrutable background of eternity greater and reassuring, Prerently Thorpham began to speak.

'it's no good,' he said. 'I don't see a clear way. What does it all amount to? This sjambok: it may have been a mass-produced thing. There may have been a hundred or a thousand facsimiles of it in use in those parts at that time. How can anything be proved after all these years? Even if it could be shown to be his, he could never be proved, at this length of time, to have used it on Haynor. What was the motive? You and I may think we know of a motive, or even of a choice of several motives. In the case of your cousin, for instance, he may have met this man by chance in the sugar-fields and, for some reason, have spoken to him angrily about hitting the natives. You say he felt strongly about that. He may have told this gentleman that if it didn't stop he must not hope for promotion, or would have to go. Our friend, a man naturally given to violence, may have had a sudden intolerable sense of grievance and have seen in your cousin a man who unjustly stood between him and everything he wanted. If there was a secret attachment between him and Mrs. Haynor, that would have added the most explosive stuff of all to the matter and the moment. And if that was the case, how he must hate her now, when she is ageing and has forced him for many years to sit with her beside the cold ashes of a dead passion. You know, if he has three murders on his hands it looks to me as if the ungovernable impulse in each case was the same. The young poor white in the village where he grew up; your cousin; Smithson; they all stood between him and something he passionately wanted, and seemed to him to be doing him insufferable wrong. They deserved to be killed, and don't forget that in the dark shanties where he was weaned and bred, next door to the tribal natives and not far from the wild animals, it was not a crime for a man to take the law of his desires or ambitions into his own strong hands. On the contrary, it was the most natural thing in the world, in the place and time where this man grew up. And the child is the father of the man, no matter how far he may travel or how high he rises. He cannot escape his blood, his instincts and his earliest teaching.'

'Well,' I said, 'it seems to me you have made a completely convincing case. The motives, as you define them, are plausible and conclusive.'

'Yes, and I should think I might be fairly near the whole truth,' he said, 'but I am not in court. Where is an atom of proof in it all? Anyone can spin theories.'

'Do you not think this long association with Mrs. Haynor contains the missing link of incrimination?' I asked. 'She clearly knows, or thinks she knows, something that would ruin him.'

'And how are we to find out what it is?' he said. 'I do not believe she has any proof. I think she would prove to be a distraught woman, ready to say she thought he killed her husband, but quite unable to support a cruel slander. How can she be approached, anyway? Am I to send someone to see her, and ask what she knows? That's obviously impossible. Actually, you are the only man who could go to her and invite her to talk. Would you do it?'

'No,' I said.

'There you are! Then consider how natural her long association with him could be made to appear. A woman suddenly widowed, in need of friendship and counsel; the old friend, wise and influential, always ready with help and advice. Look at their ages now and the propriety of their conduct. You might find his wife his warmest defendant. She would claim the other woman as an old friend of hers, too; what could be more likely and normal?'

'But surely, surely, something must be done,' I said.

'I think it is a common error to think that doing something is unchallengeably a virtue. To do nothing may sometimes be a greater one. You must not forget that it is not in mortal power to right every wrong, or even to be sure where the wrong is. Whatever power put those seagulls there,' he pointed to them, may be working better than we know to settle this matter.'

'You do not talk like a policeman.'

'That is precisely what I do. We are not concerned with right and wrong, but with evidence and proof, and I do not see either clearly here, or I should know my duty. It seems to me that some other force may be taking the matter out of our hands and that you, with your rushing in, may have been one of its instruments. Geoffrey, I am appalled by and humble before the processes of providence when I think of that little piece of film lying at the bottom of your trunk all these years, waiting to give its message to the light of day.'

'I don't understand you. What good has it done, if no use is to be made of it?'

'Who says no use is to be made of it? I only say that there is something here which should make us fear to tread too hastily. Think of all the other things, which he imagines he has discarded far behind, following this man down the stream of time, one day to be washed up at his feet. Think of the floods that uncovered Smithson and the teeth left in Smithson's mouth, of your photograph and the one from Durban, of the handclasp you saw and that woman's face in the mirror. The process seems so inevitable that I almost fear to interfere with it, and I will not until I am sure that I am meant to. Even now the keypiece in the puzzle may be making its way towards my hands, so that I can act.'

'In my innocence, I thought you would accept the sjambok as the keypiece.'

'On the contrary, the fact that he has kept it might be the clear sign of his innocence. Again, it might show how secure he feels himself, and further inquiry might confirm that You said the natives were in a dangerous mood in those parts, and that there had been a rebellion not long before. Do not such men have many native servants? If one of them, or one of his labourers, had a grievance against Haynor, what more natural than that he should steal his master's whip for a weapon and out it back?'

'You make me think that there is no such thing as proof.'

'Did it ever occur to you that murder can only be fully proved by the victim, who is dead, or by witnesses, of whom there are hardly ever any? What I think you chiefly forget is that in this case the man carries retribution within himself. I'm sure of it. Imagine what his life has really been and how different it is from the outer picture. It has been one long, hopeless struggle to shake off his own shadow. If Mrs. Haynor knew that he killed her husband, and that looks as if it were the secret of her hold over him and his inability to rid himself of her, fear has gone with him day and night for over thirty years. Then there was the earlier man, and later Smithson. Always fate seemed to work for him and cover up the past, and always it caught up with him at some unexpected moment. That makes a man morbid. He fears more men than he need fear, and thinks they know more than they really know. Over the years his secret state of mind must do something to his body. You say he is not well?'

'He certainly has not seemed so of late.'

'It may be that his own fears will kill him as certainly as the gallows.'

'Well, it seems to me monstrous that he should publicly escape, if he has done all this.'

'*If he* has. That is what we cannot swear or prove. But my instinct tells me that something else is coming, some final answer to the riddle or fresh development in the play. Do not forget: his immunity would be less monstrous than a gigantic public fiasco. That is what I dare not risk as the matter now stands. I will not even mention a word of it any where until some further thing comes to make it wise.'

'Well, I have made up my mind to resign. I cannot continue to wear a false face of respect to him. For some reason, it makes *me* feel a traitor. I simply cannot bear to think that a man of whom I know such tilings is in the place he occupies.'

'You don't *know*. And don't do anything foolish, Geoffrey. Wait a little. I have much experience and I tell you that this matter is moving to some climax that I cannot foresee. I am sure the course of the angels now is to stand aside and wait and watch.'

'Have I to stand aside and watch this afternoon when he receives the Penchurl deputation, and probably refuses a reprieve? The thing is intolerable.'

'Is that this afternoon? I envy you a unique occasion. Geoffrey, you should know better than to confuse the administrator with the man, or to let your private suspicions interfere with your departmental duties. Whatever he may have done in the past, the action he decides to take in this matter may be on the highest standard of public conduct.'

'I cannot believe it. There should at least be some way to take this matter out of his hands.'

'There yet may be. There is still some time. And anyway, you surely do not allow yourself to think that Penchurl should be reprieved merely because this man is bad?'

'No, not that. I just cannot bear that the decision should lie with him.'

'The decision is not yet taken. Wait!'

We walked on for some distance in silence before he spoke again, in reflective tone. 'There was a time,' he said, 'when there was an unwritten but effective code in such a matter. Did you ever read of the affair, long, long ago, of the Austrian staff colonel who was found to be taking money from the Russians for the betrayal of military secrets? Two officers of his own rank waited on him in his hotel bedroom and without any word of explanation laid a revolver on his table, then bowed themselves out. After half an hour they heard a shot. But times have changed.'

'I cannot imagine him responding to such an invitation.'

'Nor I. He might take the bull by the horns and precipitate the very public fiasco which, I assure you, we cannot afford to face with the material we have. Nevertheless, I wonder if a hint, conveyed to him in suitably melodramatic form, without the source of it being revealed, would have the right effect.'

'What is the right effect?'

'Why, obviously his resignation, in the first place. That is the first thing we must achieve, somehow. After that, well, we should see. I've done nothing about Clump's story yet. I might see if anything is to be found in that quarry, although I suppose the floods will have removed all traces. No, on the whole, I think the best course, even if he could be brought to resign, would be to go on waiting until the hand of providence interferes again. It only needs to play one more card.'

'But how could he be given such a hint? Have you anything in mind?'

'Well, I wonder. I've been turning it over in my mind ever since you showed me the sjambok and your picture. That's really why I wanted to come out and see if I could straighten it all out in my head here in the fresh air.' He stopped and faced me. 'Geoffrey, tell me what you think. You will have to put the sjambok back on his desk. Suppose you were to place the two photographs beside it, so that he found them confronting him when he came in. There is nothing whatever to show where they came from or how they came there. Any marks there are on the Durban one I can have cut off or erased. Fortunately there are two copies of it. I can have a second print made from one of them and thus return two, if I never see the other back. What do you think?'

'Phew,' I said; the shock of the idea literally deflated me. 'I can't imagine what would happen. I can only picture some frightful explosion of wrath and after that — I don't know.'

'It might not be like that at all,' he said. 'I judge him to be a man of great self-control in a really major crisis. He might never say a word about the pictures, merely ask what they were doing there and throw them away, or take them himself without comment. The sudden shock of realizing that eyes are watching him, and that they know more about him than he ever thought anybody knew, might just do the trick. If he is guilty, he might cut and run. If he's not, there's nothing he can do about it, nobody he can accuse or call to account. If he did blow up, surely you can bear that! What have you to answer for or fear?'

I thought for a long time. Then, 'I can't conceive how this may all turn out,' I said, 'but I'll do it, this very afternoon.'

I took three, not two, photographs with me from Thorpham's office to my own. Forbes's enlargement showed that the sjambok in my picture and that which I now restored to Farmingham's desk were replicas of each other, if they were not one and the same.

II

FARMINGHAM appeared a few minutes before the deputation was due. He looked better, and even bigger than usual in the morning coat he had put on to show respect for his visitors and a solemn occasion. With it he wore an unusually grave mien, suitable to the matter in hand, which by now was a leading topic of controversy among men and in the Press. Being in the centre of this rising storm of debate, it must have been difficult for him not to think that he, rather than the nebulous Penchurl, was the main figure in the drama.

With Travers, another senior official, I awaited him and we both asked him how he felt. With a gesture of his hand, which belittled the importance of his indisposition, he said, 'Never better. Now then, is the deputation here?'

We said it must arrive at any moment. 'Very well,' he said,, we'll go down and wait for it. I want to make this as formal as possible. And when you see that I have finished my reply to them, make it quite clear that the interview is over and show them out. I don't intend to have a lot of loose palaver. They can have their say, and then I'll say what I propose to say, and that's the end. Do you understand?'

We said we did and as he moved towards the door I said I must just fetch some documents which he might need. With Travers he went downstairs, while I quickly went to my room, unlocked a drawer and took out the three photographs, returned to his and put them on his blotting pad with the sjambok on top of them. Holding papers in my hand, I caught up with Farmingham and Travers as they entered the room where the deputation was to be received.

It arrived immediately afterwards. It was headed by Lady Dalesdown, the widow of a former Prime Minister. A woman of restless energy, it was generally thought that she had never forgiven her late husband for depriving her, by his death, of the social eminence she had enjoyed during his life and office, and it was not unfair to suspect that in public controversies she liked the publicity first, and whatever cause she battled for next. Her sorrow for Penchurl was probably assuaged by the prominence which her championship of his cause had brought her in the newspapers. Next to her was a Mr. Osmond Pebblethwaite, who was not uncommon among men in his random and indiscriminate benevolence, which led him to espouse any and every apparently good cause like a Sultan adding new wives to his harem, but was much rarer in that he was incalculably rich and thus able to make himself a considerable nuisance; he was wont to appear in a Rolls-Royce outside prisons where executions were in progress and from this chariot to harangue any who would listen about the inhumanity of the government of that hour. The truth about Mr. Pebblethwaite was that he was rather more than eccentric, but as this could not be suspected in or imputed to a man so wealthy his public reputation was that of a millionaire with an unusual compassion for the underdog. The third member of the deputation was Fenton Curthwaite, who for ulterior political motives professed a fervent opposition to capital punishment.

These three persons were not intrinsically deserving of great Respect, at all events from those whose business it was to know more of them than their one-dimensional portraits in the public prints revealed, and in any other man than Farmingham I would privately have sympathized with the disrespect which, Travers. and I saw, he inwardly felt. We knew our Farmingham by now and could read the signs of his set face and grimly clamped lips. He sat heavily down, while we stood behind him like heraldic supporters, and waited. The deputation sat down on the other side of the table.

Lady Dalesdown began by presenting the petition, a large parcel which Farmingham made no move to receive, so that I stepped forward to take it and put out of the way, at one end of the table. Then she made her verbal argument, more maladroitly than I had expected even from Lady Dalesdown. She spoke brightly, rather as man to man, in the tone of one who knows, how little Ministers know and how easily they may overlook what is apparent to all others, but also, how quickly they will respond to good advice given in a winning way. I had never had opportunity to observe her at such close quarters before and now decided that this elderly lady quite clearly believed (possibly with some cause) that she had been Prime Minister during her husband's far-off term of office and that she was now talking as. an elder statesman to an inexperienced Minister. She made that sufficiently plain, and evidently thought she was using exquisite

tact. She went over all the old details about Penchurl's poverty and distress and fear for the future of his children and was unwise enough to refer in rather menacing terms to the great number of signatures she had obtained to her petition and to the effect of a refusal of reprieve on public opinion.

Farmingham heard her without moving a muscle and merely turned his head a fraction when Pebblethwaite spoke. Pebblethwaite seemed to miss his Rolls-Royce, for he was uneasy, fumbled with words and rambled a good deal, merely echoing what Lady Dalesdown had said without adding anything to it. Farmingham did not interrupt him or show any response, but he intervened immediately when Curthwaite began his piece with an allusion, in tones of enlightened disdain, to the wickedness of capital punishment.

'I don't want to cut you short, Mr. Curthwaite,' he said. 'But please consider that I am not here to discuss the merits or demerits of capital punishment. That is a matter for Parliament to debate, if it wishes. The duty of my office is merely to decide whether or not to recommend a reprieve in this case. Please go on.'

Curthwaite, however, seemed put out of his stride, having apparently assumed too close a communion of minds between himself and Farmingham, and finished rather lamely with another repetition of the previous arguments. When he was finished Farmingham replied. Only when he began to speak did we suddenly feel that a man's life was at stake in this sober official room. I now realized that I had almost forgotten this while the three others spoke, and felt I had been right in judging them to be there as egoists, not altruists. Now the voice of responsible deliberation fell, weighty word after weighty word, into the silence.

'Thank you for this visit and for what you have said, Lady Dalesdown,' he said. 'You may be sure that I shall carefully reflect over every word. I must say, however, that you have not brought anything new to my notice and you in your turn may be sure, if you were not so when you came, that I shall give every aspect of the matter the most earnest consideration in trying *to* decide what is right, for that is my sole duty here. I think I ought to add one thing which possibly you may not know or have overlooked, and that is, that in my office a great deal more is known about such a matter as this than is generally known, and 'hat I have also to take into consideration these other factors, of which the public is not aware. Nobody who has not held this post can know the weight which falls on one of its occupants when he has to decide for or against the recommendation of reprieve. He has to steer a straight course between loose theorizings about mercy and an ignoble vindictiveness. I hope you will believe that whatever decision I come to will uphold that principle, to the best of my power. But I have always to bear in mind what, if you will allow me to say so, you have not sufficiently considered in your words to me: that murder is murder.'

I privately decided that Penchurl's last hope was gone. Nevertheless, I would have applauded every word, had any other than Farmingham spoken. None could have performed the task better or more discreetly have put a somewhat inferior group of self-advertisers in their places. In the part of constitutional minister, he was admirable. Any impartial onlooker, I thought, would have been deeply impressed by the way he asserted the dignity of the occasion and of his office.

Farmingham stood up in plain intimation that nothing more was to be said. Travers and I moved forward, just as firmly, to show the deputation out. Lady Dalesdown showed clearly that she would have liked to argue, but by dint of unobtrusive shepherding she found herself outside before there could be any chance of that. Behind us, Farmingham went out of the room and upstairs.

Travers little knew with what emotions I accompanied him upstairs, parted from him in the corridor and went to my room, while he sought his. Once inside I stood irresolute, waiting for I knew not what. Almost at once there was a hurried knock at the door and one of the uniformed messengers came in, with a face of agitated consternation.

'Sir, will you come?' he said. 'It's Mr. Farmingham. I **was** passing his door and looked in, I think he's ill.

Without waiting for more I ran out into the corridor and to the open door of Farmingham's room He was standing at his desk, leaning with both hands on it and panting for'breath. As I went in he looked slowly up and his swollen face convulsed. Only the eyes were full of life and menace and hatred; had his body responded to his will he would have flung himself at me. Then he slowly dragged one hand from his desk, raised it wavesingly in the air as if by some last, superhuman effort, and pointed it at me. Like a wobbling signpost finger it moved up and down, seeking my face.

'You... You...'he said in a choking voice, and then no more words came, but only throttled, incoherent noises between his gasping breaths. Then the arm fell to the desk again and slowly he sank down, stricken on one side, into his chair, like a melting snowman. His eyes dulled and all that remained to show that he lived were his rapid, stertorous breathing and inarticulate sounds.

With much difficulty he was carried down to his car, and one of the messengers, to whom I gave the sjambok, put it on the seat beside him.

I went upstairs and collected the three photographs from his desk. The small one I put in my inside pocket; the two others I took across the street to Thorpham.

12

THE announcement of Farmingham's resignation, for reasons of health, produced a general feeling of shock and sympathy, together with deep regret that the country should prematurely lose a man it could ill spare, for good men are at **all** times too few. There was also some public surmise about the real grounds for it: the phrase, 'reasons of health', has so often been used to disguise other considerations that the very use of it now prompts suspicion even in cases where it is unhappily most true. Farmingham's death a few months later showed these doubters their error and increased public sorrow that so promising a man should have been cut off in his prime. The reports of his death did not outrage public feeling or awaken conjecture about the past by adding that he died in an asylum, never having regained the power of speech or of lucid thought from the moment of his seizure.

Sometimes when I am preoccupied Susan asks me what I am thinking about. Often on these occasions the answer, though I never give it to her, is that I am wondering what Farmingham would have said to me if his powers had not snapped after that menacing 'You . . .' Rogue, villain, scoundrel, spy, traitor: I cannot tell, but I think it would have been one of these, for I still see so clearly the bitter fury in his eyes. They were those of a deeply wronged man, stricken by an evil-doer.