TEXT FLY WITHIN
THE BOOK ONLY

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_158593

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

Gift of
YALE UNIVERSITY



With the aid of the
ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION
1949



JOHN COWPER POWYS

WOLF SOLENT

A NOVEL

I

1929

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

NEW YORK

FIRST PRINTING, MAY 1929
SECOND PRINTING, MAY 1929
THIRD PRINTING, JUNE 1929
FOURTH PRINTING, JUNE 1929

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
COPYRIGHT, 1929, BY SIMON AND SCHUSTER, INC.
37 WEST 57 STREET NEW YORK
PRINTED IN U. S. A. BY VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, BINGHAMTON
BOUND BY H. WOLFF EST., N. Y.
DESIGNED BY ANDOR BRAUN

AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

TO

FATHER HAMILTON COWPER JOHNSON

CONTENTS

VOLUME ONE

1 *The Face on the Waterloo Steps* 1
2 *"Christ! I've had a happy life!"* 18
3 *A Dorset Chronicle* 42
4 *Gerda* 62
5 *The Blackbird's Song* 115
6 *Bar Sinister* 161
7 *Yellow Bracken* 203
8 *The Three Peewits* 244
9 *The Horse-Fair* 264
10 *Christie* 327
11 *The Tea-Party* 376
12 *The Slow-Worm of Lenty* 392
13 *Home for Bastards* 411
14 *Crooked Smoke* 433
15 *Rounded with a Sleep* 480

VOLUME TWO

16 *A Game of Bowls* 491
17 *"This is Reality"* 537
18 *The School-Treat* 562
19 *Wine* 608
20 *Mr. Malakite at Weymouth* 679
21 *"Slate"* 709
22 *The Quick or the Dead?* 774
23 *Lenty Pond* 817
24 *"Forget"* 863
25 *Ripeness is All* 917

FROM WATERLOO STATION TO THE SMALL COUNTRY town of Ramsgard in Dorset is a journey of not more than three or four hours, but having by good luck found a compartment to himself, Wolf Solent was able to indulge in such an orgy of concentrated thought, that these three or four hours lengthened themselves out into something beyond all human measurement.

A bluebottle fly buzzed up and down above his head, every now and then settling on one of the coloured advertisements of seaside resorts—Weymouth, Swanage, Lulworth, and Poole—cleaning its front legs upon the masts of painted ships or upon the sands of impossibly cerulean waters.

Through the open window near which he sat, facing the engine, the sweet airs of an unusually relaxed March morning visited his nostrils, carrying fragrances of young green shoots, of wet muddy ditches, of hazel-copses full of damp moss, and of primroses on warm grassy hedge-banks.

Solent was not an ill-favoured man; but on the other hand he was not a prepossessing one. His short stubbly hair was of a bleached tow-colour. His forehead as well as his rather shapeless chin had a tendency to slope backward, a peculiarity which had the effect of throwing the weight of his character upon the curve of his hooked nose and upon the rough, thick eyebrows that overarched his deeply sunken grey eyes.

He was tall and lean; and as he stretched out his legs and clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head over his bony wrists, it would have been difficult to tell whether the goblinish grimaces that occasionally wrinkled his physiognomy were fits of sardonic chuckling or spasms of reckless desperation.

His mood, whatever its elements may have been, was obviously connected with a crumpled letter which he more than once drew forth from his side-pocket, rapidly glanced over, and replaced, only to relapse into the same pose as before.

The letter which thus affected him was written in a meticulously small hand and ran as follows:

MY DEAR SIR:—

Will you be so kind as to arrive at Ramsgard on Thursday in time to meet my friend Mr. Darnley Otter about five o'clock in the tea-room of the Lovelace Hotel? He will be driving over to King's Barton that afternoon and will convey you to his mother's house, where for the present you will have your room. If it is convenient I would regard it as a favour if you will come up and dine with me on the night of your arrival. I dine at eight o'clock; and we shall be able to talk things over.

I must again express my pleasure at your so prompt acceptance of my poor offer.

Yours faithfully,

JOHN URQUHART.

He re-invoked the extraordinary incident which had led to his "prompt acceptance" of Mr. Urquhart's "poor offer."

He was now thirty-five and for ten years he had laboriously taught History at a small institution in the city of London, living peacefully under the despotic affection of his mother, with whom, when he was only a child of

ten, he had left Dorsetshire, and along with Dorsetshire all the agitating memories of his dead father.

As it happened, his new post, as literary assistant to the Squire of King's Barton, brought him to the very scene of these disturbing memories; for it was from a respectable position as History Master in Ramsgard School that his father had descended, by a series of mysterious headlong plunges, until he lay dead in the cemetery of that town, a byword of scandalous depravity.

It was only the fact that the Squire of King's Barton was a relative of Lord Carfax, a cousin of Wolf's mother, that had made it possible for him to find a retreat, suitable to his not very comprehensive abilities, after the astounding *dénouement* of his London life.

He could visualize now, as if it had occurred that very day instead of two months ago, the outraged anger upon his mother's face, when he communicated to her what had happened. He had danced his "malice-dance"—that is how he himself expressed it—in the middle of an innocent discourse on the reign of Queen Anne. He was telling his pupils quite quietly about Dean Swift; and all of a sudden some mental screen or lid or dam in his own mind completely collapsed and he found himself pouring forth a torrent of wild, indecent invectives upon every aspect of modern civilization.

He had, in fact, so at least he told his mother, danced his "malice-dance" on that quiet platform to so abandoned a tune, that no "authorities," in so far as they retained their natural instincts at all, could possibly condone it.

And now, with that event behind him, he was escaping

from the weight of maternal disapproval into the very region where the grand disaster of his mother's life had occurred.

They had had some very turbulent scenes after the receipt of Mr. Urquhart's first answer to his appeal. But as she had no income and only very limited savings, the sheer weight of economic necessity drove her into submission.

"You shall come down to me there when I've got a cottage," he had flung out; and her agitated, handsome face, beneath its disordered mass of wavy, grey hair, had hardened itself under the impact of those words, as if he had taken up her most precious tea-set and dashed it into fragments at her feet.

One of the suppressed emotions that had burst forth on that January afternoon had had to do with the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners. He recalled the figure of a man he had seen on the steps outside Waterloo Station. The inert despair upon the face that this figure had turned towards him came between him now and a hillside covered with budding beeches. The face was repeated many times among those great curving masses of emerald-clear foliage. It was an English face; and it was also a Chinese face, a Russian face, an Indian face. It had the variableness of that Protean wine of the priestess Bacbuc. It was just the face of a man, of a mortal man against whom Providence had grown as malignant as a mad dog. And the woe upon the face was of such a character that Wolf knew at once that no conceivable social readjustments or ameliorative revolutions could ever atone for it—could

ever make up for the simple irremediable fact that it *had* been as it had been!

By the time the hill of beeches had disappeared, he caught sight of a powerful motor-lorry clanging its way along a narrow road, leaving a cloud of dust behind it, and the sight of this thing gave his thought a new direction. There arose before him, complicated and inhuman, like a moving tower of instruments and appliances, the monstrous Apparition of Modern Invention.

He felt as though, with aeroplanes spying down upon every retreat like ubiquitous vultures, with the lanes invaded by iron-clad motors like colossal beetles, with no sea, no lake, no river, free from throbbing, thudding engines, the one thing most precious of all in the world was being steadily assassinated.

In the dusty, sunlit space of that small tobacco-stained carriage, he seemed to see, floating and helpless, an image of the whole round earth! And he saw it bleeding and victimized, like a smooth-bellied, vivisected frog. He saw it scooped and gouged and scraped and harrowed. He saw it hawked at out of the humming air. He saw it netted in a quivering entanglement of vibrations, heaving and shuddering under the weight of iron and stone.

Where, he asked himself, as for the twentieth time he took out and put back Mr. Urquhart's letter—where, in such a vivisected frog's-belly of a world, would there be a place left for a person to think any single thought that was leisurely and easy? And, as he asked himself this and mentally formed a visual image of what he considered "thought," such "thought" took the form of

slowly stirring, vegetable leaves, big as elephants' feet, hanging from succulent and cold stalks on the edges of woodland swamps.

And then, stretching out his legs still further and leaning back against the dusty cushions, he set himself to measure the resources of his spirit against these accursed mechanisms. He did this quite gravely, with no comic uneasiness at the arrogance of such a proceeding. Why should he not pit his individual magnetic strength against the tyrannous machinery invented by other men?

In fact, the thrill of malicious exultation that passed through his nerves as he thought of these things had a curious resemblance to the strange ecstasy he used to derive from certain godlike mythological legends. He would never have confessed to any living person the intoxicating enlargement of personality that used to come to him from imagining himself a sort of demiurgic force, drawing its power from the heart of Nature herself.

And it was just that sort of enlargement he experienced now, when he felt the mysterious depths of his soul stirred and excited by his defiance of these modern inventions. It was not as though he fell back on any traditional archaic obstinacy. What he fell back upon was a crafty, elusive cunning of his own, a cunning both slippery and serpentine, a cunning that could flow like air, sink like rain-water, rise like green sap, root itself like invisible spores of moss, float like filmy pond-scum, yield and retreat, retreat and yield, yet remain unconquered and inviolable!

As he stared out the open window and watched each

span of telegraph-wires sink slowly down till the next telegraph-post pulled them upward with a jerk, he indulged himself in a sensation which always gave him a peculiar pleasure, the sensation of imagining himself to be a prehistoric giant who with an effortless ease ran along by the side of the train, leaping over hedges, ditches, lanes, and ponds, and easily rivalled, in natural-born silent speed, the noisy mechanism of all those pistons and cog-wheels!

He felt himself watching this other-self, this leaping giant, with the positive satisfaction of a hooded snake, thrusting out a flickering forked tongue from coils that shimmered in the sun. And yet as the train rushed forward, it seemed to him as if his real self were neither giant nor snake; but rather that black-budded ashtree, still in the rearward of its leafy companions, whose hushed grey branches threw so contorted a shadow upon the railway bank.

Soon the train that carried him ran rapidly past the queer-looking tower of Basingstoke church, and his thoughts took yet another turn. There was a tethered cow eating grass in the churchyard; and as for the space of a quarter of a minute he watched this cow, it gathered to itself such an inviolable placidity that its feet seemed planted in a green pool of quietness that was older than life itself.

But the Basingstoke church-tower substituted itself for the image of the cow; and it seemed to Solent as though all the religions in the world were nothing but so many creaking and splashing barges, whereon the souls

of men ferried themselves over those lakes of primal silence, disturbing the swaying water-plants that grew there and driving away the shy water-fowl!

He told himself that every church-tower in the land overlooked a graveyard, and that in every graveyard was a vast empty grave waiting for the "Jealous Father of Men" who lived in the church. He knew there was just such a church-tower at King's Barton, and another one at Ramsgard, and yet another at Blacksod, the town on the further side of Mr. Urquhart's village.

He sat very upright now, as the train approached Andover; and the idea came into his head, as he fixed his gaze on his fellow traveller, the bluebottle fly, who was cleaning his front legs on a picture of Swanage pier, that from tower to tower of these West Country churches there might be sent, one gusty November night, a long-drawn melancholy cry, a cry heard only by dogs and horses and geese and cattle and village-idiots, the real death-cry of a god—dead at last of extreme old age!

"Christ is different from God," he said to himself. "Only when God is really dead will Christ be known for what He is. Christ will take the place of God then."

As a sort of deliberate retort to these wild fancies, the tall spire of Salisbury Cathedral rose suddenly before him. Here the train stopped; and though even here —possibly because his absorption in his thoughts gave him a morose and uncongenial appearance—no one entered his third-class carriage, the stream of his cogitations began to grow less turbid, less violent, less destructive. The austerity of Salisbury Plain yielded now

to the glamour of Blackmore Vale. Dairy-farms took the place of sheep-farms; lush pastures, of bare chalk-downs; enclosed orchards, of open cornfields; and park-like moss-grown oaks, of wind-swept naked thorn-bushes.

The green, heavily-grassed meadows through which the train moved now, the slow, brown, alder-shaded streams, the tall hedgerows, the pollarded elms—all these things made Solent realize how completely he had passed from the sphere of his mother's energetic ambitions into the more relaxed world, rich and soft and vaporous as the airs that hung over those mossy ditches, that had been the native land of the man in the Ramsgard cemetery.

His mother's grievances, posthumous and belated, but full of an undying vigour, had never really made him hate his father; and somehow the outburst that had ended his scholastic career had released certain latent instincts in him which now turned, with a fling of rebellious satisfaction, to the wavering image of his sinister begetter.

Children, he knew, were often completely different from both their progenitors, but Wolf had a shrewd suspicion that there was very little in him that did not revert, on one side or the other, to his two parents. He was now thirty-five, a grim, harassed-looking, clean-shaven man, with sunken eye-sockets; but he felt his heart beating with keen excitement, as, after an absence of a quarter of a century, he returned to his native pastures.

What would he find in that house of "Darnley Otter's mother?" Who was this Darnley Otter? What had he to do with Mr. Urquhart? And what would Mr. Urqu-

hart reveal that evening as to the form his own services were to take?

As the train drew up at Semley, he read the words, "For Shaftesbury," upon the notice-board; and very soon the high grassy battlements of the great heathen fortress loomed against the sky-line.

Staring at those turf-covered bastions, and drawing into his lungs lovely breathings from damp moss and cold primroses—breathings that seemed to float up and down that valley on airy journeys of their own—he found himself gathering his mental resources together so as to face with a concentrated spirit whatever awaited him in these pleasant places. . . . "Christ is not a man; He never *was* a man," he thought. "And He will be more than a god when God is dead. . . . Three church-towers . . . three. Ramsgard . . . King's Barton . . . Blacksod . . . it's quaint to think that I've absolutely no idea what I shall be feeling when I touch with my hand the masonry of those three towers . . . or what people I shall know! I hope I shall find some girl who'll let me make love to her . . . tall and slim and white! I'd like her to be *very* white . . . with a tiny little mole, like Imogen's, upon her left breast. . . . I'd like to make love to her out-of-doors . . . among elder-bushes . . . among elder-bushes and herb Robert. . . ."

He pulled in his legs and clasped his hands over his knees, leaning forward, frowning and intent. "I don't care whether I make money. I don't care whether I get fame. I don't care whether I leave any work behind me when I die. All I want is certain sensations!" And with all the power of his wits he set himself to try and ana-

lyze what these sensations were that he wanted beyond everything.

The first thing he did was to attempt to analyze a mental device he was in the habit of resorting to—a device that supplied him with the secret substratum of his whole life. This was a certain trick he had of doing what he called "sinking into his soul." This trick had been a furtive custom with him from very early days. In his childhood his mother had often rallied him about it in her light-hearted way, and had applied to these trances, or these fits of absent-mindedness, an amusing but rather indecent nursery name. His father, on the other hand, had encouraged him in these moods—taking them very gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of infant magician.

It was, however, when staying in his grandmother's house at Weymouth, that the word had come to him which he now always used in his own mind to describe these obsessions. It was the word "mythology"; and he used it entirely in a private sense of his own. He could remember very well where he first came upon the word. It was in a curious room, called "the ante-room," which was connected by folding-doors with his grandmother's drawing-room, and which was filled with the sort of ornamental débris that middle-class people were in the habit of acquiring in the early years of Queen Victoria. The window of his grandmother's room opened upon the sea; and Wolf, carrying the word "mythology" into this bow-window, allowed it to become his own secret name for his own secret habit.

This "sinking into his soul"—this sensation which he

called "mythology"—consisted of a certain summoning-up, to the surface of his mind, of a subconscious magnetic power which from those very early Weymouth days, as he watched the glitter of sun and moon upon the waters from that bow-window, had seemed prepared to answer such a summons.

This secret practice was always accompanied by an arrogant mental idea—the idea, namely, that he was taking part in some occult cosmic struggle—some struggle between what he liked to think of as "good" and what he liked to think of as "evil" in those remote depths.

How it came about that the mere indulgence in a sensation that was as thrilling as a secret vice should have the power of rousing so bold an arrogance, Wolf himself was never able to explain; for his "mythology," as he called it, had no outlet in any sort of action. It was limited entirely to a secret sensation in his own mind, such as he would have been hard put to it to explain in intelligible words to any living person.

But such as it was, his profoundest personal pride —what might be called his dominant *life-illusion*—depended entirely upon it.

Not only had he no ambition for action; he had no ambition for any sort of literary or intellectual achievement. He hid, deep down in his being, a contempt that was actually *malicious* in its pride for all the human phenomena of worldly success. It was as if he had been some changeling from a different planet, a planet where the issues of life—the great dualistic struggles between life and death—never emerged from the charmed circle of the individual's private consciousness.

Wolf himself, if pressed to describe it, would have used some simple earthly metaphor. He would have said that his magnetic impulses resembled the expanding of great vegetable leaves over a still pool—leaves nourished by hushed noons, by liquid transparent nights, by all the movements of the elements—but making some inexplicable difference, merely by their spontaneous expansion, to the great hidden struggle always going on in Nature between the good and the evil forces.

Outward things, such as that terrible face on the Waterloo steps or that tethered cow he had seen at Basingstoke, were to him like faintly limned images in a mirror, the true reality of which lay all the while in his mind—in these hushed expanding leaves—in this secret vegetation—the roots of whose being hid themselves beneath the dark waters of his consciousness.

What he experienced now was a vague wonder as to whether the events that awaited him—these new scenes—these unknown people—would be able to do what no outward events had yet done—break up this mirror of half-reality and drop great stones of real reality—drop them and lodge them—hard, brutal, material stones—down there among those dark waters and that mental foliage.

"Perhaps I've never known reality as other human beings know it," he thought. "My life has been industrious, monotonous, patient. I've carried my load like a camel. And I've been able to do this because it hasn't been my real life at all! My 'mythology' has been my real life."

The bluebottle fly moved slowly and cautiously across

Weymouth Bay, apparently seeking some invisible atom of sustenance, seeking it now off Redcliff, now off Ringstead, now off White Nore.

A sudden nervousness came upon him and he shivered a little. "What if this new reality, when it does come, smashes up my whole secret life? But perhaps it won't be like a rock or stone . . . perhaps it won't be like a tank or lorry or an aeroplane . . ."

He clasped his bony fingers tightly together. "Some girl who'll let me make love to her . . . 'white as a peeled willow-wand' . . . make love to her in the middle of a hazel wood . . . green moss . . . primroses . . . moschatel . . . whiteness. . . ." He unclasped his fingers; and then clasped them again, this time with the left hand above the right hand.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the train drew up at Longborne Port, a village which he knew was the last stop before he reached Ramsgard.

He rose from his seat and took down his things from the rack, causing, as he did so, so much agitation to his only travelling-companion, the bluebottle fly, that it escaped with an indignant humming through the window into the unfamiliar air-fields of Dorsetshire.

A young, lanky, bareheaded porter, with a countenance of whimsical inanity, bawled out at the top of his voice, as he rattled his milk-cans: "Longborne Port! Longborne Port!"

Nobody issued from the train. Nothing was put out of the train except empty milk-cans. The young man's voice, harsh as a corncrake's, seemed unable to disturb

the impenetrable security which hung, like yellow pollen upon a drooping catkin, over those ancient orchards and muddy lanes.

And there suddenly broke in upon the traveller, as he resumed his seat, with his coat and stick and bag spread out before him, the thought of how those particular syllables—"Longborne Port!"—mingling with the clatter of milk-cans, would reproduce to some long-dead human skull, roused to sudden consciousness after centuries of non-existence, the very essence of the familiar life upon earth!

What dark November twilights, what drowsy August noons, what squirtings of white milk into shining pails, would those homely syllables summon forth!

He lay back, breathing rather quickly, as the train moved out of that small station. For the last time he took from his pocket Mr. Urquhart's letter. "Darnley Otter!" he said to himself. "It's odd to think how little that name means now, and how much it may mean tomorrow!" Why was it that, when the future was very likely all there already, stretched out like the great Wessex Fosse-way in front of him, he didn't get some sort of second-sight about it by merely reading those words in Mr. Urquhart's neat hand? What kind of man was Darnley Otter? Was he a plain, middle-aged man like himself or was he a beautiful youth? The idea of beautiful youths made his mind once more revert to "peeled willow-wands," but he easily suppressed this thought in the excitement of the moment.

Ay! There were the ruins of the great Elizabethan's

castle. And *there* was the wide grassy expanse where the town held its Annual Agricultural Show, and where the Ramsgard schoolboys were wont in old days to run their Steeplechase!

How it all came back! Twenty-five years it was, since he left it, frightened and bewildered by his parents' separation; and how little it had changed!

He let his gaze wander over the high tops of the park beech-trees till it lost itself in the blue sky.

Millions of miles of blue sky; and beyond that, millions of miles of sky that could scarcely be called blue or any other colour—pure unalloyed emptiness, stretching outwards from where he sat—with his stick and coat opposite him—to no conceivable boundary or end! Didn't that almost prove that the whole affair was a matter of thought?

Suppose he were now, at this moment, some Ramsgard boy returning to school? Suppose he were Solent Major instead of Wolf Solent? And suppose some genial house-master, meeting him on the platform, were to say to him: "Well, Solent, and what have *you* made of your twenty-five years' holiday?" What would he answer to that?

As the train began to lessen its pace by the muddy banks of the river Lunt, he hurriedly, and as if from fear of that imaginary master, formulated his reply.

"I've learnt, Sir, to get my happiness out of sensation. I've learnt, Sir, when to think and when not to think. I've learnt . . ."

But at this point his excitement at catching sight of the familiar shape of the Lovelace Hotel, across the

Public Gardens, was so overwhelming, that the imaginary catechism came to an end in mid-air.

"I shall send my things over in the bus," he thought, standing up and grasping his bag. "And then I shall go and see if Selena Gault is still alive!"

HIS EXCITEMENT GREW RATHER THAN DIMINISHED AS HE got out of the train.

He gave up his ticket to an elderly station-master, whose air, at once fussily inquisitive and mildly deferential, suggested the manner of a cathedral verger. He watched his luggage being deposited on the Lovelace Bus; and there came over him a vague recollection of some incident of those early years, wherein his mother, standing by that same shabby vehicle, or one exactly resembling it, with a look of contemptuous derision on her formidable face, said something hard and ironical to him which lashed his self-love like a whip.

Opposite the station were the railed-in Public Gardens. These also brought to his mind certain isolated trivial occurrences of his childish days; and it struck him, even in his excitement, just then as being strange that what he remembered were things that had hurt his feelings rather than things that had thrilled him.

In place of following the bus round the west of the Gardens, where the road led to the Hotel, and then on past the police-station to the Abbey, he turned to the east and made his way across a small river-bridge. Here, again, the look of a certain old wall against the water, and certain patches of arrow-head leaves within the water, stirred his memory with a sudden unexpected agitation.

It was over this very bridge that twenty-five years ago

he had leaned with his father while William Solent showed him the difference between loach and gudgeon, and in a funny, rambling, querulous voice deplored the number of castaway tins that lay in the muddy stream.

But Wolf did not lean over the bridge this time. He heard the Abbey clock striking one, and he hurried on up Saint Aldhelm's Street. Newly-budded plane-trees cast curious little shadows, like deformed butterflies, upon the yellowish paving-stones; and over the top of an uneven wall at his side protruded occasional branch-ends of pear-blossom.

He came at last to a green door in the wall.

"Is it possible," he wondered uneasily, "that Selena Gault lives here still?"

He allowed a baker's cart to rattle negligently past him while he made two separate hesitating movements of his hand towards the handle of the green door.

It was queer that he should have had an instinct to look sharply both up and down the street before he brought himself to turn that handle. It was almost as though he felt himself to be a hunted criminal, taking refuge with Selena Gault! But the street was quite deserted now, and with a quick movement he boldly opened the gate and entered the garden.

A narrow stone path led up to the door of the house, which resembled a doll's house, brilliantly painted with blues and greens. Blue and white hyacinths grew in masses on either side of the path; and their scent, caught and suspended in that enclosed space, had a fainting, ecstatic voluptuousness which was at variance with the

prim neatness around them. A diminutive servant, very old but very alert, with the nervous outward-staring eyes of a yellow-hammer, opened the door to him, and without demur ushered him into the drawing-room.

He gave his name and waited. Almost immediately the little servant came back and begged him to take a chair and make himself comfortable. Miss Gault would see him in a few minutes. Those few minutes lengthened themselves into a quarter of an hour, and he had time to meditate on all the possibilities of this strange encounter. Miss Gault was the daughter of the late Headmaster of Ramsgard; and Wolf had heard his mother for twenty-five years utter airy sarcasms at her expense. It appeared she had had some tender relation with his father; had even attended William Solent's death-bed in the workhouse and seen him buried in the cemetery.

Wolf sat on Miss Gault's sofa and set himself to wonder what this rival of his mother's would look like when she entered the room. The servant had not quite closed the door; and when fifteen minutes had elapsed, it opened silently; and Wolf, rising quickly to greet his hostess, found himself confronted by three cats, who walked gravely and gingerly, one after another, into the centre of the apartment. He made some awkward gesture of welcome to these animals, who resembled one another in shape, size, breed, and temperament—in everything except colour, being respectively white, black, and grey; but instead of responding to his advances they each leapt into a separate chair, coiled themselves up, and surveyed, with half-closed languid eyes, the door through which they had entered. He felt as if he were in

the house of the Marquis of Carabas and that the three cats were three Lord Chamberlains.

He sank back upon the sofa and stared morosely at each cat in turn. He decided that he liked the black one best and the grey one least. He decided that the white one was its mistress's favourite.

He was occupied in this harmless manner when Selena Gault herself came in. He rose and advanced towards her with outstretched hand. But it was impossible for him to eliminate from his expression the shock that her appearance gave him; and it did not lessen his surprise when she received his gesture with a formal bow and a stiff rejection of his hand.

She was a tall, bony woman, with a face so strikingly ugly that it was impossible to avoid an immediate consciousness of its ugliness; and it was borne in upon him, as their conversation proceeded, that if only he *had* been able to contemplate her countenance with unconcern, she would have enjoyed one of the happiest moments of her life.

She made a sign for him to resume his seat; but as she herself stood erect in front of the fire, which in spite of the warmth of the day still burned on the hearth, he preferred to remain on his feet. Like a flash he thought to himself, "Can my father have actually embraced this extraordinary person?" And then he thought to himself: "The poor woman! Why, she can't be able to meet a single stranger anywhere without giving them a shock like this." But he had already begun speaking quietly and naturally to her, even while he was thinking these things.

"I knew you would know who I was," he said gently. "I've just been invited down here. I'm going to do some work—I can't tell you quite what it is—out at King's Barton. I'm going to drive over there this afternoon; but I thought I would come and see you first."

While she listened to him, he noticed that she kept pulling her white woollen shawl tighter and tighter round her black silk dress. The effect of this was to give her the appearance of someone caught unawares in some sort of fancy costume—some costume that rendered her ashamed and even ridiculous.

"And so I just came straight in," he went on, beginning to feel a very odd sensation, a sensation as if he were addressing someone who was listening all the time in a kind of panic to a third person's voice—"straight in through your little green door and between those hyacinths."

She still made no observation and he noticed that one marked quality of her ugliness was the dusky sallowness of her cheeks combined with the ghastly pallor of her upper lip, which projected from her face very much as certain funguses project from the brown bark of a dead tree.

"I've decided that your favourite cat is the white one," he brought out after an uncomfortable pause.

She did relax at this, and, moving to the chair occupied by the grey cat, took up the animal in her arms and sat down, holding it on her lap.

"You're wrong, wrong, wrong!" she whispered hoarsely. "Isn't he wrong. Matthew?"

The cat took not the least notice of this remark or of the fingers that caressed him; but it did impinge upon the consciousness of Miss Gault's visitor that this singular woman's hands were of a surprising beauty.

"What are the names of the others?" Solent enquired.

"The black one is Mark," replied the lady.

"And the white one Luke?" he hazarded.

She nodded; and then, quite suddenly, with an effort as though a gust of wind had swept aside a mass of dead leaves, uncovering the fresh verdure below, her whole face relaxed into a smile of disarming sweetness.

"I've never had a John," she said. "And I never will."

Wolf Solent was quick enough to take advantage of this change of mood. He moved across to her, bent down over her chair, and scratched Matthew's head. "I thought I'd like to go over and see where the grave is." His words were low-pitched but without any emotional stress. His intonation could hardly have been different if he had said, "I think I'll go to the Abbey presently."

Selena Gault gave a deep sigh, but it seemed to Solent like a sigh of relief rather than sadness.

"Quite right, quite proper," he heard her murmur, with her head held low and her hands occupied in smoothing out the shawl beneath the body of the somnolent cat.

"The best thing you could do," she added.

Since she said nothing more and persisted in keeping her head lowered—a position which accentuated the enormity of her upper lip and the dark sallowness of her face—Wolf began to feel as if he were an impertinent

intruder stroking the pet animal of some proud, secretive being whose peculiarity it was to prefer beasts to men.

He straightened himself and squared his shoulders with a sigh. Then he moved across to the sofa and laid his hand on his hat and stick, which he was rather surprised to notice he had brought with him into the room.

"I suppose," he said, as he turned round with these objects in the hand, "there'll be someone out there at the cemetery, some gardener or caretaker, who'll know where the grave is? I shouldn't like to get out there and not be able to find it. But I don't want to let this day pass without trying to find it."

Selena Gault tossed the grey cat from her lap and rose to her feet.

"I'll come with you," she said.

She uttered the words quite quietly, but he noticed that she avoided looking him in the face.

She stood for a time staring out of the window, motionless and abstracted.

"If it would be a bother to you——" he began.

But she suddenly turned her distorted countenance full upon him.

"Sit down, boy," she rapped out. "Do you think I'd let you go there alone, if there were fifty gardeners?"

She stared at him for a second after this with a look that seemed to turn his bodily presence into the frame of a doorway through which she gazed into the remote past.

"Sit down, sit down," she said more gently. "I'll be ready soon."

The door had not closed behind her for many minutes when the elderly servant entered, carrying a silver tray, upon which was a plate of Huntley and Palmer's oaten biscuits and a decanter of sherry. Wolf had poured himself out as many as three glasses of this excellent wine and had swallowed nearly all the biscuits before Miss Gault returned. She found him stroking Mark, the black cat.

Her appearance in hat and cloak was just as peculiar as before, but more distinguished; and Wolf soon found out, when presently they passed the front of the Abbey, where several townspeople greeted her, that the power of her personality was fully appreciated in Ramsgard.

Their way to the cemetery took them straight past the workhouse. This building was on the further side of the road; but Solent was unable to restrain an impulse to turn his head towards it. The edifice was rather less gloomy than such erections usually are, owing to the fact that some indulgent authority had permitted its façade to be overgrown with Virginia creeper.

He found himself reducing his pace so that he might familiarize himself with every aspect of that heavy, sombre building behind iron gates. As he lingered he became suddenly aware that his companion had slipped her gloved hand upon his arm. This natural gesture, instead of pleasing him or rousing his sympathy, made him feel curiously irritable. He quickened his pace; and her hand fell away so quickly that he might easily have supposed that light pressure to have been a pure accident.

They walked side by side now, with such swinging

steps that it was not long before they were beyond the houses and out into what was almost open country. It annoyed him that she remained so silent. Did she suppose he had come to see his father's grave in a vein of sentimental commiseration?

"What's *that?*" he exclaimed, pointing to a ramshackle group of sheds that seemed fenced off from the road with some unnatural and sinister precaution.

Selena Gault's reply made his touchiness seem captious and misplaced.

"Can't you see what that is, boy? It's the slaughterhouse! You've only to take the shadiest, quietest road to find 'em in any town!"

They were soon skirting the edge of the neat oak palings that ran along the leafy purlieus of Ramsgard Cemetery.

"I let them bury him at the pauper's end," she remarked gravely. "It's nearer. It's quieter. It's hardly ever disturbed. This is the way I generally go in." With a sly, quick glance up and down the road, a glance that gave an emphasis to the whites of her eyes such as made her companion think of a crafty dray-horse edging into a field of clover, Miss Gault stooped down and propelled herself under a rough obstruction that blocked a gap in the oak palings.

Solent followed her, confused, a little surly, but no longer hostile.

She did not wait for him, but made her way with long, rapid strides to the extreme corner of the enclosure. Her swinging arms, her gaunt figure, her erratic gait,

set the man's mind thinking once more of various non-human animals.

He came up to her just as she reached her goal. "William Solent," he read, on the upright slab of sandstone; and then, under the date of birth and death, the words, *"Mors est mihi vita."*

Wolf had no difficulty in recognizing the particular hyacinths that stood in an earthenware pot. "She must have come here for twenty-five years!" he thought, with a gasp of astonishment; and he gave her a hurried, furtive, prying look from under his bushy eyebrows.

She certainly did nothing on this occasion to cause him any discomfort. She just muttered in quite a conventional tone, "I never like to see plantains in the grass"; and bending down, she proceeded to pull up certain small weeds, making a little pile of them behind the headstone.

Swaying thus above the mound and scrabbling with outstretched arms among the grass-blades, her figure in the misty afternoon sunshine took on, as Wolf stood there, a kind of portentous unreality. There was something outlandish in the whole scene, something monstrous and bizarre that destroyed all ordinary pathos. Twenty-five years? If she had come here regularly for all that time, how could there be any "plantains," or any clover, or any moss either, left upon his father's grave? He was so conscious of the personality of this woman, so amazed at a tenacity of feeling that seemed to pass all limits of what was due, that his own sensibility became hard and rigid.

But though his emotions were cold, his imagination worked freely. The few feet of Dorsetshire clay, the half-inch of brittle West Country elm-wood, that separated him from the up-turned skull of his begetter, were like so much transparent glass. He looked down into William Solent's empty eye-sockets, and the empty eye-sockets looked back at him. Steadily, patiently, indifferently they looked back; and between the head without a nose looking up and the head with so prominent a nose looking down there passed a sardonic wordless dialogue. "So be it," the son said to himself. "I won't forget. Whether there are plantains or whether there aren't plantains, the universe shan't fool me." "Fool me; fool me," echoed the fleshless skull from below.

"There!" sighed Selena Gault, rising to her natural perpendicular position. "There! There won't be any more of *them* for a fortnight. Shall we go back now, boy?"

When they were once more in the road, Miss Gault became a little more talkative.

"You're not like him, of course—not in any way. He really was uncommonly handsome. Not that *that* had any weight with *me*. But it had with some. It had with Mr. Urquhart!" She paused and glanced almost mischievously at her companion. "I'm sure I don't know," she remarked, with a funny little laugh, "what Mr. Urquhart will make of *you!*"

"The idea seems to be," said Wolf gravely, while his estimate of his new friend's perspicacity became more respectful, "that I should help him with some historical researches. It appears he is writing a 'History of Dorset.'"

"History of fiddlestick!" snapped the lady. And then in a more amiable tone, "But he's no idiot. He *has* read a little. You'll enjoy going through his library."

Wolf felt himself experiencing a rather cowardly hope that his companion would pass the slaughter-house this time without comment. The hope was not fulfilled.

"I suppose *you* eat them?" she asked in a hoarse whisper; and Wolf, turning towards her a startled face, was struck by an expression of actual *animal fear* upon her extraordinary physiognomy. But she did not linger; and it was not long before they were once more opposite the workhouse.

"Do you know what he said when he was dying?" she began suddenly. "He didn't say it particularly to me. I just happened to be there. He said it to everyone in general. He said, 'Christ! I've enjoyed my life!' He used the word 'Christ' just in that way, as an exclamation. There was a young clergyman there, straight down from Cambridge, an athlete of some sort; and when your father cried out 'Christ!' like that—and he was dead the next second—I heard him mutter, 'Good for you, Sir!' as if it had been a fine hit at a cricket-match."

Wolf would have been entirely responsive now if Miss Gault had touched his arm or even taken his arm, but she walked forward without making any sign.

"I expect your mother has abused me pretty thoroughly to you since you were a child," she said presently. "Ann and I were never fond of each other. We were enemies even before your father came. She cut me out, of course, at every turn; but that didn't bring her round! She couldn't forgive me for being the headmaster's

daughter. You've no idea of the savage jealousies that go on in a place like this. But wherever *we* were we should have hated each other. Ann is flippant where I'm serious, and I'm flippant where Ann is serious."

Wolf tried in vain to imagine on what occasions Miss Gault would display flippancy, but he knew well enough what that word meant in regard to his mother. He was seized at that moment with an irresistible temptation to reveal to this woman the picture of her character with which he had been regaled for the last twenty-five years. It was a picture so extraordinarily different from the reality, that it made him wonder if all women, whether flippant or otherwise, were personal to the point of insanity in their judgments of one another. What his mother had told him was not even a caricature of Selena Gault. It referred to another person altogether.

"My mother has a lot of friends in town," he began, rather lamely. Miss Gault cut him short.

"Of course she has! She's a brave, high-spirited, ambitious woman. Of course she has!" And then, in a low, meditative voice that seemed to float wistfully over the years, "She was very much in love with your father."

This last remark, coming at the moment when the Abbey clock above their heads struck four, produced considerable bewilderment in Wolf's mind. The idea of his estranged parents having been "in love" with each other made him feel curiously in the cold, and strangely alien to both of them. In some obscure way he felt as if Selena Gault were practising an indecent treachery, but a treachery so subtle that he couldn't lay his finger upon it!

"Let's go in here for a minute!" he said. "And then I must keep my appointment with Mr. Otter."

They entered the great nave of the Abbey-church and sat down. The high, cool, vaulted roof, with its famous fan-tracery, seemed to offer itself to his mind as if it were some "branch-charmèd" vista of verdurous silence, along which his spirit might drift and float at large, a leaf among leaves!

There was a faint greenish mist in that high roof, the effect of some cavernous contrast with the mellow warmth of the horizontal sun pouring through the coloured windows below; and into that world of undulating carving and greenish dimness, Wolf now permitted his mind to wander, till he began to feel once again that mysterious sensation which he called his "mythology."

He felt free of his mother, and yet tender and indulgent towards her. He felt bound up in some strange affiliation with that skeleton in the cemetery. He felt in whimsical and easy harmony with the queer lady seated by his side. The only thing that troubled him at all just then was a faint doubt as to what effect this return to the land of his birth would have upon his furtive, private, hidden existence. Would he be crafty enough to keep that secretive life-illusion out of the reach of danger? Would his inner world of hushed Cimmerian ecstasies remain uninvaded by these Otters and Urquharts?

He felt as though he were tightening his muscles for a plunge into very treacherous waters. All manner of unknown voices seemed calling to him out of this warm Spring air; mocking voices, beguiling voices, insidious voices—voices that threatened unguessed-at disturbances

to that underground life of his which was like a cherished vice. It was not as though he heard the tones of these voices so that he could have recognized them again. It was as though a wavering crowd of featureless human figures on the further side of some thick opaque lattice-work were conferring together in conspiring awareness of his immediate appearance among them!

The atmosphere was cooler when they came out of the church. Its taste was the taste of an air that has been blown over leagues and leagues of green stalks full of chilly sap. It made Solent think of water-buttercups in windy ponds, and the splash of moor-hens over dark gurgling weirs.

He parted from his companion by a grotesque little statue under the lime-trees representing the debonair ancestor of the Lovelaces whose name, though intimately associated with Ramsgard, had slipped into something legendary and remote. Selena Gault gave him her hand with a stately inclination of her unlovely head.

"You'll come in and see me and my cats before long and tell me your impressions of all those people?"

"I certainly will, Miss Gault," he answered. "You've been very good to me."

"Tut, tut, boy! Good is not the word! When I come to think of it, standing like that with your hat off, you *have* a kind of look——"

"That's under *your* influence, Miss Gault," he hurriedly said; and they took their separate ways.

There was far less embarrassment for Wolf in his encounter with Mr. Darnley Otter than he had expected. They were the only men in that massive old-world

sitting-room, decorated with hunting-scenes and large solemn prints of Conservative statesmen, and they found it easy and natural to sit down opposite each other at a round table and to enjoy an excellent tea. Wolf was hungry. The bread-and-butter was fresh and plentiful. The solidity of the teapot was matched by the thinness of the cups; and the waiter, who seemed to know Mr. Otter well, treated them both with a dignified obsequiousness which had about it the mellow beauty of centuries of feudal service.

He was a clean-shaven man, this waiter, with an aristocratic stoop and a face that resembled that of Lord Shaftesbury, the great philanthropist; and Wolf felt an obscure longing to sit opposite him in his own snug parlour—wherever that was—and draw out of him the hidden sources of that superb respectfulness—to be the object of which, even for a brief hour's tea-drinking, was to be reconciled not only to oneself but also in some curious way to the whole human race!

"We haven't seen Mr. Urquhart down here lately," the waiter was saying to Wolf's new acquaintance. "His health keeps up, I hope, Sir?"

"Perfectly," responded Mr. Otter. "Perfectly, Stalbridge. I hope you yourself are all right, Stalbridge?"

Wolf had never seen a physical human movement more expressive, more adjusted, more appropriate, than the gesture with which the elderly servant balanced the back of his hand against the edge of their table and leaned forward to reply to this personal question. He noticed this gesture all the more vividly because of a curiously shaped white scar that crossed the back of the

man's hand. But he now became aware of something else about this waiter—something that surprised and rather disturbed him. The fellow's countenance did not only remind him of Lord Shaftesbury. It reminded him of that face by the Waterloo steps!

"I've nothing to complain of, Sir, thank you Sir, since I settled that little legal trouble of mine. It's the mind, Sir, that keeps us up; and except for the malice and mischief that comes to all, I've no grievance against the Almighty."

The air of courteous magnanimity with which the old waiter exonerated Providence made Wolf feel ashamed of every peevishness he had ever indulged. But why did he make him think of that Waterloo-steps face?

When Mr. Stalbridge had left them, to look after some other guests, both the men, as they finished their tea and lit their cigarettes, began to feel more comfortable and reassured in their attitude to each other.

Darnley Otter was in every respect more of a classified "gentleman" than Solent. He had a trim, pointed, Van Dyck beard of a light-chestnut colour. His fingernails were exquisitely clean. His necktie, of a dark-blue shade, had evidently been very carefully chosen. His grey tweed suit, neither too faded nor too new, fitted his slender figure to a nicety. His features were sharply-cut and very delicately moulded, his hands thin and firm and nervous. When he smiled, his rather grave countenance wrinkled itself into a thousand amiable wrinkles; but he very rarely smiled, and for some reason it was impossible for Solent to imagine him laughing. One facial trick he had which Wolf found a little

disconcerting—since his own method was to stare so very steadily from under his bushy eyebrows—a trick of hanging his head and letting his eyelids droop over his eyes as he talked. This habit was so constant with him that it wasn't until the dialogue with the waiter occurred that Wolf realized what his eyes were like. They were of a tint that Wolf had never seen before in any human face. They were like the blue markings upon the sides of freshly caught mackerel.

But what struck Wolf most deeply was not the colour of Mr. Otter's eyes. It was their look. He had never in the whole course of his life seen anything so harassed, so anxious, as the expression in those eyes, when their owner was unable any longer to avoid giving a direct glance. Nor was it just simply that the man was of a worrying turn of mind. The curious thing about the anxiety in Mr. Otter's eyes was that it was unnatural. There was a sort of puzzled surprise in it, a sort of indignant moral bewilderment, quite different from any constitutional nervousness. His expression seemed to protest against something that had been inflicted on him, something unexpected, something that struck his natural acceptance of life as both monstrous and inexplicable.

It was when he spoke to the waiter that this unhappy expression was caught most off-guard, and Wolf explained this to himself on the theory that the waiter's abysmal tact unconsciously relieved his interlocutor from the strain of habitual reticence.

Their meal once over, it did not take them long to get mounted, with all Wolf Solent's luggage, in Mr. Urquhart's dog-cart. That afternoon's drive from Rams-

gard to King's Barton was a memorable event in Wolf's life. He had come already to feel a definite attraction toward this scrupulously-dressed, punctilious gentleman with the troubled mackerel-dark eyes; and as they sat side by side in that dog-cart, jogging leisurely along behind an ancient dapple-grey horse, he made up his mind that if it was to be in Darnley Otter's company that his free hours were to pass, they would pass very harmoniously indeed.

The evening itself, through which they drove, following a road parallel to and a little to the right of that one which had ended with the cemetery, was beautiful with an exceptional kind of beauty. It was one of those Spring evenings which are neither golden from the direct rays of the sinking sun, nor opalescent from their indirect diffused reflection. A chilly wind had arisen, covering the western sky, into which they were driving, with a thick bank of clouds. The result of this complete extinction of the sunset was that the world became a world in which every green thing upon its surface received a fivefold addition to its greenness. It was as if an enormous green tidal wave, composed of a substance more translucent than water, had flowed over the whole earth; or rather as if some diaphanous essence of all the greenness created by long days of rain had evaporated during this one noon, only to fall down, with the approach of twilight, in a cold, dark, emerald-coloured dew. The road they thus followed, heading for that rain-heavy western horizon, was a road that ran along the southern slope of an arable upland—an upland that lay midway between the pastoral Dorset valley which was terminated by the

hills and woods of High Stoy and the yet wider Somersetshire valley that spread away into the marshes of Sedgemoor.

Solent learned from a few courteous but very abrupt explanations interjected by his companions, that the only other occupants of the house to which they were proceeding were Darnley's elder brother, Jason, and his mother, Mrs. Otter. He also gathered that Darnley himself, except on Saturdays and Sundays, worked as a classical under-master in a small grammar-school in Blacksod. By one means and another—Wolf was quick at such surmises—he obtained an impression that this work in Blacksod was anything but congenial to his reserved companion. He also began to divine, though certainly with no help from his well-bred friend, that these scholastic activities of his were almost the sole financial support of the family at Pond Cottage.

"I do wish I could persuade you," Solent began, when they were still some two and a half miles from their destination, "to give me some sort of notion of what Mr. Urquhart really expects from me. I've never made any historical researches in my life. I've only compiled wretched summaries from books that everyone can get. What will he want me to do? Go searching round in parish-registers and so on?"

The driver's gaze, directed obstinately to the grey tail of their slow-moving horse, remained unresponsive to the querulousness of this appeal.

"I have a notion, Solent," he remarked, "that you'll get light on a great many things as soon as you've seen Mr. Urquhart."

Wolf pulled down the corners of his mouth and lifted his thick eyebrows.

"The devil!" he thought. "That's just about what my friend Miss Gault hinted."

He raised his voice and gave it a more serious tone.

"Tell me, Otter, is Mr. Urquhart what you might call eccentric—queer, in fact?"

Darnley did turn his bearded profile at this. "That depends," he said, "what you mean by 'queer.' I've always found him very civil. My brother can't bear the sight of him."

Wolf made his favourite grimace again at this.

"I hope your brother will approve of *me*," he said. "I confess I begin to be a bit frightened."

"Jason is a poet," remarked Mr. Otter gravely, and his tone had enough of a rebuke in it to rouse a flicker of malice in his companion.

"I hope Mr. Urquhart isn't a poet too," he said.

Mr. Otter took no notice of this retort except to fall into a deeper silence than ever; and Wolf's attention reverted to what he could see of the famous Vale of Blackmore. Every time the hedge grew low, as they jogged along, every time a gate or a gap interrupted its green undulating rampart, he caught a glimpse of that great valley, gathering the twilight about it as a dying god might gather to his heart the cold, wet ashes of his last holocaust.

More and more did the feeling grow upon him that he was entering into a new world where he must leave behind the customs, the grooves, the habits of fifteen long

years of his life. "There's one thing," he thought to himself, while a sudden chilliness struck his face as their road drew nearer the course of the river, "that I'll never give up . . . not even for the sake of the slenderest 'peeled willow-wand' in Dorset." As this thought crossed his mind he actually tightened his two bony hands tenaciously over his legs just above his knees, as if he were fortifying himself against some unknown threat to his treasured vice. And then in a kind of self-protective reassembling of his memories, as if by the erection of a great barrier of mental earthworks he could ward off any attack upon his secret, he set himself to recall certain notable landmarks among his experiences of the world up to the hour of this exciting plunge into the unknown.

He recalled various agitating and shameful scenes between his high-spirited mother and his drifting unscrupulous father. He summoned up, as opposed to these, his own delicious memories of long, irresponsible holidays, lovely uninterrupted weeks of idleness, by the sea at Weymouth, when he read so many thrilling books in the sunlit bow-window at Brunswick Terrace. How clearly he could see now the Jubilee clock on the Esplanade, the pompous statue of George the Third, the White Nore, the White Horse, the wave-washed outline of Portland breakwater! How he could recall his childish preference for the great shimmering expanse of wet sand, out beyond the bathing-machines, over the hot, dry sand under the sea-wall, where the donkeys stood and Punch and Judy was played!

"I am within twenty miles of Weymouth here," he

thought. "*That's* where my real life began . . . *that's* the place I love . . . in spite of its lack of hedges and trees!"

Then he recalled his tedious uninspired youth in London, the hateful day-school, the hateful overcrowded college, the interminable routine of his ten years of teaching. "A double life! A double life!" he muttered under his breath, staring at the grey rump of Mr. Urquhart's nag, as it swayed before him, and moving his own body a little forward, as he tightened his grip still more fiercely upon his own bony thighs.

Was he going to be plunged now into another world of commonplace tedium, full of the same flat, conventional ambitions, the same sickening clevernesses? It couldn't be so! It couldn't . . . it couldn't . . . with this enchanted springtime stirring in all these leaves and grasses. . . .

What a country this was!

To his right, as they drove along, the ground sloped upwards—cornfield after cornfield of young green shoots—to the great main ridge between Dorset and Somerset, along which—only a mile or so away, his companion told him—lay the main highway, famous in West Country history, between Ramsgard and Blacksod, and also between—so Mr. Otter assured him—Salisbury and Exeter!

To his left the Vale of Blackmore beckoned to him out of its meadows—meadows that were full of faint grassy odours which carried a vague taste of river-mud in their savour because of the nearness of the banks of the Lunt. From Shaftesbury, on the north, to the isolated

eminence of Melbury Bub, to the south, that valley stretched away, whispering, so it seemed, some inexplicable prophetic greeting to its returned native-born.

As he listened to the noise of the horse's hooves steadily clicking, clicking, clicking, with every now and then a bluish spark rising in the dusk of the road, as iron struck against flint; as he watched the horizon in front of him grow each moment more fluid, more wavering; as he saw detached fragments of the earth's surface—hill-curves, copses, far-away fields and hedges—blend with fragments of cloud and fragments of cloudless space, it came over him with a mounting confidence that this wonderful country must surely deepen, intensify, enrich his furtive inner life, rather than threaten or destroy it.

Thus clutching his legs as if to assure himself of his own identity, thus leaning eagerly forward by his companion's side, his eyebrows contracted into a fixed frown and his nostrils twitching, Wolf felt the familiar mystic sensation surging up even now from its hidden retreat. Up, up it rose, like some great moonlight-coloured fish from fathomless watery depths, like some wide-winged marsh-bird from dark untraversed pools! The airs of this new world that met its rising were full of the coolness of mosses, full of the faint unsheathing of fern-fronds. Whatever this mysterious emotion was, it leaped forward now towards the new element as if conscious that it carried with it a power as formidable, as incalculable, as anything that it could encounter there.

"SO THIS IS TO BE YOUR ROOM," SAID MRS. OTTER. "I knew you'd want to see it at once; as you have to dress, of course, for dining at the House? It's not large, but I think it's rather comfortable. My son Jason said only just now that he felt quite envious of it. His own room is just opposite, looking on the back garden, as yours does on the front. I think we might show him Jason's room, don't you, Darnley? It's so very characteristic! At least we try to keep it so, don't we, Darnley? Darnley and I do it ourselves, when he's out." Her voice, as the two men stood in the doorway staring at Solent's pieces of shabby luggage, which they had just carried in, sank into a confidential whisper. "He's out now," she added. They both moved aside as she proceeded to make her way across the small passage. "There!" she exclaimed, opening a door; and Wolf peered into complete and rather stuffy darkness. "There! Perhaps you have a match, Darnley?"

Darnley obediently struck a match and proceeded to set alight two ornate candles that stood on a chest of drawers. The whole look of the chamber thus revealed, was detestable to the visitor.

Above the bed hung an enormous Arundel print of a richly gilded picture by Benozzo Gozzoli; and above the fireplace, where a few red coals still smouldered, was a morbidly sanctimonious Holy Family by Filippino Lippi.

"I'd better open the window a little, mother, hadn't I?" said Darnley, moving across the room.

"No—no, dear!" cried the lady hurriedly. "He feels the draught so terribly when he's indoors. It's only cigarette-smoke—and a little incense," she added, turning to Wolf. "He finds incense refreshing. We order it from the Stores. Darnley and I don't care for it. So a little lasts a long time."

"He must have gone to Blacksod again," remarked the son grimly, glancing at his watch and looking very significantly at his mother.

"If he has, I'm sure I hope they'll be nicer to him than they were last time," murmured the lady.

"At the Three Peewits?" retorted her son drily. "Too nice, I daresay! I wish he'd stick to Farmer's Rest."

"We are referring to the inns in this neighbourhood where my son meets his friends," remarked the mother; and Wolf, contemplating the thin, peaked face, the smooth, high forehead, the neatly brushed pale hair, the nun-like dress of the little woman, felt ashamed of the first rush of inconsiderate contempt that her manner of speech had provoked in him.

"There's something funny about all this," he thought to himself. "I'll be interested to see this confounded incense-burner."

Left to himself to unpack his things, he looked round with anxious concern at the room that was to be his base of operations, his secret fox's hole, for so prolonged a time. There was a Leighton over the mantelpiece, and a huge Alma-Tadema between the two windows; and he divined at once that the spare-bedroom

was used as a depository by this household for mid-Victorian works of art.

He leaned out of one of the windows. A sharp scent of jonquils was wafted up from some flower-bed below; but the night was so dark he could see nothing except a row of what looked like poplar-trees and a clump of thick bushes.

He quickly unpacked his clothes and put them away in easily-opening, agreeably-papered drawers. There was a vase of rust-tinted polyanthuses on the dressing-table; and he thought to himself, "The poet's mother knows how to manage things!"

He decided at first to confine himself to a dinner-jacket; but realizing that he had only one pair of black trousers, and that these went best with the tail-coat, he changed his mind and put on full evening-dress.

As he finally tied his white tie into a bow at the small mahogany-framed looking-glass, he could not help thinking of the many unknown events that would occupy his thoughts as he stood just there in future days—events that were only now so many airy images, floating, drifting, upon the sea of the unborn.

"How will Mr. Urquhart receive me?" his thoughts ran on. "This brother of Otter's doesn't like him; but that's nothing. . . . I'll deal with these awful pictures later!" And he carefully extinguished his candles and stepped out on the landing.

The little dining-room of Pond Cottage faced the drawing-room at the foot of the stairs; and when he stood in the hall, hesitating over which room to enter,

he was surprised to find himself beckoned to, eagerly and surreptitiously, by a bent old woman in a blue apron, laying the dinner. He crossed the threshold in answer to this appeal.

"I know'd yer," the crone whispered. "I know'd 'twas none o' they, soon as I did hear yer feet. Looksy here, Mister! Master Darnley'll want to go up to Squire's with 'ee. Don't 'ee let 'un go! That's what I've got to say to 'ee. Don't 'ee let 'un go! 'Tis no walk up to House. 'Tis straight along Pond Lane and down Lenty, and there 'a be! Just 'ee go off now, quiet-like, afore they be comed downstairs. I'll certify to Missus that I telled 'ee the way to House. Don't 'ee stand staring at a person toad-struck and pondering! Off with 'ee now! Be an angel of a sweet young gent! There! Don't 'ee wait a minute. They'll be down, afore 'ee can holler yer own name. Out wi' 'ee, and God bless 'ee. Straight to the end of Pond, and then down Lenty!"

It was the nature of Wolf Solent, when other things were equal, to be easy, flexible, obliging. So without asking any questions he silently and expeditiously obeyed the old servant. He snatched up his hat and his overcoat, and vanished into the darkness of the night.

"I suppose this is Pond Lane," he said to himself, as he made his way in the direction pointed out by the old woman. "But if it isn't, I can't help it. They're all on the jump about that chap's coming home. She wanted to keep Otter in the house to deal with the beggar."

Fortune favoured him more than he might have expected. Just where Pond Lane turned into Lenty, he met

a group of children, and under their direction he had no difficulty in finding the drive-entrance to King's Barton Manor.

It was not a long drive and it did not lead to a big house. Built in the reign of James the First, Barton Manor had always remained a small and unimportant dwelling. Its chief glory was its large and rambling garden—a garden that needed more hands to keep it in order than the present owner was able to afford.

And, standing on the top of the weather-stained, lichen-spotted stone steps, after he had rung the bell, Wolf Solent had time, before anyone answered his ring, to imbibe something of the beauty of this new surrounding. The sky had cleared a little, and from a few open spaces, crowded with small faint stars, a pallid luminosity revealed the outlines of several wide, velvety lawns, intersected by box-hedges, themselves divided by stone-flagged paths. Wolf could see at one end of these lawns a long, high yew-hedge, looking in that uncertain light so mysterious and ill-omened that it was easy to imagine that on the further side of it all manner of phantasmal figures moved, ready to vanish at cock-crow!

For one moment he had a queer sensation that that wretched human face he had seen on the Waterloo steps hung there—there also, between the branches of a tall obscure tree that grew at the end of that yew-hedge. But even as he looked, the face faded; and instead of it, so wrought-upon were his nerves at that moment, there appeared to him the worried, anxious, mackerel-coloured eyes of Darnley Otter.

He was disturbed in these fancies by the opening of the carved Jacobean door. The man-servant who admitted him was, to his surprise, dressed in rough working-clothes. He was an extremely powerful man, and had a swarthy, gipsy-like complexion and coal-black hair.

"Excuse me, Sir," he said with a melancholy smile, as he took the visitor's coat and laid it on a great oak chest that stood in the hall. "Excuse me, Mr. Solent, but I've been working till a few minutes ago in the stable. He never likes me to apologize to gentlemen who come; but that's the way I am; and I hope you'll excuse me, Sir."

Even at the very moment he was muttering an appropriate reply to this somewhat unusual greeting, and allowing his thoughts, below the surface of his words, to reflect how oddly the servants in King's Barton behaved, Wolf became aware of the approach of an imposing personage coming down the long hallway towards them. This figure, limping very much and leaning upon a stick, was in evening-dress; and as he approached he muttered, over and over again, in a low, soft, satiny voice: "What's this I hear, eh? What's this I hear, eh? What's this I hear, eh?"

The tall coachman, or gardener, or whatever he was, did not wait for his master's arrival. With one quick glance at Solent and a final "Excuse me, Sir!" he vanished through a side-door, leaving Wolf to face his host without any official announcement.

"Mr. Solent? Very good. Mr. Wolf Solent? Very, very good. You received my letter and you came at once? Excellent. Very, very good."

Uttering these words in the same low voice that made Wolf think of the unrolling of some great, rich bundle of Chinese silk, he offered his left hand to his visitor and kept his right still leaning upon the handle of the stick that supported him.

The impression Wolf got from Mr. Urquhart's face was extremely complicated. Heavy eyelids, and pendulous, baggy foldings below the eyes, made one aspect of it. Greenish-blackness in the eyes themselves, and something profoundly suspicious in their intense questioning gaze, made another. An air of agitated restlessness, amounting to something that might have been described as a hunted look, made yet a third. The features of the face, taken in their general outlines, were massive and refined. It was in the expression that flitted across them that Wolf detected something that puzzled and perturbed him. One thing was certain. Both Mr. Urquhart's head and Mr. Urquhart's stomach were unnaturally large—far too large for his feeble legs. His hair, which was almost as black as that of his manservant, caused Wolf to wonder whether or not he wore a wig.

Dropping his visitor's hand, he suddenly stood stock-still, in the attitude of one who listens. Wolf had no idea whether he was arrested by sounds in the garden outside or sounds in the kitchen inside. He himself heard nothing but the ticking of the hall-clock.

Presently the squire spoke again. "They didn't come with you then? They didn't bring you to the door then?" He spoke with what Wolf fancied was a tone of nervous relief.

"I found my way very easily," was all the visitor could reply.

"What's that? You came alone? They let you come alone?" The man gave him a quick, suspicious glance, and limped a step or two towards the front-door. Wolf received an impression that he wasn't believed, and that Mr. Urquhart thought that, if the door were opened and he called loud enough, someone would respond at once out of the darkness.

"Didn't Darnley come *any* of the way with you?" This was said with such a querulous, suspicious accent that Wolf looked him straight in the face.

"They didn't even know I had left the house," he remarked sternly.

Mr. Urquhart glanced at the door through which the servant had vanished.

"I told him to lay three places," he remarked. "I made sure they wouldn't let you come alone."

Wolf, at this, lifted one of his thick eyebrows; and a flicker of a smile crossed his mouth.

"Would you like me to run over and fetch him?" he said.

"What's that, eh? Fetch him? Did you say fetch him? Of course not! Come, come. Let's go in. Monk will have everything ready by now. Come along. This is the way."

He led his visitor down the hall and into a small oak-panelled room. The table *was* laid for three; and no sooner were they seated, than Roger Monk, re-garbed as if by magic in a plain dark suit, and accompanied by a young maid in cap and apron, brought in two steaming soup-plates. The dinner that followed was an excep-

tionally good one, and so also was the wine. Both host and guest drank quite freely; so that by the time the servants left them to their own devices, there had emerged not only a fairly complete understanding as to the character of the work which Wolf was to undertake in that remarkable establishment, but also a certain *rapport* between their personalities.

Staring contentedly at a large monumental landscape by Gainsborough, where what might have been called the spiritual idea of a Country Road lost itself between avenues of park-like trees and vistas of mysterious terrace-walks, Wolf began to experience, as he sipped his port wine and listened to his host's mellow discourse, a more delicious sense of actual physical well-being than he had known for many a long year.

He soon discovered that he was to labour at his particular share of their grandiose enterprise in a window-seat of the big library of the house, while Mr. Urquhart pursued independent researches in a room he called "the study." This was excellent news to the new secretary. Very vividly he conjured up an image of that window-seat, ensconced behind mullion-panes of armorial glass, and opening upon an umbrageous vista resembling that picture by Gainsborough!

"Our history will be an entirely new *genre*," Mr. Urquhart was saying. "What I want to do is to isolate the particular portion of the earth's surface called 'Dorset'; as if it were possible to decipher there a palimpsest of successive strata, one inscribed below another, of human impression. Such impressions are forever being made and forever being obliterated in the ebb and flow of events;

and the chronicle of them should be continuous, not episodic." He paused in his discourse to light a cigarette; which, when it was lit, he waved to and fro, forming curves and squares and patterns. His hand holding the cigarette was white and plump, like the hand of a priest; and, as he wrote on the air, a trail of filmy smoke followed the movements of his arm.

"Of course, a genuine continuity," he went on, "would occupy several lifetimes in the telling of it. What's to be done then, eh? D'ye see the problem? Eh? What's to be done?"

Solent indicated as well as he could by discreet facial signs that he did see the problem, but left its solution to the profound intelligence in front of him.

Mr. Urquhart proceeded. "We must select, my friend. We must select. All history lies in selection. We can't put in everything. We must put in only what's got pith and sap and salt. Things like adulteries, murders, and fornications."

"Are we to have any method of selection?" Wolf enquired.

Mr. Urquhart chuckled. "Do you know what I've thought?" he said. "I've thought that I'd like to get the sort of perspective on human occurrences that the bedposts in brothels must come to possess—and the counters of bar-rooms—and the butlers' pantries in old houses—and the muddy ditches in long-frequented lovers' lanes."

"It's in fact a sort of Rabelaisian chronicle you wish to write?" threw in Wolf.

Mr. Urquhart smiled and leant back in his chair. He drained his wine-cup to the dregs, and with half-shut

malignant eyes, full of a strange inward unction, he squinnied at his interlocutor. The lines of his face, as he sat there contemplating his imaginary History, took to themselves the emphatic dignity of a picture by Holbein. The parchment-like skin stretched itself tightly and firmly round the bony structure of the cheeks, as though it had been vellum over a mysterious folio. A veil of almost sacerdotal cunning hovered, like a drooping gonfalon, over the man's heavy eyelids and the loose wrinkles that gathered beneath his eyes. What still puzzled Wolf more than anything else was the youthful glossiness of his host's hair, which contrasted very oddly not only with the extreme pallor of his flesh, but also with the deeply indented contours of his Holbein-like countenance. Mr. Urquhart's coiffure seemed, in fact, an obtrusive and unnatural ornament designed to set off quite a different type of face from the one it actually surmounted.

"Is it or isn't it a wig?" Wolf caught himself wondering again. But each furtive glance he took at the raven-black cranium opposite him made such a supposition less and less credible; for by the flicker of the candles he seemed to detect the presence of actual individual hairs, coarsely and strongly growing, on either side of the "parting" in the centre of that massive skull. While he was considering this phenomenon, he became conscious that Mr. Urquhart had left the matter of Dorset Chronicles and was speaking of religion.

"I was brought up an Anglican and I shall die an Anglican," he was saying. "That doesn't in the least mean that I believe in the Christian religion."

There was a pause at this point, while the squire refilled his own glass and that of his visitor.

"I like the altar," the man continued. "The altar, Mr. Solent, is the one absolutely satisfactory object of worship left in our degenerate days." There came into Mr. Urquhart's face, as he uttered these words, an expression that struck Wolf as nothing less than Satanic.

"It—does—not—matter—to you then, Sir," threw out Wolf cautiously, "what the altar represents?"

Mr. Urquhart smiled. "Eh?" he muttered. "Represents—did you say?" And then in a vague, dreamy, detached manner he repeated the word "represents" several times, as if he were mentally examining it, as a connoisseur might examine some small object; but his voice, as he did this, grew fainter and fainter, and presently died away altogether.

The new secretary bowed discreetly over his plate of almonds and raisins. He suspected that if it had not been for the excellence of the wine, the great swaying pontifical head in front of him would have been more reserved in its unusual credo.

"Is the church in King's Barton ritualistic enough for your taste, Sir?" he enquired.

And then straight out of the air there came into his mind the image of Mr. John Urquhart, stark naked, with a protuberant belly like Punch or Napoleon, kneeling in the dead of night, while a storm of rain lashed the windows, before the altar of a small, dark, unfrequented edifice.

"Eh? What's that?" grumbled his entertainer. "The church here? Oh, Tilly-Valley's all right. Tilly-Valley's

as docile as a ewe-lamb." He leaned forward with a sardonic leer, lowering his head between the candles as if he possessed a pair of sacred horns. "Tilly-Valley's afraid of me; just simply afraid." His voice sank into a whisper. "I make him say Mass every morning. D'ye hear? I make him say Mass whether there's anyone there or not."

The tone in which Mr. Urquhart uttered these words roused a definite hostility in Wolf's nerves. There came over him a feeling as if he had been permitted, on an airless night, to catch a glimpse of monstrous human lineaments behind the heavy rumble of a particular clap of thunder. There was something abominably menacing in this great wrinkled white face, with its glossy, carefully parted hair, its pendulous eyelids, its baggy eye-folds, butting at him between the candle-flames.

It presented itself to his mind as a clear issue, that he had now really come across a person who, in that mysterious mythopœic world in which his own imagination insisted on moving, was a serious antagonist—an antagonist who embodied a depth of actual evil such as was a completely new experience in his life. This idea, as it slowly dawned upon his wine-befogged brain, was at once an agitating threat and an exciting challenge. He deliberately stiffened the muscles of his body to meet this menace. He straightened his shoulders and glanced carelessly round the room. He composed his countenance into an expression of cautious reserve. He stretched out his legs. He threw one of his arms over the back of his chair. He clenched together the fingers of his other hand, as it lay on his knee beneath the table. He knew well

enough that what Mr. Urquhart saw in these manifestations was an access of casual *bonhomie* in his new secretary, a *bonhomie* amounting to something almost like youthful bravado. He knew that what he did not see was a furtive gathering together of the forces of an alien soul, a soul composed of metaphysical chemicals directly antipodal to those out of which his own was compounded.

What Wolf felt in his own mind just then summed itself up in vague half-articulated words uttered in that margin of his consciousness where the rational fades away into the irrational. "This Dorsetshire adventure is going to be serious," he said to himself. And then he became suddenly aware that though quite ignorant of all that was occurring in the mind and nerves of his visitor, the squire of King's Barton had grown alive to the fact that his remarks were not meeting with the same magnetic response that they had met with at first. After a minute or two of silence, Mr. Urquhart rose and limped towards the door of the dining-room. He opened the door for Wolf and they both went out into the hall.

"I think," he said, as they stood at the foot of the stately Jacobean staircase, "I think I will not show you the library tonight. You have had a tiring day, and if I take you upstairs there's no knowing when we shall separate! By Jove"—and he glanced at the hall-clock—"it's past ten already! Better say good-night before we start talking again, eh? You've got a walk before you, too. Better say good-night before we get too interested in each other, eh? What? Where'd that idiot put your things? Oh, good! Very good. Well, come again by ten

o'clock tomorrow morning and we'll settle everything. I am very relieved to find how much we've got in common. My History will not be betrayed by *your* assistance as it was by my last helper."

Wolf walked to the place where his coat had been laid down by the man-servant, and after he had put it on, and picked up his hat and stick, he turned to his host, who kept uttering meaningless monosyllables in a silky, propitiatory whisper, as if he were ushering out a madman or a policeman; and asked him point-blank who this ill-advised predecessor of his was, turning as he did so the handle of the front-door. The question seemed to disturb Mr. Urquhart's mental equanimity, as much as the chilly March wind that blew in with a gust when the door was opened, disturbed his physical balance.

"Eh? What? What's that? Didn't Darnley tell you? The boy ruined my History at the start. I had to tear up every scrap. He dropped it and went—all in a minute. Eh? What? Didn't Darnley tell you? He left it in chaos. He played hop-scotch with it!"

Struggling with the heavy door and the gusty wind, Solent muttered a propitiatory reply.

"Very annoying—I hope, indeed, I shall do better, Sir! You had to get rid of him, then?"

The wind whistled past him as he spoke, so that his host's final word was scarcely audible. In fact, the last thing he saw of Mr. Urquhart was a feeble attempt the man seemed to be making to cover his rotund stomach with the flaps of his dress-suit.

When at last the great door had really closed between them and he was striding down the stone steps, he found

his mind full of the impression which that inarticulate final word had made upon him; and before he reached the end of the drive and passed through the iron gates into Lenty Lane, he had come to the startling conclusion that his predecessor in the study of Dorset Chronicles had died, as they say in that county, "in the het of his job."

"Good Lord!" he thought, as he turned into Pond Lane. "If all he feels for his assistants when they die at their post is anger like that, he must be a queer chap to deal with. Or did he mean something quite different? Dead? Dead? But that wasn't the word he used. What *was* the word he used?" And he continued worrying over the wind-blown sarcasm he had caught in the doorway, without coming to any solution of the riddle. "If it wasn't that he meant the fellow was dead, what *did* he mean?"

His mind was so full of this problem that he arrived at the gate into the small garden of Pond Cottage before he was aware of it. There was a faint reddish light in the window of what he knew was his own bedroom. "She's given me a fire!" he thought to himself; and he looked forward with keen anticipation to his first night in Dorset after twenty-five years.

Opening the door quietly, he lit a match as soon as he was inside, and turned the key in the lock. He then took the precaution of taking off his shoes; and lightly and stealthily he slipped upstairs and entered his room.

He had no sooner done so than a figure rose up from a chair by the fire and stumbled towards him. It was a middle-aged man, in a long, white, old-fashioned night-

shirt, with a woollen shawl wrapped about his shoulders. There was no light but the firelight in the room; and the man's countenance was a mere blur above the folded shawl.

"Was writing poetry . . . let my fire out . . . came before expected . . . humbly apologize . . . hope you'll sleep well . . ." Without further explanation the man pushed past him and went out, leaving these broken sentences humming in the air like the murmurs of some thick, muffled, mechanical instrument. Once more Wolf found himself alone with the Landseer and the Alma-Tadema pictures.

"This is too much!" he muttered furiously. "If I can't have my room to myself I'll go somewhere else," he thought. "Does this incense-burner suppose that everyone in the world must humour his whimsies?" He opened both windows wide and lit the candles on his dressing-table.

Apparently Jason Otter had retired quietly to his bedroom, for the house was now as silent as the darkness outside it. He began slowly undressing. For a while his irritation was prolonged by the way the wind kept making the candles flare; but gradually, in the freshness of the cool garden-smells, his accustomed equanimity returned. After all, there would be plenty of time to adjust all these things! He must propitiate these people to the limit at present, and feel his way. It would be silly to show touchiness and cantankerousness at the very start.

By the time he had blown out the flickering candles and was safe in bed, his habitual mood had quite reasserted itself. He went over in his mind his conversa-

tion with Mr. Urquhart, and wondered how far his imagination had led him on to exaggerate the sinister element in the man. He wished intensely that he had caught the drift of that final word about his predecessor. Was he dead? Or was it only that he had been ignominiously dismissed?

As he grew sleepy, all manner of trivial occurrences and objects of this adventurous day began rising up before him, emphasizing themselves, out of all proportion to the rest, in a strange half-feverish panorama. The long, enchanted road revealed in that Gainsborough picture hovered before him and beckoned him to follow it. The abrupt apologies of Roger Monk melted into the furtive exhortations of the old woman in the blue apron. Framed in the darkness that closed in upon him, the coarse black hairs, that had refused to be reduced to a wig, metamorphosed themselves into similar hairs, growing, as he knew they *could* grow, upon a long-dead human skull! The jogging grey haunches of the mare that had brought him from Ramsgard confused themselves with the grey paws of the cat upon Selena Gault's knees.

Very vividly, more vividly than anything else, he saw the waiter at the Lovelace, as he leaned heavily upon their tea-table. He remembered now both the queer whitish scar on the back of that hand and the resemblance to the Waterloo-steps face.

And then, all suddenly, it seemed that he could think of nothing else but the completely unknown personality —apparently that of the clergyman of the place—referred to so contemptuously by Mr. Urquhart as "Tilly-Valley." While the syllables "Tilly-Valley" repeated

themselves in his brain, the person concealed behind that odd appellation ceased to be a man. He became some queer-shaped floating object that could not be put into words, and yet was of the utmost importance. What was of importance was that an obstinate bend in that floating object should be straightened out. Something was preventing it from being straightened out, something that emanated from a black wig and a woollen shawl, and was extremely thick and heavy, and had a taste like port wine!

But there was another thing, far down, far off, covered up, as if by masses of dead leaves, a thing that was stirring, gathering, rising, a thing that, in a minute more, would give him illimitable reassurance and strength. When this thing rose to the surface, the bent twig would be straightened out—and all would be well! This "all being well" implied that that calm, placid cow which was eating plantain-leaves under Basingstoke church-tower, should stop eating and lie down. The cow lying down would be a beautiful green mound covered with plantains—plantains that grew larger and larger, till they became enormous succulent leaves as big as elephants' ears; but the cow couldn't quite lie down. Something thick and heavy and sticky, like port wine, impeded its movements. . . .

Everything in the world was material now. Thoughts were material. Feelings were material. It was a world of material objects, of which his mind was one. His mind was a little bluish-coloured thing, soft, fluffy, like blue cotton-wool; and what was rising out of the dead

leaves was blue too, but the sticky impeding thing was brown, and the bent twig was brown. . . .

It was as if in that slow sinking into sleep his soul had to pass all the long, previous, evolutionary stages of planetary life, and be conscious with the consciousness of vegetable things and mineral things. This is what made every material substance of such supernal importance to him—of an importance which perhaps material substances really *did* possess, if all were known.

THE FIRST SENSATION TO WHICH WOLF AWOKE IN A morning of rainy wind and drifting clouds, was a sensation of discomfort. As his mind began concentrating on this discomfort, he realized it proceeded from those two heavily-framed pictures which gave to his chamber a sort of reading-room or club-room aspect. Harmless enough in themselves had they awaited him in the parlour of an hotel, they seemed no less than an outrage upon his senses when associated with this simple and quiet bedroom. He resolved to issue an ultimatum at once. He hadn't come to Dorsetshire to be oppressed by the ponderous labours of Royal Academicians. And he would also make it clear that his bedroom was to be his sanctuary. No night-shirted intruder should run in and out at his pleasure!

He leapt from the bed and proceeded to turn to the wall both of the mid-Victorian masterpieces. That done, he lay down again and gave himself up to the rainy air, full of the smell of young leaves and wet garden-mould. Lying stretched out upon his back, he set himself with a deliberate effort to gather up his recent impressions and relate them as well as he could to the mood of yesterday's drive. With clear awareness of most of the things that had happened to him since he left his mother at the door of their little flat in Hammersmith, he was oddly conscious that all his deepest instincts were still passive, expectant, waiting. He was like a man who re-

covers from the shock of a shipwreck, and who, drying himself in the security of some alien beach, hesitates, in a grateful placid lethargy, to begin his hunt for berries or fruits or fresh water.

Detail by detail he reviewed the events of the previous day; and as the images of all these people—of Miss Gault, of Darnley, of Mr. Urquhart—passed in procession before him, he was surprised at the light in which he saw them, so different from the way in which they had appeared only some eight or nine hours ago. The importance of material objects—their mystical importance—had been his last impression before sleeping; but now everything appeared in a cold, unmystical light. It was always thus when he awoke from sleep; but the fact that he recognized the transitoriness of the mood did not diminish its power. He was never more cynically clairvoyant than on these occasions. He surveyed at such times his dearest friends through a sort of unsympathetic magnifying-glass in which there was not one of their frailties that did not stand out in exaggerated relief. The port-hole, so to speak, of the malign consciousness through which he saw them was at the same time telescopic and microscopic. It was surrounded, too, by a thick, circular obscurity. He was abnormally sensitive at such times, but with a curtailed and reduced sensibility. Each particular thing as it presented itself dominated the whole field of vision. Nor was this sensitiveness itself an altogether normal receptivity. It was primarily physiological. It had few nervous chords; and no spiritual or psychic ones. Everything that approached it approached it on the bodily plane, as something—

even if it were a mental image—to be actually grasped with the five senses.

And so, as he lay there, knowing that a long while must pass before he would have any chance of breakfast or even of a cup of tea, he made a stronger effort than usual to get his thoughts into focus. The wet airs blowing in through the open windows helped him in this attempt. It was as if he stole away from that little round port-hole and shuffled off to some upper deck, where he could feel the wide horizons. His mind kept reverting to what he had felt during the drive with Darnley, and he tried to analyze what sort of philosophy it was that remained with him during all the normal hours when his "mythology"—his secret spiritual vice—lay quiescent. He fumbled about in his mind for some clue to his normal attitude to life—some clue-word that he could use to describe it, if any of his new friends began questioning him; and the word he hit upon at last was the word *fetish-worship*. That was it! His normal attitude to life was just that—or nearer that than anything else!

It was a worship of all the separate, mysterious, living souls he approached: "souls" of grass, trees, stones, animals, birds, fish; "souls" of planetary bodies and of the bodies of men and women; the "souls," even, of all manner of inanimate little things; the "souls" of all those strange, chemical groupings that give a living identity to houses, towns, places, countrysides. . . .

"Am I inhuman in some appallingly incurable manner?" he thought. "Is the affection I have for human beings less important to me than the shadows of leaves and the flowing of waters?"

He gazed intently at the window-sills of his open windows, above which the tassels of the blinds swayed to and fro in the damp gusts of wind. He thought of the grotesque and obsessed figure of Selena Gault, as she pulled up plantains from his father's grave. No! Whatever this fetish-worship might be, it certainly was different from "love." Love was a possessive, feverish, exacting emotion. It demanded a response. It called for mutual activity. It entailed responsibility. The thrilling delight with which he was wont to contemplate his mother's face under certain conditions, the deep satisfaction he derived from the sight of Miss Gault and her cats, the pleasure with which he had surveyed the blue eyes and pointed beard of Darnley Otter—these things had nothing in them that was either possessive or responsible. And yet he lost all thought of himself in watching these things, just as he used to do in watching the mossy roots of the chestnuts and sycamores in the avenues at Hampton Court! It seemed then that what he felt for both things and people, as he saw them under certain lights, was a kind of exultant blending of vision and sympathy. Their beauty held him in a magical enchantment; and between his soul and the "soul," as it were, of whatever it was he happened to be regarding, there seemed to be established a tremulous and subtle reciprocity.

He was pleased at having thought of the word "fetish-worship" in this connection. And it was in the pleasure of this thought that he now leapt out of bed and, putting on his overcoat, began hurriedly to shave himself, using as he did so the cold water in his jug.

He had not got very far with this, however, when there was a sound in the passage outside that reminded him of the rattle of the milk-cans on the Longbourne Port platform. This was followed by a gentle knock at his door. Opening it cautiously, he was surprised to see Mrs. Otter herself standing there, while beside her was a wide tin bath and a can of hot water.

"I was waiting till I heard you move," she said. "Darnley has had his breakfast and gone. He goes to Blacksod early. Jason does not get up till late. Dimity and I will be ready for you when you come down."

Wolf hovered at the door, his face lathered, his safety-razor in his hand. He suddenly felt no better than a lout in the presence of this faded old lady.

She smiled at him pleasantly. "I hope you'll be happy with us," she said. "You'll get used to us soon. Poor Mr. Redfern got quite used to us before he died."

"Mr. Redfern?"

"The gentleman who helped the Squire with his book. But you must have your bath now. Do you think you can be ready in about half-an-hour?"

Wolf bowed his lathered face and she went off. While he was dragging the bath into his room, she turned at the head of the stairs.

"Would you like a cup of tea at once, Mr. Solent, or will you wait till you come down?"

"I'll wait, thank you! Thank you *very* much!" he shouted; and jerking both bath and can into his fortress, he shut the door and prepared to wash and dress.

The whole process of his ablution and his dressing was now a mechanical accompaniment to absent-minded

fantastic thoughts on the subject of the dead Mr. Redfern.

"This was the fellow's room, no doubt," he said to himself. "I suppose he died here. A nice death, with those monstrous pictures lying like lead on his consciousness!"

It was on Mr. Redfern's behalf now that Wolf scowled at the backs of these pictures, as he sponged himself in the tin bath. Mr. Redfern dominated that half-hour, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Wolf saw him lying stone-dead on the pillows he himself had just quitted. He saw him as a pale, emaciated youth, with beautifully moulded features. He wondered if he had been buried by the person Mr. Urquhart called "Tilly-Valley." He decided he would look for his grave in the King's Barton churchyard. His dead face took during that half-hour the most curious forms. It became the soap. It became the sponge. It became the spilt water upon the floor. It became the slop-pail. It became the untidy heap of Wolf's dress-clothes. Wolf was not relieved from it, in fact, till he found himself drinking delicious cups of tea and eating incredibly fresh eggs under the care of his hostess in their pleasant dining-room. The pictures here were of the kind that no philosopher could quarrel with. Old-fashioned prints, old-fashioned pastels, old-fashioned engravings, gave the room a spirit that seemed to emerge from centuries of placidity and stretch out consolatory hands to every kind of wayfarer.

"This is *my* room," said Mrs. Otter, looking very pleased when Wolf explained to her what he felt about it. "These things came from my own home in Cornwall.

The best things in the house belonged to my husband. They're in the drawing-room; very valuable things. But I like this room myself and I'm glad you do. Mr. Redfern used to love to read and write at this table. I believe if he'd done all his work here he'd never have got that terrible illness. That library of Mr. Urquhart's was too learned for him, poor, dear, young man! And he *was* so good-looking! My son Jason used to call him by the names of all the heathen gods, one after another! Jason was extremely upset when he died so suddenly."

The visitor to King's Barton found his attention wandering several times after this. Mrs. Otter began to drift into rambling stories about her native Cornwall, and it was only Wolf's power of automatically putting a convincing animation into his heavy countenance that prevented her from realizing how far away his thoughts had flown.

Hostess and guest were interrupted in their rather one-sided tête-à-tête by the sound of footsteps descending the stairs. Mrs. Otter jumped up at once.

"It's Jason!" she cried. "We must have disturbed him. I was talking too much. I'll go and tell Dimity she need not clear away. I expect Jason will like to have a smoke with you."

She disappeared through the door into the kitchen at the very moment when her elder son entered the room. Wolf was astonished at the difference between the figure he had seen the night before and the figure he rose to shake hands with now. Dressed in neat, dark-blue serge, Jason Otter had the quiet, self-composed air of a much-

travelled man of the world. His clean-shaven face, framed by prematurely grey hair, was massively and yet abnormally expressive. Forehead and chin were imposing and commanding; but this effect was diminished and almost negated by the peculiar kind of restless misery displayed in the lines of the mouth. The man's eyes were large and grey; and instead of glancing aside in the way Darnley's did, they seemed to cry out for help without cessation or intermission.

He and Wolf sat opposite each other at Mr. Redfern's favourite table, and, lighting their cigarettes, looked each other up and down in silence. Jason Otter was decidedly nervous. Wolf saw his hand shaking as he lit a match.

There was, indeed, something almost indecent about the sensitiveness of this man's lined and indented face. It made Wolf feel as though at all costs the possessor of such a countenance must be protected from nervous shocks. Was it in taking care of him that Darnley's blue eyes had acquired their curious expression? Jason's own eyes were not tragic. They were something worse. They were exposed; they were stripped bare; they seemed to peer forth helplessly from the human skull behind them, as though some protective filaments that ought to have been there were *not* there!

"I saw you'd turned our pictures to the wall," he began, fixing his pleading eyes upon Wolf's face as if asking for permission to humble himself to the ground. "I'll have them taken away. I'll have them put in the privy or in the passage."

"Oh, it's all right, Mr. Otter," returned Wolf. "It's only that I never can sleep in a room with large pictures. It's a peculiarity of mine."

No sooner had Jason heard this expression, "a peculiarity of mine," than his whole visage changed. A childish mischievousness illuminated his pallid physiognomy, and he chuckled audibly, nodding his head.

"A peculiarity? That's excellent. That's what Bluebeard used to say. 'It's a peculiarity of mine.' I think that's one of the prettiest excuses I've ever heard."

This explosion was so surprising to Wolf that all he could do was to open his mouth and stare at the man. But the humour passed as quickly as it had come. The face unwrinkled itself. The eyes became supplicatory. The mouth tightened in solemn misery.

"I don't want anyone to be bothered about the moving of those pictures, Mr. Otter," said Wolf; for he seemed to see with terrible distinctness the devoted lady of the house struggling alone with those heavy frames. "You must allow me to do it myself. In fact," he went on, in what he tried to make a casual, airy tone, "I'm going to beg Mrs. Otter to let me treat that room as if it were an unfurnished flat of my own."

The head opposite him was so grey that he felt as if he were addressing this hint to Mrs. Otter's husband rather than to her son.

Very gently, moving delicately, like Agag before Samuel, Jason rose to his feet. "I think we'd better get those pictures changed now," he whispered earnestly, in a grave, conspiring voice.

Wolf tried to retain his airy, casual manner in the face of this gravity.

"I'll do it like a shot," he said, rising and moving towards the door. "Just tell me where to put them!"

The two men went up together, and under Jason's directions the Landseer and the Alma-Tadema were deposited in a vacant room at the back of the pantry.

"Come upstairs for a minute," said Mr. Otter, when this transaction was completed; and stepping softly and quietly, as if there were a dead person somewhere in the house, he led the way into his own room.

Wolf felt the same uneasy sensations in this chamber as he had experienced the evening before. Sinking into a luxurious armchair and accepting a cigarette, he found himself bold enough to make a faint protest against his host's Arundel prints, whose ceremonious piety he found so distasteful.

"I couldn't work in this room," he murmured—and felt as he spoke that his tone was cantankerous and impolite.

But Jason Otter showed not the least annoyance or even surprise at his guest's rudeness.

"I expect not! I expect not!" he cried cheerfully. "There are few people who *could*. I myself could work in a church or in a museum. I welcome anything that acts as a shield. It's like having a band of retainers, a sort of papal guard, to keep the populace at bay."

As he spoke, he looked proudly and complacently round the room, as if conscious of the protection of the antique French chair in which he had ensconced him-

self. There was a Boule table at his side, and he proceeded to dust it with a large silk handkerchief.

"I suppose you've never read any books on Hindoo mythology?" he said suddenly.

The word "mythology" gave Wolf an uncomfortable shock. He felt as a Catholic might feel if he heard a Methodist refer to the Virgin Mary.

He shook his head.

"I've only read one myself," went on the poet, with a chuckle; "so you needn't feel a fool. It was by that man who went to Thibet. But in it he mentions Mukalog, the god of rain."

"The god of rain?" responded Wolf, beginning to feel reassured.

"That's what the man says," continued the other. "Of course, we know what these travellers are; but he had a lot of letters after his name, so I suppose he passed some examination." Jason put his hand in front of his mouth as he said this; and his face was wrinkled with amusement. "He knows Latin, anyway. He brings it in on the first page," he added.

"It sounds like a real idol . . . Mukalog, the god of rain . . ." murmured Wolf.

Jason's countenance suddenly grew solemn and confidential. "I've got it here," he whispered. "I bought it for thirty shillings from Mr. Malakite, the bookseller. *He* bought it at a sale from some fool who thought it was nothing. . . . It's brought me all my luck. . . ." He lowered his voice still further, so that Wolf could scarcely hear him. "These priests look for God in the clouds, but I never do that. . . . I look for Him . . ."

"I beg your pardon?" questioned Wolf, leaning attentively forward. "You say you look for Him . . . ?"

There was a pause; and the expression of the man changed from extreme gravity to hobgoblinish humour.

"*In the mud!*" he shouted.

Then, once more grave, he rose to his feet and fetched from its pedestal a hideous East Indian idol, about six inches high, and placed it in the middle of the Boule table, just opposite Wolf.

"It's his stomach that makes him so shocking," said Jason Otter; "but the ways of God aren't as dainty as those of the Bishop of Salisbury. In this world Truth flies downward, not upward!"

Hardly aware of what he was doing, so occupied was his mind with the whole problem of his host's personality, Wolf rose, and, leaning over the table, picked up Mukalog, the god of rain. Holding it absent-mindedly in his fingers for a while, he finally made a foolish schoolboy-like attempt to balance it upside-down on the flat skull of its monstrous head.

This proceeding brought a flash of real anger into Jason's eyes. He snatched the thing away with a nervous clutch, and, hurrying to the back of the room, replaced it on its jade pedestal, which Wolf noticed now, with no great surprise, was standing near a carved brazier containing some still-smouldering ashes—doubtless the ashes of that very incense which had to be "ordered from the Stores"!

While his host returned in silence to his French chair and in profound dejection took out his cigarette-case, Wolf, still staring in a sort of hypnotized trance at the

"god of rain," set himself to wonder why it was that the kind of evil which emanated from this idol should be so much more distasteful than the kind of evil that emanated from Mr. Urquhart.

He came to the conclusion that although it is impossible for any living human being to obliterate all elements of good from itself, it *is* possible for an artist, or for a writer, or even for the anonymous creative energy of the race itself, to create an image of evil that should be *entirely evil.*

But why should this Hindoo idol seem so much more sinister than any Chinese or Japanese monster? Was it because in India the cult of spirituality, both for good and evil, had been carried to a greater length than anywhere else in the world?

"You'd better not listen to any tales about me that old Urquhart tells you," said the poet suddenly, fixing his sorrowful eyes upon the visitor.

The name of his employer made Wolf rise hurriedly from his armchair.

"Certainly not," he said brusquely, moving to the door. As he placed his hand on the door-handle, he felt as though the evil spirit of Mukalog were serpentining towards him over the poet's shoulders and over the smooth Boule table.

"I'm not one to listen to tales from anyone, Mr. Otter," he said as he went out.

He crossed the landing and entered his own room. Now that he was alone, he fell into a very grave meditation, as he slowly laced up his boots. "No wonder," he said to himself, "that poor chap Redfern committed sui-

cide! What with this man's demon and Mr. Urquhart's devilish History, this place doesn't seem a paradisal retreat. Well! Well! We shall see what we shall see."

He carried his coat and hat quietly downstairs and managed to get out of the house unobserved by either Mrs. Otter or the old servant.

The current of his mood was running more normally and gently by the time he found himself being escorted by his eccentric employer to the great isolated library which was now to be the scene of his labours. His dream of the writing-table by a mullioned window "blushing with the blood of kings and queens" turned out to be a literal presentiment. The view he got from his seat at that window surpassed the Gainsborough itself. The manor-garden melted away into herbaceous terraces and shadowy orchards. These in their turn faded into a green pasture-land, on the further side of which, faint in the distance, he could make out the high ridge of ploughed fields along the top of which ran the main road from Blacksod to Ramsgard.

Mr. Urquhart, however, seemed in a fussy, preoccupied, fidgetty mood that morning. He kept bringing books from the shelves and placing them on his secretary's table; and then, after he had opened them and read a passage or two, muttering "That's good, isn't it? That's the kind of thing we want, isn't it?" he would return them to the shelves and bring back others. Wolf was not very much helped by these manœuvres. In fact, he was teased and nonplussed. He was anxious to find out exactly how much of a free hand he was going to be allowed, and he was also anxious to find out what

SOLUBILITY TABLE

	Ag^+ (1)	Pb^{++} (1)	Hg_2^{++} (1)	Hg^{++}	Bi^{+++} (2)	Cu^{++}	Cd^{++}	As^{+++}	Sb^{+++} (2)	Sn^{++}	Sn^{++++}	Ni^{++}	Co^{++}	Fe^{++}
Nitrite, NO_2^-	Hot W	W	W	W	—	W	W	—	—	—	—	W	W	—
Sulfide, $S^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	aq. reg.	aq. reg.	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	strong HCl	strong HCl	strong HCl	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl
Sulfite, $SO_3^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	—	—	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	HCl
Thiosulfate, $S_2O_3^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	—	—	—	—	W	—	—	W	W	W	W	W
Carbonate, $CO_3^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	—	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl
Arsenite, $AsO_3^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	—	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	HCl
Arsenate, $AsO_4^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl
Phosphate, $PO_4^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl
Chromate, $CrO_4^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	W	HCl	—	—	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	—
Sulfate, $SO_4^=$	Sl. W Ins.	Ins.	Sl. W Ins.	Sl. W	Sl. W	W	W	—	HCl	W	—	W	W	W
Borate, $BO_3^=$	HNO_3	HNO_3	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	—	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	HCl
Silicate, $SiO_3^=$ (3)	HNO_3	HNO_3	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	—	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl
Fluoride, F^-	W	Sl. W HNO_3	W	W	HCl	Sl. W HCl	Sl. W HCl	—	Sl. W HCl	W	W	HCl	HCl	Sl. W HCl
Oxalate, $C_2O_4^=$ (4)	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	W	HCl	HCl	HCl
Tartrate, $C_4H_4O_6^=$ (4)	HNO_3	HNO_3	Sl. W HNO_3	HCl	HCl	W	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	W	HCl	W	HCl
Ferricyanide, $Fe(CN)_6^{\equiv}$	Ins.	Ins.	—	Ins.	—	Ins.	Ins.	—	—	Ins.	—	Ins.	Ins.	Ins.
Ferrocyanide, $Fe(CN)_6^{\equiv\equiv}$	Ins.	Ins.	—	—	—	Ins.	Ins.	—	—	—	Ins.	Ins.	Ins.	Ins.
Thiocyanate, CNS^-	Ins.	HNO_3	HNO_3	W	—	HNO_3	HCl	—	—	—	W	W	W	W
Cyanide, CN^-	Ins.	HNO_3	—	W	—	HCl	HCl	—	—	—	—	HNO_3	HNO_3	Ins.
Iodide, I^-	Ins.	Sl. W HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	Sl. W	W	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	W	W
Bromide, Br^-	Ins.	Ins.	Sl. HNO_3 Ins.	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	W	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	W	W	W	W
Chloride, Cl^-	Ins.	Hot W Ins.	HNO_3	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	W	W	Hyd. W HCl	W	W	W	W	W
Acetate, $C_2H_3O_2^-$	Sl. W	W	W	W	W	W	—	—	—	W	W	W	W	W
Nitrate, NO_3^-	W	W	Sl. W HNO_3	W	Sl. W (HNO_3)	W	W	—	—	—	—	W	W	W
Oxide, $(O^=)$	HNO_3	HNO_3	HNO_3	HCl	HNO_3	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	HCl	Sl. HCl Ins	HCl	HCl	HCl
Hydroxide, OH^-	HNO_3	HNO_3	—	—	HCl	HCl	HCl	—	HCl	HCl	Ins.	HCl	HCl	HCl

W = water-soluble (solubility at least 1 gram of the salt in 100 cc. of water);
Sl. W = slightly soluble in water (solubility about 0.1 gram per 100 cc. of water);
Hyd. W = hydrolysed by water yielding a product not soluble in water;
HCl = soluble in hydrochloric acid;
HNO_3 = soluble in nitric acid;
Aq. reg. = soluble in aqua regia;
Ins. = insoluble in acids taken singly or together;
— = compound either does not exist or the proper solvent has not been determined.

Wolf listened patiently and dutifully to this discourse. What he thought in his mind was: "This whole business is evidently just an old man's hobby. I must give up any idea of taking it seriously. I must play with it, just as he's playing with it."

With this intention in his mind, as soon as he was alone in his window, he spread open before him that monument of scurrilous scandal, "The History of the Abbotsbury Family," and gave himself up to leisurely note-making. He transcribed in as lively a way as he could the most outrageous of the misdeeds of this remarkable race, as they are narrated by the sly Doctor Tarrant. He exaggerated, where it was possible, the Doctor's unctuous commentaries, and he added a few of his own. He began before long to think that the Squire was not so devoid of all sagacity in this unusual method as he had at first supposed.

Half the morning had already passed in this way when Mr. Urquhart came limping in in a state of impetuous excitement.

"I must send you off at once to Blacksod," he began. "Eh? What? You don't mind walking a few miles, eh? Roger says he can't spare the trap. You can lunch in the town at my expense. I've got a bill at the Three Peewits; and you can come back at your leisure. You don't object, eh? It's nothing for a young man like you, and there's very good ale at the Peewits."

Wolf folded up his notes and replaced Doctor Tarrant's History. He expressed himself as more than delighted to walk to Blacksod, and he enquired what it was that Mr. Urquhart wanted done.

"Well, there are two things that have come up, both of them rather important. I've just heard from my bookseller down there. You'll easily find him. His name's Malakite. He's in Cerne Street. He says he's got hold of the Evershot Letters. That's the book for us, Solent! Privately printed and full of allusions to the Brambledown Case! He says there's a man in London after it already. That may be a lie. You'll have to find out. Sometimes Malakite's let me have the use of a book and then sold it afterwards. You'll have to find out, Solent. Eh? What? You'll have to be a diplomatist, a Talleyrand, and that sort of thing, eh?"

Wolf composed his countenance as intelligently as he could and enquired what the other thing was.

Mr. Urquhart lifted his eyebrows, as if the question had been impertinent.

"The other thing?" he murmured dreamily.

But the next moment, as Wolf leaned back against the arm of his chair and looked straight into the man's eyes, there was a startling change in that supercilious face. A flicker, a shadow, a nothing, passed from one to the other; one of those exposures of secret thoughts that seem to bring together levels of consciousness beyond rational thought. It was all over in a moment; and with a quick alteration of his position, and a shuffling of his stick, the lame man recovered his composure.

"Ah yes," he murmured, with a smiling inclination of his head that resembled the bow of a great gentleman confessing a lapse of memory. "Ah yes, you are perfectly right, Solent. There *was* another little thing that you might as well attend to while you're about it. It's

not of any pressing importance; but, as I say, if you have time, and feel energetic, it might be a good thing to jolt the memory of Mr. Torp. Eh? What's that? Torp, the stone-cutter. Torp of Chequers Street. You'll easily find the fellow. He's a jack-of-all-trades—does undertaking and grave-digging as well as stone-cutting."

Mr. Urquhart became silent, but the expression upon his face was like that of some courtly prince-prelate of old times, who desired his subordinate to obey instructions that he was unwilling to put into vulgar speech.

"Mr. Torp?" repeated Wolf, patiently and interrogatively.

"Just a little matter of a headstone," went on the other. "Tilly-Valley's quarrelled with our sexton here. So I've had to use Torp as both sexton and undertaker. He has been disgracefully dilatory." Mr. Urquhart shuffled to the bookcase, leaning heavily on his stick. He changed the position of one or two of the books; and as he did so, with his back to his secretary, he finished his sentence. "He's been as dilatory about Redfern's headstone as he was about digging his grave."

Once more there was a silence in the library of King's Barton Manor. But when the Squire turned round, he seemed in the best of spirits. "It's not your job, of course, this kind of thing. But I'm an old man and I don't think you're touchy about trifles. Jog the memory of the good Torp, then, will you? What? Jolt the torpid Torp. That's the word, eh? Tell the beggar in good clear English that I'll go to Dorchester for that stone if he doesn't set it up within the week. You can do that for me, Solent? But it's not important. If it's a bother, let it go!

But have a good luncheon at the Three Peewits anyway! Make 'em give 'ee their own ale. It's good. It's excellent. That individual down at Pond Cottage gets drunk on it every night, Monk tells me."

Turning again to the bookcase, Mr. Urquhart made as though the conversation had terminated; and Wolf, after a moment or two of that awkward hesitation which a subordinate feels when he is uncertain as to what particular gesture of parting is required, went straight out of the room, without a word, and ran downstairs.

He had found his hat and stick, and was on the point of letting himself out of the house, when the little side-door leading to the kitchen hurriedly opened, and Roger Monk made himself visible. He did this with the precipitation of a man reckless with anxiety, and he plunged at once into rapid speech.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Solent, for troubling you, but the truth of the matter is, Sir, that this house will be upset by breakfast-time tomorrow, unless you—unless you—would be so kind, Sir, as to help Mrs. Martin and myself."

"What on earth is coming now?" thought Wolf. "These King's Barton servants seem pretty hard put to it."

" 'Tisn't as though I didn't know that it's above my province to speak," went on the agitated man. "But speak I must; and if you're the kind of young gentleman I think you are, you'll listen to my words."

Wolf contemplated the swarthy giant, who, dressed in his gardener's-clothes, with bare throat and bare arms, had the torso of a classical athlete. Beads of perspira-

tion stood out on his forehead, and his great sunburnt hands made weak fumbling gestures in the air.

"Certainly, Roger. By all means, Roger. I shall be delighted to help you and Mrs. Martin in any way I can. What is it I can do for you?"

The tall servant's face relaxed instantaneously, and he smiled sweetly. His smile was like the smile of some melancholy slave in a Greek play. His voice sank into a confidential whisper.

"It's sausages, Sir, asking you to excuse me, it's sausages. Mr. Urquhart *has* to have 'em these days for breakfast, and there ain't none of 'em in the house; and I am too set out, what with horses to clean and artichokes to plant and pigs in the yard to feed, to go to town myself."

Wolf smiled in as grave and well-bred a manner as he could. "I'll be very glad to bring you home some sausages, Monk," he said amiably.

"At Weevil's," cried the other, full of relief and joy. "At Weevil's in High Street. And be sure you get fresh ones, Mr. Solent. Tell Bob Weevil they're for me. He knows me and I know him. Don't mention Squire. Say they're for Mr. Monk. He'll know! Two pounds of sausages; and you can tell Weevil to put 'em down. Thank 'ee more than I can say, Sir, for doing this. It eases a man's mind. I was downright distraught in thinking of it. Squire's like that. What he puts his heart on he puts his heart on, and none can turn him. I've been with other gentlemen—mostly in stable-work you understand—but I've never worked for one like Squire. Doesn't do to

contravene Squire when his heart is fixed, and so I thank 'ee kindly, Mr. Solent." And the man vanished with the same precipitation with which he appeared.

Wolf set out down the drive in extremely good spirits. Nothing suited him better than to have the day to himself. It seemed to extend before him, this day, and gather volume and freedom, as if it were many days rolled into one. It didn't worry him that it was Friday. The nature of the day, its cloudiness, its gustiness, its greyness, suited his mood completely. It seemed to carry his mind far, far back—back beyond any definite recollections. The look of the oak palings; the look of the mud; the look of the branches, with their scarcely budded embryo leaves swaying in the wind—all these things hit his imagination with a sudden accumulated force. He rubbed his hands; he prodded the ground with his stick; he strode forward with great strides.

This melancholy day, with its gustily blown elm-branches, seemed to extend itself before him along a road that was something more than an ordinary road. Fragmentary images, made up out of fantastic names—the name of Torp, the name of Malakite—hovered in front of him, mingled with the foam of dark-brown ale and the peculiar, bare, smooth look of uncooked sausages. And over and above such images floated the ambiguous presence of his father, William Solent. He felt as if everything that might chance to happen on this grey phantom-like day would happen under the direct influence of this dead man. He loved his father at that moment, not with any idealistic emotion, but with an

earthy, sensual, heathen piety which allowed for much equivocal indulgence.

At the foot of the drive he turned into Lenty Lane, passing at the corner a trim little cottage, whose garden of rich black earth was full of daffodils. He stopped for a moment to stare at the window of this neat lodge—thinking in his mind, "That must be where Roger Monk lives"—and without being seriously disturbed, he was a little startled when, by reason of some impish trick of light and shade, it seemed to him that he saw an image of himself standing just inside one of the lower windows.

But he walked on in undiminished good spirits, and in about a quarter of an hour found himself in the centre of the village of King's Barton.

All the cottages he saw here had protective cornices, carved above windows and doors, chiselled and moulded with as much elaboration as if they were ornamenting some noble mansion or abbey. Many of these cottage-doors stood ajar, as Wolf passed by, and it was easy for him to observe their quaintly furnished interiors: the china dogs upon the mantelpieces, the grandfather's-clocks, the highly-coloured lithographs of war and religion, the shining pots and pans, the well-scrubbed deal tables, the deeply indented wooden steps leading to the rooms above. Almost all of them had large flagstones, of the same mellow, yellowish tint, laid between the doorstep and the path;' and in many cases this stone was as deeply hollowed out, under the passing feet of the generations, as was the actual doorstep which rose above it.

Beyond these cottages his road led him past the low

wall of the parish-church. Here he stopped for a while to view the graves and to enjoy the look of that solid and yet proud edifice whose massive masonry and tall square tower gathered up into themselves so many of the characteristics of that countryside.

Wolf wondered vaguely in what part of the churchyard his predecessor's body lay—that hiding-place without a headstone! He also wondered whether by some stroke of good luck he should get a glimpse of that submissive clergyman, satirically styled "Tilly-Valley," pottering about the place.

But the church remained lonely and unfrequented at that mid-morning hour. Nothing moved there but a heavy rack of dark-grey, wind-blown clouds, sailing swiftly above the four foliated pinnacles that rose from the corners of the tower. Close to the church he perceived what was evidently the parsonage; but there was no sign of life there either.

The cottages grew more scattered now. Some of them were really small dairy-farms, through the gates of whose muddy yards he could see pigs and poultry, and sometimes a young bull or an excited flock of geese.

At last he had passed the last house of the village and was drifting leisurely along a lonely country road. The hedges were already in full leaf; but many of the trees, especially the oaks and ashes, were yet quite bare. The ditches on both sides of the road contained gleaming patches of celandines.

As Wolf walked along, an extraordinary happiness took possession of him. He seemed to derive satisfaction from the mere mechanical achievement of putting

one foot in front of the other. It seemed a delicious privilege to him merely to feel his boots sinking in the wet mud—merely to feel the gusts of cold air blowing upon his face.

He asked himself lazily why it was that he found nature, especially this simple pastoral nature that made no attempt to be grandiose or even picturesque, so much more thrilling than any human society he had ever met. He felt as if he enjoyed at that hour some primitive life-feeling that was identical with what these pollarded elms felt, against whose ribbed trunks the gusts of wind were blowing, or with what these shiny celandine-leaves felt, whose world was limited to tree-roots and fern-fronds and damp, dark mud!

The town of Blacksod stands in the midst of a richly green valley, at the point where the Dorsetshire Blackmore Vale, following the loamy banks of the river Lunt, carries its umbrageous fertility into the great Somersetshire plain. Blacksod is not only the centre of a large agricultural district; it is the energetic and bustling emporium of many small but enterprising factories. Cheeses are made here and also shoes. Sausages are made here and also leather gloves. Ironmongers, saddlers, shops dealing in every sort of farm-implement and farm-produce, abound in the streets of Blacksod side by side with haberdashers, grocers, fishmongers; and up and down its narrow pavements farmers and labourers jostle with factory-hands and burgesses.

After walking for about two miles, Wolf became conscious that this lively agglomeration of West Country trade was about to reveal itself. The hedges became

lower, the ditches shallower, the blackbirds and thrushes less voluble. Neat little villas began to appear at the roadside, with trim but rather exposed gardens, where daffodils nodded with a splendid negligence, as if ready in their royal largesse to do what they could for the patient clerks and humble shop-assistants who had weeded the earth about their proud stems.

Soon there began to be manifested certain signs of borough traffic. Motor-cars showed themselves and even motor-lorries. Bakers' carts and butchers' carts came swiftly past him. He overtook maids and mothers returning from shopping, with perambulators where the infant riders were almost lost beneath the heaps of parcels piled up around them. He observed a couple of tramps taking off their boots under the hedge, their long brown peevish fingers untwisting dirty linen, their furtive suspicious eyes watching the passers-by with the look of sick jackals.

And then he found himself in an actual street. It was a new street, composed of spick-and-span jerry-built houses, each exactly like the other. But it gave Wolf a mysterious satisfaction. The neatness, the abnormal cleanliness of the brickwork and of the wretched sham-Gothic ornamentation did not displease him. The little gardens, behind low, brightly-painted, wooden palings, were delicious to him, with their crocuses and jonquils and budding polyanthuses.

He surveyed these little houses and gardens—doubtless the homes of artisans and factory-hands—with a feeling of almost maudlin delight. He imagined himself as living in one of these places, and he realized exactly

with what deep sensual pleasure he would enjoy the rain and the intermittent sunshine. There would be nothing artistic or over-cluttered there, to prevent every delicate vibration of air and sky from reaching the skin of his very soul. He loved the muslin curtains over the parlour-windows, and the ferns and flowerpots on the window-sills. He loved the quaint names of these little toy houses—names like Rosecot, Woodbine, Bankside, Primrose Villa. He tried to fancy what it would be like to sit in the bow-window of any one of these, drinking tea and eating bread-and-honey, while the Spring afternoon slowly darkened towards twilight.

He roused himself presently from these imaginations to observe that some of the real business of the town was becoming manifest. The little houses began to be interspersed with wood-sheds and timber-yards, by grocers' shops and coal-yards. He became alert now—that faint sort of "second-sight," which almost all contemplative people possess, warning him that Mr. Torp's establishment was not far off. He knew he was in Chequers Street. It only remained for him to keep his eyes open. He walked very slowly now, peering at the yards and shops on both sides of the road; and as he walked, a curious trance-like sensation came over him, the nature of which was very complicated, though no doubt it had something to do with the emptiness of his stomach. But it took the form of making him feel as if he were retracing some sequence of events through which long ago he had already passed.

Ah! There it was! "Torp, Stone-Cutter." He gazed with interest at the various monuments for the dead,

which lay about on the ground or stood erect and challenging against the wall. It produced a queer impression, this crowd of anonymous tombstones, the owners and possessors whereof even now cheerfully walking about the earth.

"I must get this Torp to show me what he's done for poor Redfern," he thought, as he passed on to the door of the house.

He knocked at the door and was so instantaneously admitted that it was with a certain degree of confusion that he found himself in the very heart of the stone-cutter's household.

They had evidently just finished their midday meal. Mrs. Torp, a lean, cadaverous woman, was clearing the table. The stone-cutter himself, a plump, lethargic man, with a whimsical eye, was smoking his pipe by the fire. A handsome boy of about eleven, who had evidently just opened the door to let himself out, fell back now and stared at the stranger with a bold impertinence.

"What can I do for 'ee, Sir?" said Mr. Torp, not making any attempt to rise, but smiling amiably at the intruder.

"Get on! Get off! Don't worry the gentleman, Lob!" murmured the woman to the spellbound boy.

And then it was that Wolf became aware of another member of the family.

No sooner was he conscious of her presence than he felt himself becoming as speechless with astonishment as the boy was at his own appearance. She sat on a stool opposite her father, leaning her shoulders against the edge of a high-backed settle. She was a young girl

of about eighteen, and her beauty was so startling that it seemed to destroy in a moment all ordinary human relations. Her wide-open grey eyes were fringed with long, dark eyelashes. Her voluptuous throat resembled an arum lily before it has unsheathed its petals. She wore a simple close-fitting dress, more suited to the summer than to a chilly day in spring; but the peculiarity of this dress lay in the way it emphasized the extraordinary suppleness of her shoulders and the delicate Artemis-like beauty of her young breasts.

"I've come from King's Barton," began Wolf, moving towards the stone-cutter. "I believe I have the honour to have taken the place of the gentleman for whom you have just designed one of your monuments."

"Sit 'ee down, Mister. Sit 'ee down, Sir!" cried the man cheerfully. "Give the gentleman a chair, Missus!" He spoke in a tone that implied that his own obesity must be accepted as a pleasant excuse for his retaining a sitting-posture.

But Mrs. Torp had already left the room with a tray; and Wolf, as he seated himself with his face to the girl, could hear the woman muttering viciously to herself and clattering angrily with the plates behind the kitchen-door—a door she seemed to have left open on purpose, so that she might combine the pleasure of listening to the conversation with the pleasure of disturbing it.

"Missus be cantiferous wi' I 'cos them 'taties be so terrible rotted," remarked the man, in a loud, hoarse whisper, leaning forward towards his guest and confidentially tapping his knee with his pipe. "And them onions what she been and cooked all morning, she've

a-boiled all taste out o' they. Them onions might as well be hog-roots for all the Christian juice what be left in 'un."

Wolf, who had found it difficult to keep his eyes away from the girl by the settle, now suddenly became aware that she was fully conscious of his agitation and was regarding him with grave amusement.

"I suppose *you* don't do any of the cooking?" he said, rather faintly, meeting her gaze.

She changed her position into one that emphasized her beauty with a kind of innocent wantonness, smiled straight into his eyes, but remained silent.

"She?" put in her father. "Save us and help us! Gerda do the cooking? Why, Mister, that girl ain't got the gumption to comb her own hair. That's the Lord's own truth, Mister, what I'm telling 'ee. She ain't got the durned consideration to comb her own hair; and it be mighty silky, too, when it be combed out. But her mother have to do it. There ain't nothing in this blessed house what that poor woman hasn't to do; and her own daughter sitting round, strong as a May-pole.—Now you be off to school, Lob Torp! Don't yer trouble the gentleman."

This last remark was due to the fact that the handsome boy had edged himself quite close to Wolf and was gazing at him with a mixture of admiration and insolence.

"What be that on your chain?" he enquired. "Be that a real girt seal, like what King John throwed into the Wash?"

Wolf put his arm round the child's waist; but as he

did so, he looked steadily at Gerda. At that moment Mrs. Torp re-entered the room.

"Well, John?" she said. "Aren't yer going into the yard? That stone for Mr. Manley's mother's been waiting since Sunday. He comes to see 'un five times a day. He'll be a crazed-man like, if 'tisn't up afore to-morrow."

Wolf rose to his feet.

"What shall I tell Mr. Urquhart about the headstone for Mr. Redfern?"

He uttered these words in a more decided and less propitiatory tone than he had yet used, and all the family stared at him with placid surprise.

"Oh, that!" cried Mr. Torp. "So you came about that, did yer? I had thought maybe you knowed some wealthy folk out in country what had a waiting corpse. Do 'ee come from these parts, Mister, or be 'ee from Lunnon, as this 'ere Redfern were? . . . Lunnon, eh? Well, 'tis strange that two young men same as you be should come to Blacksod; and both be Lunnoners! But that's what I tells our Gerda here. Maids what won't help their mothers in house, maids what do nought but walk out wi' lads, had best be in Lunnon their own selves! That there Metropolis must be summat wonderful to look at, I reckon. I expect they makes their own moniments in them parts?"

Wolf nodded, with a shrug of his shoulders, to imply that there was little need at present for Mr. Torp to think of extending his activities.

"Could you show me what you've done for Redfern?" he asked abruptly.

"Well, there ain't no harm in that, is there, Missus?" said the stone-cutter, looking appealingly at his wife.

"Best show him," said the lady briefly. "Best show him. But let 'un understand that Mr. Manley's mother is what comes first."

The obese stone-cutter rose with an effort and led the way into the yard. Wolf stepped aside to permit the girl to follow her father; and as she passed him, she gave him a glance that resembled the sudden trembling of a white-lilac branch, heavy with rain and sweetness. Her languorous personality dominated the whole occasion for him; and as he watched her swaying body moving between those oblong stones in that cold enclosure, the thought rose within him that if his subterranean vice couldn't find a place for loveliness like this, there must be something really inhuman in its exactions.

With an incredible rapidity he began laying plots to see this girl again. Did Mr. Urquhart know of her existence? Had Darnley Otter ever seen her? . . . He was roused from his amorous thoughts by an abrupt gesture of Mr. Torp.

"There 'a be!" said the carver. " 'Tis Ham Hill stone, as Squire Urquhart said for'n to be. I does better jobs in marble; and marble's what most of 'em likes. But that's the order; and the young gent what it's chipped for can't help 'isself."

Wolf regarded the upright yellow slab, upon the top of which was a vigorous "Here Lies," and at the foot of which was an even more vigorous "John Torp, Monument-Maker."

"You haven't got very far, Mr. Torp," he remarked drily.

"Won't take me more'n a couple o' afternoons to finish it up," replied the other. "And you can tell Mr. Urquhart that as soon as Mr. Manley be satisfied—Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill, tell 'un!—I'll get to work on his young friend and make a clean job of he."

There did not seem any excuse just then for prolonging this interview. Wolf's mind hurried backwards and forwards like a rat trying to find a hole into a pantry. He thought, "Would they let her show me the way to the Three Peewits?" and then immediately afterwards he thought, "They'll send the boy, and I'll never get rid of him!"

In the end he went off with an abruptness that was almost rude. He patted Lob on the head, nodded at the stone-cutter, plunged into the eyes of Gerda as a diver plunges into water, and strode away down Chequers Street.

It was not long before he was seated at a spotless white cloth in the commercial dining-room of the famous West Country inn. In front of him rose a massive mahogany sideboard, which served as a sort of sacred pedestal for the ancient silver plate of three generations of sagacious landlords. In the centre of this silver were two symbolic objects—an immense uncut ham, adorned with a white paper frill, and a large half-eaten apple-tart.

Wolf was so late for luncheon that he and a solitary waiter had the whole dusky, sober room entirely to themselves. They were, however, looked down upon by the

ferocious eye of a stuffed pike and by the supercilious eye of Queen Victoria, who, wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter, conveyed, but only by the flicker of an eyelid, her ineffable disdain for all members of the human race who were not subjects of the House of Hanover.

And as he lingered over his meal, drinking that dark, foamy liquor that seemed the dedicated antidote to a grey March day, he permitted his fancy to run riot with the loveliness of Gerda Torp. How remarkable that she had never once opened her lips! And yet in her silence she had compelled both that room and that yard to serve as mere frames to her personality. He tilted back in his chair, and pressed the palms of his hands against the edge of the table, revolving every detail of that queer scene, and becoming so absorbed that it was only after a perceptible interval that he began to taste the cigarettes which he went on unconsciously smoking.

The girl was not the particular physical type that appealed to him most, or that had, whenever he had come across it, the most provocative effect upon his senses; but the effect upon him of a beauty so overpowering, so absolute in its flawlessness, was great enough to sweep out of sight all previous predilections. And now, as he conjured up the vision of what she was like, it seemed that nothing more desirable could possibly happen to him than to enjoy such beauty.

He made up his mind that by hook or by crook he would possess her. He knew perfectly well that he could not, properly speaking, be said to have fallen in love with her. He was like a man who suddenly finds out that he has suffered all his life from thirst, and simul-

taneously with this discovery stumbles upon a cool cellar of the rarest wine. To have caught sight of her at all was to be dominated by an insatiable craving for her—a craving that made him feel as if he had some sixth sense, some sense that *must* be satisfied by the possession of her, and that nothing but the possession of her *could* satisfy.

Drugged and dazed with the Three Peewits' ale and with these amorous contemplations, Wolf sat on beneath that picture of Queen Victoria in a species of erotic trance. His rugged face, with its high cheek-bones and hawk-like nose, nodded over his plate with half-shut lecherous eyes. Every now and then he ran his fingers through his short, stiff, fair hair, till it stood up erect upon his head.

"Well, well," he said to himself at last, "this won't do!" And rising abruptly from his chair, he gave the waiter, who, in his preoccupation had been to him a mere white blur above a black coat, an extravagant tip—half-a-crown, in fact—and, taking up his hat and stick, told them to put down his meal to Mr. Urquhart's account, and stepped out into the street.

The cold, gusty wind, when he got outside, cleared his brain at once. He made up his mind that he would leave the bookseller to the last; and, stopping one of the passers-by, he enquired the way to Weevil's grocery.

Never did he forget that first lingering stroll through the centre of Blacksod! The country people seemed to be doing their shopping as if it were some special *fête*. Parsons, squires, farmers, villagers—all were receiving obsequious and yet quizzical welcome from the sly shop-

keepers and their irresponsible assistants. The image of Gerda Torp moved with him as he drifted slowly through this animated scene. Her sweetness flowed through his senses and flowed out around him, heightening his interest in everything he looked at, making everything seem rich and mellow, as if it were seen through a diffused golden light, like that of the pictures of Claude Lorraine.

And all the while over the slate roofs the great grey clouds rushed upon their arbitrary way. His spirit, drunk with the sweetness of Gerda and the fumes of the Three Peewits' ale, rose in exultation to follow those clouds.

Whirling along with them in this exultant freedom of his spirit, while his human figure with its oak walking-stick tapped the edge of the pavement, he felt a queer need, now, to carry this maddeningly sweet burden of his to that mound in the Ramsgard cemetery.

"*He* would chuckle over this," thought Wolf, as he recalled that profane death-bed cry. "*He* would push me on to snatch most scandalously at this girl, let the result be as it may!"

His mind dropped now like a leaden plummet into all manner of erotic thoughts. Would her silence go on . . . with its indrawing magnetic secrecy . . . even if he were making love to her? Would that glaucous greyness in her eyes darken, or grow more luminous, as he caressed her? Gerda certainly couldn't be called a "peeled willow-wand," for her limbs were rounded and voluptuous, just as her face had something of that lethargic sulkiness that is seen sometimes in ancient Greek sculpture.

It was just at this point that, looking round for a suitable person to enquire of again concerning the sausage-shop, he felt himself jerked by the elbow; and there, in front of him, smiling up into his face, was the handsome, mischievous countenance of Lob Torp.

"I see'd 'ee, Mister!" burst out the boy breathlessly. "I see'd 'ee long afore 'ee could see I! Say now, Mister, have 'ee any cigarette-pictures on 'ee?"

Wolf surveyed the excited child thoughtfully. Surely the gods were on his side this day!

"If I haven't, I soon *will* have," he brought out with a nervous smile, searching hurriedly in his pockets.

It appeared that he did have a couple of half-used packages, containing the desired little bits of stiff, shiny paper.

"There, there's two, at any rate!" he said, handing them over.

Lob Torp scrutinized the two cards with a disappointed eye. "They ain't Three Castles," he said sadly. "Them others bain't as pretty as they Three Castles be." He meditated for a moment, with his hands in his pockets. "Say, Mister," he began eagerly, with radiant eyes. "Tell 'ee what I'll do for 'ee. I'll sell 'ee the photo of Sis what I be taking down to Bob Weevil's. He were a-going to gie I summat for'n, but like enough it'll be worth more to a gent like yourself. Come now, mister, gie I a sixpence and I'll gie 'ee the picture and say nought to Bob."

The ingratiating smile with which Lob uttered these words would have been worthy of an Algerian street-arab. Wolf made a humorous grimace at him, under

the mask of which he hid annoyance, uneasiness, curiosity.

The boy continued: "'Tis a wonderful pretty picture, Mister. I tooked it me own self. She be ridin' astride one of them wold tombstones in Dad's yard, just the same as 'twere a girt 'oss."

"I don't mind looking at it," said Wolf, after a pause, pulling the boy into the door of a shop. But Lob Torp was evidently an adept in the ways of infatuated gentlemen.

"Threepence for a look, Mister, and sixpence for to keep," he said resolutely.

It was on the tip of Wolf's tongue to cry, "Hand it over, boy. I'll keep it!" But an instinct of suspicious dignity restrained him, and he assumed a non-committal, negligent air. But under this air the ancient, sly cunning of the predatory demon began to fumble at the springs of his intention. "I'll get Bob Weevil to show it to me," the Machiavellian monitor whispered. "I shall have it in my hands then without being indebted to this rascally little blackmailer!"

He turned to the boy and took him by the arm. "Come on, youngster!" he said. "Never mind about the picture. Much better give it to your friend! I'm going to Weevil's shop now myself, and you can show me the way. I'll give you your sixpence for *that!*" He pulled the child forward with him and made him walk by his side, his arm thrown lightly and casually round Lobbie's neck. But all this sagacious hypocrisy no more deceived the cynical intelligence of Gerda's brother than did the unction of that arm about his shoulder!

The child slipped out of his grasp like a little eel. "Don't 'ee hold on to I, Mister. I ain't going to rin nowhere. I ain't a-gived school the go-by for to play marbles. I be goin' fishing with Bob Weevil, present. He lets I hold his net for'n."

"Oh, is there any fishing about here?" enquired Wolf blandly, accepting his defeat. The boy skipped a pace or two like a young rabbit.

" 'Tain't what *you'd* call fishing, Mister. Nought but minnies and stickles, 'cept when us do go to Willum's Mill. Woops-I! But them girt chub be hard to hook. And Mister Manley he likes to keep *them* for the gentry. 'Tis when us be down to Willum's of an evening, when farmer be feeding 'isself, that Bob and me do a bit of real fishing."

Wolf surveyed the good-looking urchin with benevolent irony. "Have you ever landed any of those big chub?" he asked. And then he suddenly became conscious that the nervous, hunted eye of a very shabby clergyman was observing them both, with startled interest, from the edge of the pavement.

"We're near where us wants to go now, Sir," was the boy's irrelevant response, uttered in a surprisingly loud voice.

When they had advanced a little further, the child turned round to his companion and whispered furtively. "Yon Passon were the Reverend T. E. Valley, Mister, from King's Barton. 'Ee do talk to I sometimes about helping he with them holy services up to church; but Dad he says all them things be gammon. He's what you might call blasphemious, my Dad is; and I be blasphe-

mious, too, I reckon; though Bob says that High Church be a religion what lets a person play cricket on Sundays. But I takes no stock o' that, being as cricket and such-like ain't nought to I."

"Tilly-Valley! Tilly-Valley!" muttered Wolf under his breath, recalling the contemptuous allusion of Mr. Urquhart.

"Here we be, Mister!" cried Lobbie Torp, pausing before a capacious old-fashioned shop, over which was written in dignified lettering, "Robert Weevil and Son."

They entered together, and the boy was at once greeted by a young man behind the counter, a young man with black hair and a pasty complexion.

"Hullo, Lob! Come to see if there's fishing tonight?"

Wolf advanced in as easy and natural a manner as he could assume. "I must propitiate my rival," he said grimly to himself. "My name is Solent, Mr. Weevil," he said aloud, "and I come on behalf of Mr. Urquhart of King's Barton."

"Yes, Sir, quite so, Sir; and what can I do for you, Sir?" said the young man politely, bowing with a professional smirk over the polished counter.

"The gentleman's been to see Dad," put in Lobbie, in his high treble. "And he saw Sis, too, and Sis seed him, too; and I rinned after him and showed him the way!"

"And what can I do for you, Sir, or for Mr. Urquhart, Sir?" repeated the young grocer.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Weevil, it was Monk, the man up there, who asked me to come to you. It appears he's run out of sausages—your especial sausages—and

he begged me to take back a pound or two for him."

"I'll do them up at once for you," said the grocer benignantly. "I've just had a new lot in."

It was not very surprising to Wolf to notice that his young guide hurriedly followed Mr. Weevil into the recesses of the shop. From where he stood he could see the two of them quite clearly through an open door, the dark head and the fair head close together, poring over some object that certainly was not sausages!

A shameless and scandalous curiosity seized him to share in that colloquy. The various paraphernalia of the shop, the piled-up tins of Reading Biscuits, the great copper canisters of Indian teas, the noble erections of Blacksod cheeses—all melted—all grew vague and indistinct.

"Mounted astride of a girt tombstone," he repeated to himself; and the thought of the cool whiteness of that girl's skin and its contact with that chiselled marble reduced everything else in the world to a kind of irrelevance, to something that fell into the category of the tedious and the negligible.

There came at last an outburst of merriment from the back of the shop that actually caused him to make a few hurried steps in that direction; but he stopped short, interdicted by his sense of personal dignity. "I really can't join in libidinous jesting with the Blacksod populace *just* at present!" he thought to himself. "But there's plenty of time. I've no doubt *William* Solent would have had no such hesitation!" And the thought came over him how ridiculous these dignified withdrawings of his would appear to that grinning skull in the cemetery.

But the youth and the boy came back again now gravely enough to the front of the shop.

"There you are, sir!" said Bob Weevil, handing him a lusty package, and puffing out his cheeks as he did so. "I think Mr. Urquhart will find those to his taste." He paused and gave Wolf's companion a glance of complicated significance. "Don't tell Gerdie what I said about that picture, Lob, will you?" he added.

There was a tone in this remark that caused Wolf's face to stiffen and his eyebrows to rise. "And now perhaps you can tell me," he said, "where I can find Malakite's, the book-shop?"

The two friends exchanged a puzzled and baffled glance, not unmixed with disapproval. Books were evidently something for which they both entertained a hostile suspicion. But the young grocer gave him detailed instructions, to which Lob Torp listened with satiric condescension. "See you both again soon!" murmured Wolf, with dignified amiability, as he left the shop.

He walked very slowly this time along the Blacksod pavements, and he found himself buttoning his overcoat tightly and turning up his collar; for the wind had veered from northwest to due north, and the air that blew against his face now had whistled across the sheep-tracks of Salisbury Plain.

Ah! *There* was the second-hand-book shop, with the single curious word, "Malakite," written above it. He paused for a second to gaze in at the window, and was both surprised and delighted by the number and rarity of the works exposed there for sale. The house itself was a solidly constructed, sturdily built Mid-Victorian

erection, with a grey slate roof; and there was a little open passage at one side of it, leading, he could see, into a small walled-in garden at the back.

He pushed open the door and entered the shop. At first he found it difficult to see clearly; for it was already nearly four o'clock, the sky heavily overcast, the place ill-lighted, the gas-jets unlit. But after a moment of suspense, he made out a tall, gaunt, bearded, old man, with sunken cheeks, hollow eye-sockets, closely cropped grizzled hair, seated in a corner of the shop upon a rough, faded horse-hair chair, with a little round table in front of him, carefully gumming together the loose leaves of a large folio which he held upon his knee. The old man's head was bent low over his work, and he made no sign of having heard anyone enter.

"Mr. Malakite?" said Wolf quietly, advancing towards him between rows of books. His approach was so easy and natural in that dim light, that his astonishment may be imagined when the old man let the folio fall to the ground, and stumbled to his feet with such agitated violence that the round table collapsed also, tossing the glue-pot upon the floor. In that twilit place it was almost spectral to see the eyes in that old furrowed face staring forth like black holes burnt in a wooden panel.

"I startled you, Sir," muttered Wolf gently, drawing back a little. "It's a dark, cold afternoon. I'm afraid I disturbed you. I am very sorry."

For one second the old bookseller seemed to totter and sway, as if to follow his folio to the ground; but he mastered himself, and, leaning against the arm of his horse-hair chair, spoke in a dry, collected voice. His

words were as unexpected to his visitor as his agitation had been.

"Who *are* you, young man?" he said sternly. "Who were your parents?"

Not Dante himself, when in the Inferno he heard a similar question from that proud tomb, could have been more startled than Wolf was at this extraordinary enquiry.

"My name is Wolf Solent, Mr. Malakite," he answered humbly. "My father's name was William Solent. He was a master at Ramsgard School. My mother lives in London. I am acting now as Secretary for Mr. Urquhart."

The old man, hearing these words, gave vent to a curious rattling sigh, deep down in his throat, like the sound of the wind through a patch of dead thistle-heads. He made a feeble gesture with one of his long, bony hands, half apologetic, half sorrowful, and sank back again upon his chair.

"You must forgive me, Sir," he said after a pause. "You must forgive me, Mr. Solent. The truth is, your voice, coming suddenly upon me like that, reminded me of things that ought to be—reminded me of—of too many things." The old man's voice rose at the words "too many," but his next remark was quiet and natural. "I knew your father quite well, sir. We were intimate friends. His death was a great blow to me. Your father, Mr. Solent, was a very remarkable man."

Wolf, on hearing these words, moved up to the bookseller's side, and with an easy and spontaneous gesture

laid his hand upon the hand of the old man as it rested upon the arm of his chair.

"You are the second friend of my father's that I have met lately," said he. "The other was Miss Selena Gault."

The old man hardly seemed to listen to these words. He kept staring at him, out of his sunken eye-sockets, with deprecatory intensity.

Wolf, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable, bent down and occupied himself by picking up the fallen table, the glue-pot, and the folio. As he did this he began to grow aware of a sensation resembling that which he had felt in Mr. Urquhart's library—the sensation of the presence of forms of human obliquity completely new in his experience.

He had no sooner got the folio safe back upon the table, than the shop-door swung open behind him and closed with a resounding noise. He glanced round; and there, to his surprise, stood Darnley Otter. This quiet gentleman brought in with him such an air of ease and orderliness, that Wolf felt a wave of very agreeable reassurance pass through his nerves. He was, in fact, thoroughly relieved to see that yellow beard and gracious reticence. The man's reserved manner and courtly smile gave him a comfortable sense of a return to those normal and natural conventions from which he felt as if he had departed very far since he left the tea-room of the Lovelace Hotel yesterday.

The two young men exchanged greetings, while the owner of the book-shop observed them with a sort of patient bewilderment. He then rose slowly to his feet.

"It's time for tea," he said, in a carefully measured voice. "I generally lock the place up now and go upstairs. I don't know——" He hesitated, looking from one to the other. "I don't know whether it would be asking too much—if I asked you both to come upstairs with me?"

Wolf and Mr. Otter simultaneously expressed their extreme desire to drink a cup of tea with him.

"I'll go and warn my daughter, then," he said eagerly. "You know, Mr. Otter, I feel as if this young gentleman and myself were already old friends. By the way, this folio, Sir"—and he turned to Solent—"is the book I wrote to Mr. Urquhart about. I think I shall have to trust it with you. It's a treasure. But Mr. Urquhart is a good customer of mine. I don't think he'll want to purchase it though. Its price is higher than he usually cares to give. Will you excuse me, then, gentlemen?"

So saying, he opened a door at the rear of the shop and vanished from view. The two men looked at each other with that particular look which normal people exchange when an extraordinary person has suddenly left them.

"A remarkable old chap," observed Wolf quietly.

Darnley shrugged his shoulders and looked round the shop.

"You don't think so?" pursued Solent.

"Oh, he's all right," admitted the other.

"You don't like him, then?"

The only reply to this was an almost Gallic gesture, implying avoidance of an unpleasant subject.

"Why, what's wrong?" said Solent, pressing him.

"Oh, well," responded the Latin-teacher, driven to make himself more explicit. "There's a rather sinister legend attached to Mr. Malakite, in regard to his wife."

"His wife?" echoed Wolf.

"He is said to have killed her with shame."

"Shame? Do people die of shame?"

"They have been known to do so," said the schoolmaster, drily, "at least in classical times. You've probably heard of Œdipus, Solent?"

"But Œdipus *didn't* die. That was the whole point. The gods carried him away."

"Well, perhaps the gods will carry Mr. Malakite away."

"What do you mean?" enquired Wolf, with great interest, lowering his voice.

"Oh, I daresay we make too much of these things. But there was a quarrel between this man and his wife, connected with his fondness for their daughter, this young Christie's elder sister . . . and . . . well . . . there was a child born, too."

"And the wife died?"

"The wife died. The girl was packed off to Australia. It seems she couldn't bear the sight of her child, and it was taken away from her. I can't tell you whether the case got as far as the law-courts, or whether it was hushed up. Your friend Miss Gault knows all about it."

Wolf was silent, meditating upon all this.

"Not a very pleasant background for the other daughter!" he brought out at last.

"Oh, she's a funny little thing," said Darnley, smiling. "She lives so completely in books, that I don't think she

takes anything that happens in the real world very seriously. She always seems to me, when I meet her, as if she'd just come out of a deep trance and wanted to return to it. She and I get on splendidly. Well, you'll see her in a minute, and can judge for yourself."

Wolf was silent again. He was thinking of the friendship between this old man and his father. He pondered in his mind whether or not to reveal to Darnley the unexpected agitation which his appearance had excited. For some reason he felt reluctant to do this. He felt vaguely that his new closeness to his cynical progenitor committed him to a certain caution. He was on the edge of all manner of dark entanglements. Well! He would use what discernment he had; but at any rate he would keep the whole problem to himself.

"I went to Torp's yard," he remarked, anxious to change the subject. "The fellow doesn't seem to have got very far with Redfern's headstone."

Darnley Otter lifted his heavy eyelids and fixed upon him a sudden piercing look from his mackerel-blue eyes.

"Did Urquhart talk to you about Redfern?" he asked.

"Only to grumble at him for doing something about the book that didn't suit his ideas. Did *you* know him? Did he die suddenly?"

Mr. Otter, instead of replying, turned his back, put his hands in his pockets, and began pacing up and down the floor of the shop, which seemed to get darker and darker around them.

He stopped suddenly and pulled at his trim beard.

"I cursed my wretched school-work to you yesterday," he said. "But when I think of the misery that hu-

man beings cause one another in this world, I am thankful that I can teach Latin, and let it all go. But I daresay I exaggerate; I daresay I exaggerate."

At that moment the door at the back of the shop opened, and the old bookseller, standing in the entrance, called out to them in a calm, well-bred voice.

"Will you come, gentlemen? Will you come?"

They followed him in silence into a little unlit passage. Preceding them with a slow, careful shuffle, he led them up a flight of steps to a landing above, where there were several closed doors and one open door. At this open door he stood aside and beckoned them to enter.

The room, when they found themselves within it, was lighted by a pleasant, green-shaded lamp. There was a warm fire burning in the grate, in front of which was a dainty tea-table with an old-fashioned urn, a silver teapot, some cups and saucers of Dresden china, and a large plate of thin bread-and-butter.

From beside this table a fragile-looking girl who might have been anything between twenty and twenty-five rose to welcome them. Darnley Otter greeted this young person in the manner of a benevolent uncle, and while Wolf and she were shaking hands, retained her left hand affectionately in his own.

Solent had received, since he left King's Barton, so many disturbing impressions, that he was glad enough to yield himself up now, in this peaceful room, to what was really a vague, formless anodyne of almost Quakerish serenity. What he felt was undoubtedly due to the personality of Christie Malakite; but as he sank down in an armchair by her side, the impression he received

of her appearance was confined to an awareness of smoothly parted hair, of a quaint pointed chin, and of a figure so slight and sexless that it resembled those meagre, androgynous forms that can be seen sometimes in early Italian pictures.

For several minutes Wolf permitted the conversation to pass lightly and easily between Darnley and Christie, while he occupied himself in enjoying his tea. He did not, however, hesitate to cast every now and then surreptitious glances at the extraordinary countenance of the old man, who, at a little distance from the table, was reposing in a kind of abstracted coma, his bony hands clasped around one of his thin knees, and his eyes half-closed.

Then, all in a moment, Wolf found himself describing his visit to the stone-cutter's yard, and without the least embarrassment enlarging upon the hypnotic charm that had been cast upon him by the loveliness of Gerda.

It appeared, for some mysterious reason, that he could talk more freely to these two people than he had ever talked in his life.

He had come, little as he had yet seen of him, to have a genuine regard for Darnley Otter, a regard that he had reason to feel was quite as strongly reciprocated. And in addition to this there seemed to be something about the pale, indefinite profile of the girl by his side, the patient slenderness of her neck, the cool detachment of her whole attitude, that unloosed the flow of his speech and threw around him an unforced consciousness of being at one with himself and at one with the general stream of life.

Darnley rallied him with a dry shamelessness about

his confessed infatuation for the stone-cutter's daughter; and Christie, turning every now and then an almost elfish smile toward his voluble talk, actually offered, as she filled his cup for the third or fourth time, to help him in his adventure by inviting the young woman herself, whom she said she knew perfectly well, to have tea with him any afternoon he liked to name!

"She *is* beautiful," the girl repeated. "I love to watch her. But I warn you, Mr. Solent, you'll have many rivals."

"She's worse than a flirt," remarked Darnley, gravely. "She's got something in her that I have always fancied Helen of Troy must have had—a sort of terrible passivity. I know for a fact that she's had three lovers already. One of them was a young Oxonian who, they tell me, was a terrific rake. Another, so they say, was your predecessor, young Redfern. But none of them—forgive me, Christie dear!—seems to have, as they say down here, 'got her into trouble.' None of them seems to have made the least impression upon her! I doubt if she possesses what you call a heart. Certainly not a heart that you, Solent"—he smiled one of his gentlest ironic smiles —"are likely to break. So go ahead, my friend! We shall watch the course of your 'furtivos amores,' as Catullus would say, with the most cold-blooded interest. Shan't we, Christie?"

The young girl turned upon Wolf her steady, unprovocative, indulgent gaze. "Perhaps," she said quietly, after a moment in which Wolf felt as though his mind had encountered her mind like two bodiless shadows in a flowing river—"perhaps in this case it will be differ-

ent. Would you marry her if it were different?" These words were added in a tone that had the sort of faint aqueous mischief in it, such as a water-nymph might have indulged in, contemplating the rather heavy earth-loves of a pair of mortals.

"Oh, confound it, *that's* going a little too fast, even for me!" Wolf protested. And, in the silence that followed, it seemed to him as if these two people, this Darnley and this Christie, had managed between them, in some sort of subtle conspiracy, to take off the delicious edge of his furtive obsession.

"Damn them!" he muttered to himself. "I was a fool to talk about it. But there it is! None of their chatter can make the sweetness of Gerda less entrancing." But even as he formulated this revolt with a half-humorous irritation, he was aware that his mood *had* in some imperceptible way changed. Under cover of the friendly badinage that was going on between Darnley and Christie, he once or twice encountered the silent observation of the old bookseller, who had now lighted his pipe and was watching them all with a cloudy intentness; and it occurred to him that it was quite as much due to the shock of what he had heard about the old man that this change had come, as to anything that these two had said.

"But to the devil with them all!" he muttered to himself, as he and Darnley rose to go. "I've never seen anything as desirable as that girl's body and I'm not going to be teased into giving it up."

Before he left the house, the old bookseller wrapped the folio in paper and cardboard and placed it in his hands, making, as he did so, an automatic reference to

his professional concern about its well-being. But the expression in Mr. Malakite's hollow eyes, as this transaction took place, seemed to Wolf to have some quite different significance—some significance in no way connected with the History of the Evershot Family.

All the way back to King's Barton, as the two men walked side by side in friendly fragmentary speech, Wolf kept making spasmodic attempts to adjust the folio and the sausages so as to leave his right hand free for his oak-stick. He rejected all offers of assistance from his companion with a kind of obstinate pride, declaring that he "liked" carrying parcels; but the physical difficulty of these adjustments had the effect of diminishing his response both to the influence of the night and to the conversation of his friend.

It was quite dark now; and the north wind, whistling through the blackthorn-hedges, sighing through the tops of the trees, whimpering in the telegraph-wires, had begun to acquire that peculiar burden of impersonal sadness, which seems to combine the natural sorrows of the human generations with some strange planetary grief whose character is unrevealed.

The influence of this dirge-like wind did by degrees, in spite of the numbness of his obstinate clutch upon his packages, come to affect Wolf's mind. He seemed to rush backward on the wings of this wind, to the two human heads—to the fleshless head of William Solent buried in the earth and to the despairing head of that son of perdition crouching at Waterloo Station.

He mentally compared, as he shouted his replies to his companion's remarks against the blustering gusts, the

sardonic aplomb of the skull under the clay with that ghastly despair of the living, and he flung over the thorn-hedge a savage comment upon the ways of God.

The trim beard of Darnley Otter might wag on . . . like a brave bowsprit "stemming nightly to the pole" . . . but the keel of every human vessel had a leak . . . it was only a question of chance . . . just pure chance . . . how far that leak would go . . . any wagging beard . . . any brave chin might have to cry, at any moment, "Hold, enough!" . . .

And suddenly, in the covering darkness, Wolf took off his hat and stretched back his head, straining his neck as far as it would go, so that without relaxing the movement of walking, his up-turned face might become horizontal. In this position he made a hideous grimace into infinity—a grimace directed at the Governing Power of the Universe. What he desired to express in this grimace was an announcement that his own secret happiness had not "squared" him. . . .

His mind rushed upwards like a rocket among those distant stars. He imagined himself standing on some incredible promontory on the faintest star he could see. Even from that vantage he wanted to repeat his defiance —not "squared" yet, O crafty universe!—not "squared" yet!

THE DESTINIES CERTAINLY DID APPEAR ANXIOUS TO "square" him; for when that evening, after dinner with the Otters, he repaired to the Manor House with his packages, Mr. Urquhart turned out to be so delighted with the book, that he commissioned him to return to the bookseller the very next morning and make the old man a liberal offer.

Wolf awoke, therefore, on this day of Saturn, in that vague delicious mood wherein the sense of happiness-to-come seems, like a great melted pearl, to cover every immediate object and person with a liquid glamour.

He took his bath with unalloyed satisfaction between the four bare walls, whereon certain dimly outlined squares in the extended whiteness indicated the exile of all art except that of the air, the sun, and the wind.

He saw nothing of either of the brothers. Jason had not yet appeared; and though there had been some vague reference to his accompanying Darnley in his early start, it was now clear that the younger Otter wished his morning walk to be free of human intercourse.

This was all agreeable enough to Wolf, who, like most conspirators, had a furtive desire to be left to his own devices; and he resolved, without putting his resolution into any formal shape, that as soon as his business with Malakite was settled, he would make his way to the stone-cutter's yard.

From his conversation at breakfast with Mrs. Otter,

he learnt that it was possible to reach the portion of the town where the bookseller lived without following the whole length of Chequers Street. This suited him well, as he wished to time his appearance at the Torp ménage so as to be certain of finding the girl at home.

He had discovered, laid carefully at the edge of his plate, a letter from his mother, and another letter, with a Ramsgard postmark, that he suspected to be from Selena Gault. Both these epistles he hurriedly thrust into his coat-pocket, afraid of any ill-omened side-tracking of his plans for that auspicious day.

It lacked about an hour of noon, when, armed with permission to bid as high as five pounds for the Evershot chronicle, Wolf entered for the second time the establishment of Mr. John Malakite.

The old man received him without the remotest trace of the emotion of the preceding day. He agreed so quickly to accept Mr. Urquhart's offer, that Wolf felt a little ashamed of his own skill as a business intermediary. But he was glad to escape the tedium of haggling, and was preparing to bid the bookseller farewell, when the man asked in a blank and neutral voice, as if the proposal were a mechanical form of politeness, "Will you come upstairs with me, Mr. Solent, and have a glass of something?"

Knowing that there was no immediate hurry, if he were to time his visit to the Torps so as to catch them at their midday meal, Wolf assented to this suggestion, and, as on the former occasion, followed the man up the dark stairway with unquestioning docility.

He found Christie in a long blue apron, dusting the

little sitting-room. Wolf was touched by the grave awkwardness with which she pulled this garment over her head and flung it down before offering him her hand. The dress she now appeared in was of a sombre brown, and so tightly fitting that it not only enhanced her slenderness, but also gave her an almost hieratic look. With her smoothly parted hair and abstracted brown eyes she resembled some withdrawn priestess of Artemis, interrupted in some sacred rite.

No sooner was the guest seated, than Mr. Malakite muttered some inarticulate apology and went down to his shop.

The girl stood for a while in silence, looking down upon her visitor, who returned her scrutiny without embarrassment. A delicious sense of age-long intimacy and ease flowed over him.

"Well, Mr. Solent," she murmured, "I suppose you're not going to leave Blacksod without seeing Gerda?"

"I thought of waiting till their dinner-time," he said, "when I would be certain of finding her. Redfern's headstone can be dragged in again as an excuse."

Christie nodded gravely. "I wrote to her yesterday," she said, "after you went. If I'd known you were coming in today I might have asked her to tea. But I daresay she'll come anyway. She often does pay me visits."

While the girl uttered these words, Wolf became aware for the first time of the extraordinary key in which her voice was pitched. It was a key so faint and so unresonant as to suggest some actual deficiency in her vocal cords. As soon as he became conscious of this peculiarity, he found his attention wandering from the meaning of her

speech and focussing itself upon her curious intonation.

But she moved to the fireplace now and bent her back over it, striking a little lump of coal with an extremely large silver poker.

"That girl must be sick of admiration," observed Wolf, "wouldn't you think so? Her mother must have an anxious time."

"I expect her mother knows how well she can take care of herself," retorted Christie, glancing sideways at him while she rested on the handle of the poker. A couple of thin loose tresses of silky brown hair hung down across her brow, her nose, her mouth, her chin, giving the impression that she was peering out at him through the drooping tendrils of some sort of wild vegetation.

Her remark, as may well be imagined, was not received with any great ardour by her guest.

"What an expression!" he cried petulantly. "Take care of herself! Why the devil *shouldn't* she take care of herself?" And it occurred to him to wonder how it was that this sophisticated young lady had ever made friends with the stone-cutter's daughter. Christie's manners were so well-bred that it was difficult to associate her with a family like the Torps.

The girl smiled as she replaced the silver poker by the side of the hearth. "Gerda knows well enough that *I* don't worry about her," she said. "Pardon me a minute," she added, slipping past him into an alcove that adjoined the room.

Wolf took advantage of her absence to move across to a bookshelf which already had attracted his attention.

What first arrested his interest now was an edition of Sir Thomas Browne's "Hydriotaphia, or Urn-Burial." He took this book down from the shelf, and was dreamily turning its pages, when the girl returned with a glass of claret in her hand. Hurriedly replacing the book in its place and raising the wine to his lips, he could not resist commenting upon some other, more abstruse volumes that her bookshelf contained.

"I see you read Leibnitz, Miss Malakite," he said. "Don't you find those 'monads' of his hard to understand? You've got Hegel there, too, I notice. I've always been rather attracted to *him*—though just why, I'd be puzzled to tell you."

He settled himself again in his wicker-chair, wine-glass in hand.

"You're fond of philosophy?" he added, scowling amiably at her. His thick eyebrows contracted as he did this, and his eyes grew narrow and small.

She seated herself near him upon the sofa and smoothed out her brown skirt thoughtfully with her fingers. She was evidently anxious to answer this important question with a becoming scrupulousness.

With this new gravity upon the features of its mistress, it seemed to Wolf as if the little sitting-room itself awoke from somnolence and asserted its individuality. He observed the unadulterated mid-century style of its cut-glass chandeliers, of its antimacassars, of its rosewood chairs, of its Geneva clock, and of the heavy gold frames of its water-colour pictures. The room, as the morning light fell upon these things across the grey slate roofs and the yellow pansies in the window-box, certainly did

possess a charming character of its own, a character to which the thick, dusky carpet and the great mahogany curtain-rod across the window gave the final touches.

"I don't understand half of what I read," Christie began, speaking with extreme precision. "All I know is that every one of those old books has its own atmosphere for me."

"Atmosphere?" questioned Wolf.

"I suppose it's funny to talk in such a way," she went on, "but all these queer non-human abstractions, like Spinoza's 'substance' and Leibnitz's 'monads' and Hegel's 'idea,' don't stay hard and logical to me. They seem to melt."

She stopped and looked at Wolf with a faint smile, as if deprecating her extravagant pedantry.

"What do you mean—melt?" he murmured.

"I mean as I say," she answered, with a shade of querulousness, as if the physical utterance of words were difficult to her and she expected her interlocutor to get her meaning independently of them. "I mean they turn into what I call 'atmosphere.' "

"The tone of thought," he threw in, "that suits you best, I suppose?"

She looked at him as if she had been blowing soap-bubbles and he had thrown his stick at one of them.

"I'm afraid I'm hopeless at expressing myself," she said. "I don't think I regard philosophy in the light of 'truth' at all."

"How do you regard it then?"

Christie Malakite sighed. "There are so many of them!" she murmured irrelevantly.

"So many?"

"So many truths. But don't tease yourself trying to follow my awkward ways of putting things, Mr. Solent."

"I'm following you with the greatest interest," said Wolf.

"What I mean to say *is*," she went on, with a little gasp, flinging out the words almost fiercely, "I regard each philosophy, not as the 'truth,' but just as a particular country, in which I can go about—countries with their own peculiar light, their Gothic buildings, their pointed roofs, their avenues of trees—— But I'm afraid I'm tiring you with all this!"

"Go on, for heaven's sake!" he pleaded. "It's just what I want to hear."

"I mean that it's like the way you feel about things," she explained, "when you hear the rain outside, while you're reading a book. You know what I mean? Oh, I can't put it into words! When you get a sudden feeling of life going on outside . . . far away from where you sit . . . over wide tracts of country . . . as if you were driving in a carriage and all the things you passed were . . . life itself . . . parapets of bridges, with dead leaves blowing over them . . . trees at crossroads . . . park-railings . . . lamp-lights on ponds. . . . I don't mean, of course," she went on, "that philosophy is the same as life . . . but—— Oh! Can't you *see* what I mean?" She broke off with an angry gesture of impatience.

Wolf bit his lip to suppress a smile. At that moment he could have hugged the nervous little figure before him.

"I know perfectly well what you mean," he said

eagerly. "Philosophy to you, and to me, too, isn't science at all! It's life winnowed and heightened. It's the essence of life caught on the wing. It's life *framed* . . . framed in room-windows . . . in carriage-windows . . . in mirrors . . . in our 'brown-studies,' when we look up from absorbing books . . . in waking-dreams—— I do know perfectly well what you mean!"

Christie drew up her feet beneath her on the sofa and turned her head, so that all he could see of her face was its delicate profile, a profile which, in that particular position, reminded him of a portrait of the philosopher Descartes!

He changed the conversation back to himself. "It's queer," he remarked, "that I can confide in you so completely about Gerda."

"Why?" she threw out.

"Don't you see that what I'm admitting is an unscrupulous desire to make love to your young friend?"

"Oh!" She uttered this exclamation in a faint, meditative sigh, like a wistful little wind sinking down among feathery reeds. "You mean that you might make her unhappy?"

He gave a deprecatory shake of the head.

"But you leave out so many things in all this," she went on. "You leave out the character of Gerda; and you leave out your own character, which, for all I know"—she spoke in a tone whose irony was barely perceptible—"may be so interesting that the advantage of contact with it might even counterbalance—your lack of scruple!"

Wolf withdrew his hands, which were clasped so close to Christie's elbows as almost to touch them. He inter-

locked his fingers now, round the back of his head, tilting his chair a little. "Forgive me, Miss Malakite," he said ruefully. "I do blunder into unpardonable lapses sometimes. I oughtn't to have said *that* to you . . . so bluntly. It's because I seem to have . . . a sort of . . . curiosity. At least I *think* it's curiosity!"

"It's all right. Don't you mind!" She spoke these words with a tenderness that was as gentle as a caress—a caress which might have been given to a disgraced animal that required reassuring; and as she spoke she leaned forward and made a little movement of her hand towards him. It was the faintest of gestures. Her fingers immediately afterwards lay clasped on her lap. But he did not miss the movement, and it pleased him well. Another thing he did not miss was that under any stress of emotion a certain wavering shapelessness in her countenance disappeared. Mouth, nose, cheeks, chin, all these features, chaotic and inchoate when left to themselves, at such moments attained a harmony of expression which approached, if it did not actually reach, the verge of the beautiful.

Wolf brought down his tilted chair upon the floor with a jerk.

"I'm forgiven then?" he said, and paused for a second, searching gravely in her brown eyes for a clue to her secret thoughts. "It must be all those books you read," he went on, "that makes you take my scandalous confessions so calmly." He stopped once more. "I suppose," he flung out, "the most amazing perversities wouldn't shock you in the least!" As soon as he had uttered these words he remembered what Darnley had told him, and he caught

his breath in dismay. But Christie Malakite gave no sign of being distressed. She even smiled faintly.

"I don't know," she said, "that it's my readings that have made me what I am. In a sense I *am* conventional. You're wrong there. But in another sense I am . . . what you might call . . . *outside the pale.*"

"Do you mean . . . inhuman?"

She turned this over gravely.

"I certainly don't like it when things get too human," she said. "That's probably why I can't *bear* the Bible. I like to be able to escape into parts of Nature that are lovely and cool, untouched and free."

Wolf nodded sympathetically; but he got up now to take his leave, and allowed these words of hers to float away unanswered. He allowed them, as he moved to the door, to sink down among the old-fashioned furniture about her, as if they were a chilly, moonlight dew mingling with warm, dusty sun-motes. His final impression was that the ancient objects in her room were pondering mutely and disapprovingly upon this fragile heathen challenge to the anthropomorphism of the Scriptures!

Once out in the street—and strangely enough before his mind reverted to Gerda at all—Wolf found himself recalling something he had hardly noticed at the time, but which now assumed a curious importance. Between the pages of the volume of the "Urn-Burial" which he had taken down from Christie's shelf, there had lain a grey feather. "Her marker, I suppose!" he said to himself, as he made his way back to the High Street.

But soon enough, now, in the hard metallic sunshine and the sharp wind, his obsession for the stone-cutter's

daughter rose up again and dominated his consciousness. With rapid strides he made his way through the chief thoroughfares of the town, witnessing on every side all manner of bustling lively preparations for the Saturday afternoon's marketing.

When he was within a few hundred yards of the Torp yard, he glanced at his watch and realized that he was still a good deal too early. It would be, he felt, a great blunder to present himself at that house, and find no Gerda! Looking around for a resting-place, he espied a small patch of grass behind some ricketty palings, in the centre of which was a stone water-trough. He clambered through the palings and sat down on the ground, with his back to this object. It was then, as he lit a cigarette, that he remembered that he had not yet read his letters.

He opened them one by one. They were both short. Miss Gault's ran as follows—

MY DEAR BOY:

If I were not so eccentric a person and *striking*, I may say, in more senses than one, I should take for granted that you had forgotten all about me—but since I know that both my manners and my cats *must* have made *some* impression upon you, I am not at all afraid of this! I am writing to ask you whether you will care to come over to tea with me on Sunday afternoon? I will not reveal in advance whether there will be only myself and my cats . . .

Yrs. affectionately,
SELENA GAULT.

Mrs. Solent's letter was even more laconic.

MY DEAREST WOLF:

Carter has begun to fuss about the rent. What does he think we are? And why did you run up that bill at Walpole's? That's the one kind of luxury which ought always to be paid for in cash. I have refused to pay till the Summer. Better let it be under-

stood that you're away on a holiday! I think I shall join you at King's Barton quite soon; in fact, as soon as you can assure me that you've discovered a clean, small cottage, with a neat, small garden. I think it will do me good to do a little gardening. How lovely, my dear, it will be to see you again!

Your loving mother,
ANN HAGGARD SOLENT.

Wolf pushed out his under-lip and drew down the corners of his mouth, as he replaced these two documents in his pocket. Then he got up upon his feet and shivered. He looked at his watch again. "I'll go in," he said to himself, "when it's five minutes to one."

He pulled his greatcoat tighter around him, and, removing his cloth-cap, sat down upon it very gravely, as if it had been a wishing-carpet.

The passers-by upon the pavement hardly turned to notice the bareheaded man with an oak-stick across his knees. They were Blacksod burgesses and had their own affairs to attend to. A tuft of vividly green grass grew between some uneven bricks in front of him; and he regarded its sturdy, transparent blades with concentrated interest.

"Grass and clay!" he thought to himself. "From clay to grass and then from grass to clay!" And once more that peculiar kind of shivering ran through him, which a coincidence of physical cold with amorous excitement is apt to produce, especially when some fatal step of unknown consequence is trembling in suspension.

And with extraordinary clearness he realized that particular moment in the passing of time, as he sat there, a hunched-up gaunt figure, wrapped in a faded brown overcoat, waiting with a beating heart his entrance to the yard of Mr. Torp.

His mind, after his fashion, conjured up in geographical simultaneousness all the scenes around him. He saw the long, low ridge of upland, on the east slope of which lay the village of King's Barton, and along the top of which ran the high-road linking together the scholastic retreats of Ramsgard with the shops and tanneries of Blacksod. He saw the rich, pastoral Dorsetshire valley on his right. He saw the willows and the reeds of the Somerset salt-marshes away there on his left. And it came into his mind how strange it was that while he at this moment was shivering with amorous expectation at the idea of entering that yard of half-made tombstones, far off in the Blackmore Vale many old ploughmen, weather-stained as the gates they were even now leisurely setting open, were moving their horses from one furrowed field to another after their midday's rest and meal. And probably almost all of them had relations who would come to Mr. Torp's yard on their behalf one day.

"I'll go to Miss Gault on Sunday," he said to himself, "and I'll look around for a place for mother."

Swinging his mind from these resolutions with an abrupt turn, emphasized by a dagger-like thrust into the earth with the end of his stick, he now struggled to his feet, and without glancing again at his watch, clambered over the palings and strode down the road.

The appearance of Torp's yard seemed to have changed in the night. It looked smaller, less imposing. The headstones themselves looked second-rate; but Wolf, as he made for the door, wondered which of them it was that had served the girl for a hobby-horse, and this doubt once more lent them dignity.

He knocked boldly at the door; but he had time, while the vibrations of the sound were dying down, to notice that there was a crack in one of the door-panels, and in the middle of this crack a tiny globule of dirty paint.

The door was opened by Mrs. Torp. There they all were, just beginning their meal! Gerda was evidently disposing of no small helping of Yorkshire pudding. But she swallowed her mouthful at one gallant gulp and regarded her admirer with a smile of pleasure.

The first words uttered by Wolf, when Mrs. Torp had shut the door behind him, were directed at the head of the family, whose mouth and eyes were simultaneously so wide open as to suggest sheer panic.

"I haven't come about business today. I only happened to be passing and I thought I'd look in. Mr. Urquhart was very pleased to hear how well you're getting on with that monument. I saw him last night."

Mr. Torp turned his countenance toward his wife, a proceeding which seemed to announce to everyone round the table that he was too cautious even to commit himself to a word, until reassured as to what was expected of him.

"Just passing, and thought to look in," repeated Mrs. Torp, avoiding her husband's appeal.

"We seed three girt woppers down to Willum's Mill. We dursn't pull 'em out, cos Mr. Manley his own self were casting. He were fishing proper, he were. But Bob says maybe Mr. Manley won't be at the job, come Monday. So then us'll try again."

These hurried words from young Lob eased the atmosphere a little.

Mrs. Torp looked at the sirloin in front of her husband and at the Yorkshire pudding in front of herself.

"Thought to look in," she repeated, resuming her seat.

Wolf began to feel something of a fool. He also began to feel extremely hungry. He laid his hand on the shoulder of the boy, and was on the point of saying something about perch and chub, to cover his embarrassment, when he detected a quick interchange of glances between mother and daughter, followed by the appearance of a faint flush on the girl's cheeks.

"Since you *were* passing, you'd be best to sit 'ee down and take a bit of summat," said the woman reluctantly. "Father, cut the young gentleman a slice. Get a plate from the dresser, Lob." Thus speaking, she thrust a chair beneath the table, with more violence than was necessary, and having added a very moderate portion of Yorkshire pudding to the immense slice of beef carved by the monument-maker, she caught up her own empty plate and retired into the scullery.

When once his guest was seated at the table, between the silent Gerda and himself, the obese stone-cutter relaxed into most free pleasantry.

"Injoy theeself like the wheel at the cistern, be my text, Mr. Redfern, I beg pardon, Mr. Solent. The Lord gives beef, but us must go to the Devil for sauce, as my granddad used to murmur. I warrant this meat were well fed and well killed, as you might say. 'Tain't always so wi' they Darset farmers."

Wolf listened in silence to these and other similar remarks while he ate his meal. He was so close to Gerda

that he could catch the faint susurration of her deep, even breathing.

"I'm glad she doesn't speak," he thought to himself, in that sensualized level of consciousness which is just below the threshold of mental words; "for unless I could talk to her alone——"

"And so thik beast went to the hammer." The thread of Mr. Torp's carnivorous discourse had begun to pass Wolf by, when the foregoing sentence fell like a veritable pole-axe upon his ear. Like a flash he recalled Selena Gault's words outside the slaughter-house. "Damn it!" he said to himself. "The woman's right."

"Be there any apple-tart, Mammie?" cried Lob, in a shrill voice.

The door of the scullery was opened about three inches, in which space the beckoning forefinger of Joan Torp summoned her son to her side.

Very slowly the beautiful profile on Wolf's right turned towards her father.

" 'Tisn't no use your coaxing of I, Missie," responded the stone-cutter. "What yer Mummie says, yer Mummie says. I reckon she's just got enough o' that there pasty to comfort Lob. Us and Mr. Redfern must swetten our bellies by talking sweet; and what's more, my pet, if I don't get out in thik yard afore I gets to sleep, there'll be no pleasing Squire *or* Mr. Manley!"

Saying this, the man rose from his chair, glanced at Wolf with a leer like the famous uncle of Cressid, and shuffled out of the house, closing the door behind him.

Wolf and Gerda were left alone, seated side by side in uncomfortable silence. He moved his chair back a little

and glanced toward the scullery-door. The voice of the woman and her son reached him in an obscure murmur. His eye caught the devastated piece of meat at the end of the table and it brought to his mind the terrifying story of how the flesh of the Oxen of the Sun uttered articulate murmurs as the companions of Odysseus roasted it at their impious camp-fire.

"I *must* say something," he thought. "This silence is beginning to grow comic."

He began to search his pockets for cigarettes. It seemed absurd to ask leave of this young girl, and yet it was likely enough that her shrewish mother detested tobacco.

"You don't mind if I smoke?" he said.

Gerda smilingly shook her head.

"I suppose you've often been told that you're as lovely as the girl who was the cause of the Trojan War?"

"What a way of breaking the ice!" he thought to himself, and felt a pang of mental humiliation. "If the wench is going to dull my wits to this extent, I'll miss my chance and be just where I was yesterday." Under cover of what Darnley had called the girl's terrible passivity, which was indeed just then like the quiescence of a great unpicked white phlox in a sun-warmed garden, he lit his cigarette and ransacked his brain for a line of action.

Desperately he hit upon the most obvious one. "Have you got anything to put on within reach?" he whispered rapidly. "I want to see something more of you. Let's step out while we've got the chance and go for a stroll somewhere!"

The girl remained for a moment in motionless indecision, listening intently to the murmuring voices in the

scullery. Then, with a grave nod, she rose to her feet and stepped lightly to a curtained recess, behind which she vanished. Returning in less than a minute she presented herself in hat and cloak.

Wolf, trembling with a nervous excitement that made his stomach feel sick, seized his own coat and stick and moved boldly to the door.

"Come on!" he whispered. "Come on!"

They slipped out together and the girl closed the door behind them with cautious celerity.

The stone-cutter's chisel could be heard in his open shed; but his back must have been turned to them, and they did not cast a glance in his direction. Into the street they passed, Wolf taking care not to let the latch of the gate click. Instinctively he led his captive to the right, away from the town. They walked rapidly side by side, and Wolf noted with surprise the absence of finery in the things worn by his silent companion. The hat was of cream-coloured felt surrounded by a blue band; the cloak of some soft plain stuff, also cream-coloured. Wolf kept walking a good deal faster than circumstances seemed to demand, but he repeatedly fancied he heard the light steps of the intrusive Lob running in pursuit of them.

Before long they reached a place where a broad road branched to the left at the foot of a considerable hill. Wolf had not remembered passing this turn on the preceding day; but his attention must have been occupied with the row of little villas on the other side.

Following his instinct again, he turned up this road and slackened his pace. Still his companion remained perfectly silent; but she appeared quite untroubled by

the rapidity of their movement, and she swung along by his side lightly and easily, every now and then brushing the budding hedge on her right with her bare hand.

For about half a mile they advanced up the long, steady hill, meeting no one and seeing nothing but snatches of sloping meadow-land as they passed various five-barred gates.

Then there came a turn to the left, and all of a sudden, over a well-worn wooden stile, the top bar of which was shiny as a piece of old furniture, they found themselves overlooking the whole town of Blacksod, and, away beyond that, the pollard-bordered course of the sluggish Lunt, as it crossed the invisible border-line between Dorset and Somerset.

"What do you call this hill, Missie?" he murmured, as he recovered his breath. It seemed impertinent to use her Christian name quite so quickly; but no stretch of politeness could have induced him just then to utter the syllable Torp.

"Babylon Hill," she replied quite naturally and easily; for she was less out of breath than he.

"Babylon? What an extraordinary name!" he cried. "Why Babylon?"

But at that she shrugged her young shoulders and contemplated the blue distances of Somersetshire. To her mind the extraordinary thing evidently was that anyone could be surprised that Babylon Hill was called Babylon Hill!

From the stile over which they were leaning a little field-path ran along the sloping greensward and lost itself in a small hazel-copse that overshadowed one end

of a rounded table-land of turf-covered earthworks.

"Come on," he cried. "Skip over, child; and let's see where *that* leads!"

She swung herself across without any assistance, and Wolf noticed that in the open country the movements of her body were entirely free from languor or voluptuousness. They became the swift, unconscious movements of a very healthy young animal.

"Has *this* got any name?" he remarked, as they clambered up the turfy slope of the grassy rampart.

"Poll's Camp," she answered. And then, after a pause,

> "When Poll his rain-cap has got on
> They'll get their drink at Dunderton!"

She repeated this in the peculiar sing-song drawl of a children's game.

There was something in her intonation that struck Wolf as queerly touching. It didn't harmonize with her lady-like attire. It suggested the simple finery of a thousand West Country fairs.

"Poll-Poll-Poll," he repeated. And there came over him a deep wonder about the origin of this laborious piece of human toil. Were they Celts or Romans who actually, with their blunt primitive spades, had changed the face of this hill? Was this silent beautiful girl beside him the descendant of some Ionian soldier who had come in the train of the legionaries?

Dallying with these thoughts—which probably would never have come into his head at all, if a certain childishness in the girl hadn't, in a very subtle manner, lessened the bite of his lust—Wolf was slower than she in reaching the top of the ridge. When he did reach the top,

and looked down into the rounded hollow below, he was astonished to see no sign of his companion.

"Good Lord!" he thought, "has she gone round to the right or to the left?"

He ran down into the bottom of the little artificial valley and stood hesitating.

How like a child, to play him a trick of this kind!

His thoughts shaped themselves quickly now. His hope of finding her depended on how far he could sound her basic instincts. If she were of a hare-like nature she would double on her tracks, which in this case would mean turning to the left or right; if she were of the feline tribe she would pursue her course, which in this case would mean climbing the opposing earthwork. Wolf turned to the right and followed the narrow green hollow as it wound round the hill.

Ah, there she was!

Gerda lay supine, her arms outstretched, her cream-coloured hat clutched tight in one of her hands, her knees bare.

She waited till Wolf was so close that he could see that her eyes were shut. Then, catching the vibration of his tread upon the turf, she leapt to her feet and was off again, running like Atalanta, and soon vanishing from sight. Wolf pursued her; but he thought to himself, "I won't run *quite* as fast as I could! She'll better enjoy being caught if she has had a good race."

As a matter of fact, so swift-footed was the damsel that by following this method of leisurely pursuit he soon lost her altogether. The hollow trench ran straight into the heart of a thick coppice which from this point out-

wards had overgrown the whole of the camp. Here, in the heavy undergrowth, composed of brambles, elder-bushes, dead bracken, stunted sycamores, and newly budded hazels, all ordinary paths disappeared completely. All he could have done was to have followed obstinately the bottom of the trench; and that was so overgrown that it was unbelievable she should have forced a way there. But if he didn't follow the trench, where the devil should he go? Where, under the sky, had *she* gone? "The earth hath bubbles as the water hath," he quoted to himself, amused, irritated, and completely nonplussed. Teased into doing what he knew was the last thing calculated to bring her back, he began calling her name; at first gently and hesitatingly; at last loudly and indignantly. The girl, no doubt panting like a hunted fawn somewhere quite close to him, must have been especially delighted by this issue to the affair; for one of the peculiarities of Poll's Camp was the presence of an echo; and now, over and over again, this echo taunted him. "Ger-da—Ger-da!" it flung across the valley.

He would have been more philosophical at this juncture if he hadn't, at that brief moment of overtaking her, caught sight of those incredibly white knees. But the impatience in his senses was at least mitigated by his appreciation of the immemorial quality of his pursuit! He looked round helplessly and whimsically at the thick undergrowth and sturdy hazel-twigs; and he played with the fancy that, like another Daphne or Syrinx, his maid might have undergone some miraculous vegetable transformation.

"Ger—da! Ger—da!" The echo returned to him again; whereupon once more, the image of those bare knees destroyed the spirit of philosophical patience.

But he sat down then, with his back against a young sycamore, and lit a cigarette, wrapping his overcoat carefully round him and resolving to make the best of a bad job.

"If she *has* run away from me," he thought, "and just gone back to Chequers Street, there's no doubt she'll come out with me again. She certainly seemed at ease with me." Thus spoke one voice within him. Another voice said: "She thinks you're the father of all fools. You'll never have the gall to ask her to go out with you again." And then as he extinguished his third cigarette against a piece of chalk, moving aside the tiny green buds of an infinitesimal spray of milkwort, he became aware that a blackbird, in the dark twilight of hazel-stems, was uttering notes of an extraordinary purity and poignance.

He listened, fascinated. That particular intonation of the blackbird's note, more full of the spirits of air and of water than any sound upon earth, had always possessed a mysterious attraction for him. It seemed to hold, in the sphere of sound, what amber-paved pools surrounded by hart's-tongue ferns contain in the sphere of substance. It seemed to embrace in it all the sadness that it is possible to experience without crossing the subtle line into the region where sadness becomes misery.

He listened, spellbound, forgetting hamadryads, Daphne's pearl-white knees and everything.

The delicious notes hovered through the wood—hov-

ered over the scented turf where he lay—and went wavering down the hollow valley. It was like the voice of the very spirit of Poll's Camp, unseduced by Roman or by Saxon, pouring forth to a sky whose peculiar tint of indescribable greyness exactly suited the essence of its identity, the happiness of that sorrow which knows nothing of misery. Wolf sat entranced, just giving himself up to listen; forgetting all else. He was utterly unmusical; and it may have been for that very reason that the quality of certain sounds in the world melted the very core of his soul. Certain sounds could do it; not very many. But the blackbird's note was one of them. And then it was that without rising from the ground he straightened his back against the sycamore-tree and got furiously red under his rugged cheeks. Even his tow-coloured hair, protruding from the front of his cap, seemed conscious of his humiliation. Waves of electricity shivered through it; while beads of perspiration ran down his forehead into his scowling eyebrows.

For he realized, in one rush of shame, that Gerda was the blackbird!

He realized this before she made a sound other than that long-sustained tremulous whistle. He realized it instantaneously by a kind of sudden absolute knowledge, like a slap in the face.

And then, immediately afterwards, she came forward, quite calmly and coolly, pushing aside the hazels and the elder-bushes.

He found her a different being, when she stood there in front of him, smiling down upon him and removing bits of moss and twigs from her hair. She had lost some-

thing from the outermost sheath of her habitual reserve; and like a plant that has unloosed its perianth she displayed some inner petal of her personality that had, until that moment, been quite concealed from him.

"*Gerda!*" he exclaimed reproachfully, too disordered to assume any sagacious reticence; "how on earth did you learn to whistle like that?"

She continued placidly to clear the wood-rubble out of her fair hair; and the only reply she vouchsafed to his question was to toss down her cream-coloured hat at his feet.

Very deliberately, when her hair was in order, she proceeded to lift up the hem of her skirt and pick out the burs from that. Then she quickly turned away from him. "Brush my back, will you?" she said.

He had to get up upon his feet at this; but he obeyed her with all patience, carefully removing from the cream-coloured jacket every vestige of her escapade.

"There!" he said, when he had finished; and taking her by the shoulders, he swung her around.

In the very act of doing this he had determined to kiss her; but something about the extraordinary loveliness of her face, when she did confront him, deterred him.

This was a surprise to himself at the moment; but later, analyzing it, he came to the conclusion that although beauty, up to a certain point, is provocative of lust, beyond a certain point it is destructive of lust; and it is this, whether the possessor of such beauty be in a chaste mood or not.

If only—so he thought to himself later—Gerda's face had been a little less flawless in its beauty, the

beauty of her body would have remained as maddening to his senses as it was at the beginning. But the more he had seen of her the more beautiful her face had grown; until it had now reached that magical level of loveliness which absorbs with a kind of absoluteness the whole æsthetic sense, paralyzing the erotic sensibility.

Instead of kissing her he sat down again with his back to the sycamore; while Gerda, lying on her stomach at his feet, her chin propped upon the palms of her hands, began to talk to him in unconscious, easy, almost boyish freedom.

"I wouldn't have run away," she said, "so you needn't scold. I *would* have if it had been anyone else. I always *do* run away. I hide first and then slip off. Father's quite tired of seeing me come back into the yard after I've started for a walk with someone. That's because I always like people at the beginning, when they're frightened of me and don't try to touch me. But when they stop being frightened, and get familiar, I just hate them. Can you understand what I mean, or can't you?"

Wolf surveyed the beautiful face in front of him and recalled what Darnley had said about the three lovers.

"But, Gerda——" he began.

"Well?" she said, smiling. "Say it out! I know it's something bad."

"You must have had *some* love-affairs, being the sort of girl you are. You can't make me believe you've always run away."

She nodded her head vigorously.

"I have," she said. "I have, always. Though the boys I know never will believe it. Directly they touch me I run

away. I want them to want me. It's a lovely feeling to be wanted like that. It's like floating on a wave. But when they try any of their games, messing a person about and rumpling a person's clothes, I can't bear it. I *won't* bear it, either!"

Wolf lifted his thick eyebrows and let them fall again, wrinkling them so that a great puckered fold established itself above his hooked nose. His ruddy face, under its rough crop of coarse, bleached hair, resembled a red sandstone cliff on the top of which a whitish-yellow patch of withered grass bowed before the wind.

The girl clambered to her feet, and, smoothing out her skirt beneath her, sat down on the ground by his side, hugging her knees.

"I found out I could whistle like that," she began again, this time in a slow, meditative voice, "when I used to play with Bob in the Lunt ditches, down Longmead. I fooled him endless times doing different birds. Listen to this. Do you know what this is?" And with her mouth pursed up into the form of a crimson sea-anemone, she imitated the cry of the female plover when any strange foot, of man or beast, approaches her nest on the ground.

"Wonderful!" cried Wolf, enraptured by that long-drawn familiar scream borne away upon the wind. "How *did* you learn to do it?"

"I fooled Bob with that; but I fooled Dick—he was an Oxford gentleman—with a silly owl's-hooting which old Bob would have known at once."

"Did you let the Oxford gentleman make love to you, Gerda?"

As soon as he had uttered the words, he felt a sense of shame that was like a pricking sore lodged under the cell-lobes in the front of his brain.

"There—don't answer!" he whispered hurriedly. "That was a gross remark of mine."

But the half-profile which she had turned upon him showed no traces of anger.

"I told you, didn't I?" was all she said. "I ran away. I hid. I hid in the hedge under Ramsbottom. Dick was furious. He went past me several times. I heard him damning me like a serjeant—Ramsbottom's miles away. We'd taken our lunch. He had to go home without me and he told mother. Mother hit me with the broom when I got back. Dick was an 'honourable'; so Mother wanted me to marry him."

Wolf was reduced to silence. He watched the flutterings of a greenfinch over some young elder-bush saplings. Then he turned towards her and spoke with solemn emphasis.

"I wish you'd make that blackbird-noise for me now, Gerda."

He detected from her expression that this was a crisis between them. Her smile was suspended and hung like a faltering wraith over every feature of her face. She seemed to hesitate; and her hesitation brought a depth into her eyes that darkened their colour so that they became a deep violet.

"I've never *once* whistled for anybody," she said slowly.

Wolf sent a wordless cry of appeal down into the abysses of his consciousness. They were ready to help

him, those powers in the hidden levels of his being. They responded to his cry and he knew that they responded. In the repetition of his request there was a magnetic tone of power that reassured himself.

"Come on, Gerda!" he said. "That's all the more reason. Come on! Whistle that song!"

Turning her face away from him, so that he could see nothing of her mouth, she began at once.

He could hardly believe his ears. It was like a miracle. It was as if she had swiftly summoned one of those yellow-beaked birds out of its leafy retreat. It seemed easier that a bird should be decoyed out of a wood than that a human throat should utter actual unmistakable bird-notes.

"Go on! Go on!" cried Wolf, in an ecstasy of pleasure, the moment there was any cessation of this stream of cool, liquid, tremulous melody.

Over the turf-ramparts of Poll's Camp it swelled and sank, that wistful, immortal strain. Away down the grassy slopes it floated forth upon the March wind. No conceivable sky but one of that particular greyness could have formed the right kind of roof for the utterance of this sound. Wolf cared nothing that the whistler kept her face turned aside as she whistled. He gave himself up so completely to the voice, that the girl Gerda became no more than a voice herself. At length it did really cease, and silence seemed to fall down upon that place like large grey feathers from some inaccessible height.

Both the man and the girl remained absolutely motionless for a while.

Then Gerda leapt to her feet.

"Let's go down to Longmead and watch the water-rats swim the Lunt!" she cried. "We can get down there from here easily. There's a lovely little field-path I know. And we shan't meet anyone; for Bob and Lobbie are going to Willum's Mill."

Wolf rose stiffly. He had sat so long in petrified delight that he was a little cramped. His mind felt drugged and cramped too, and felicitously stupid.

"Wherever you like, Gerda dear," he said, looking at her with hypnotized admiration.

She took him by the hand, and together they climbed the embankment.

The wind was gentler now, and a very curious diffusion of thin, watery, greenish light seemed to have melted into the grey stretches of sky above their heads. The immense Somersetshire plain, with patches of olive-green marsh-land and patches of moss-green meadow-land, lost itself in a pale, sad horizon, where, like a king's sepulchre, rose the hill-ruin of Glastonbury. The path by which Gerda guided him down to the valley was indeed an ideal one for two companions who desired no interruption. Starting from a pheasants' "drive" in the lower half of the hazel-copse, it wound its way down the incline along a series of grassy terraces dotted by patches of young bracken-fronds that had only very recently sprouted up among the great dead brown leaves.

Arrived at the foot of the hill, they struck a narrow cattle-drove where the deep winter-ditches were still full of water and where huge half-fallen willow-trunks lay across old lichen-covered palings.

Advancing up this lane hand in hand with his companion, Wolf felt his soul invaded by that peculiar kind of melancholy which emanates, at the end of a spring day, from all the elements of earth and water. It is a sadness unlike all others, and has perhaps some mysterious connection with the swift, sudden recognition, by myriads and myriads of growing things, of the strange fatality that pursues all earthly life, whether clothed in flesh or clothed in vegetable fibre. It is a sadness accentuated by grey skies, grey water, and grey horizons; but it does not seem to attain its most significant meaning until the pressure of the Spring adds to these elemental wraiths the intense wistfulness of young new life.

It seemed to Wolf, as they plodded along side by side through that muddy lane, that the light-green buds of those aged willow-trunks were framed in a more appropriate setting under that cold forlorn sky than any sunshine could give to them. Later seasons would warm them and cherish them. November rains would turn them yellow and bring them down into the mud.

But no other sky would hang above them with the cold floating weight of sadness as this one did—a weight like a mass of grey seaweed beneath a silent sea. No other sky would be cold enough and motionless enough to actually *listen* to the rising of the green sap within them, that infinitesimal flowing, flowing, flowing, that for non-human ears must have made strange low gurglings and susurrations all day long.

At last they came to the bank of the river Lunt.

"Hush!" whispered Gerda. "Don't make a noise! It's

so lovely when you can make a water-rat flop in and see it swim across."

It was along the edge of a small tributary full of marsh-marigolds that they approached the river-bank. Gerda was so impatient to hear a water-rat splash that she scarcely glanced at these great yellow orbs rising from thick, moist, mud-stained stalks and burnished leaves; but to Wolf, as he passed them by, there came rushing headlong out of that ditch, like an invisible company of tossing-maned air-horses, a whole wild herd of ancient memories! Indescribable! Indescribable! They had to do with wild rain-drenched escapes beneath banks of sombre clouds, of escapes along old backwaters and by forsaken sea-estuaries, of escapes along wet, deserted moor-paths and by sighing pond-reeds; along melancholy quarry-pools and by quagmires of livid moss. Indescribable! Indescribable! But memories of this kind were—and he had long known it!—the very essence of his life. They were more important to him than any outward event. They were more sacred to him than any living person. They were his friends, his gods, his secret religion. Like a mad botanist, like a crazed butterfly-collector, he hunted these filmy growths, these wild wanderers, and stored them up in his mind. For what purpose did he store them up? For *no* purpose! And yet these things were connected in some mysterious way with that mythopœic fatality which drove him on and on and on.

"There's one! There's one! There's one! Oh, throw something to make it go faster. Throw something! Quick!

Quick! Quick! No—I don't mean to *hit* it. I don't mean to *hurt* it. To make it swim faster! There! I *can't* throw straight. Oh, do look at its head breathing and puffing! Oh, what ripples it makes!"

Conjured in this way to join in this sport, Wolf did pick up an enormous piece of wet mud and hurled it in the trail of the swimming rat.

The muddy ripples from this missile came rushing up behind that pointed little head, came splashing against those pointed little ears. Gerda clasped her hands. "Swim! Swim! Swim!" she called out; and then in her excitement she pouted her mouth into a reed-mouth and uttered a long, strange, low, liquid cry that was like no sound Wolf had ever heard in his life.

"It's gone! It's done it!" she sighed at last, when the rat, emerging from the water without so much as one shake of its sleek sides, slid off along its mud-channel to its bed in the reed-roots. "It's gone! And you *did* make it swim! I liked to see it. Let's go rat-swimming often. It's wonderful!"

She began walking along the river-bank in the direction leading away from Blacksod, gazing intently and rapturously at the sluggish brown stream.

Wolf followed her, but he surreptitiously glanced at his watch, and discovered, as he suspected, that it was already late in the afternoon.

"You can't tell when twilight begins," he thought to himself, "when the sky is *all* twilight."

"Hush!" The sound reached him rather by implication than by ear. But the girl had crouched down under an

overhanging alder and was staring at the water, her long cream-coloured arms supporting half the weight of her body.

He sat down himself and waited patiently. It satisfied his nature with an ineffable satisfaction to watch that steady flow of the brown water, gurgling round the willow-roots and the muddy concavities of the bank. He felt glad that the Lunt, where he was now watching it, had left the town behind and was now to meet with nothing else really contaminating until it mingled with the Bristol Channel. He had already begun to feel a peculiar personal friendliness toward this patient muddy stream; and it gave him pleasure to think that its troubles were really over, when itself might so easily be fearing another Blacksod somewhere between these green meadows and the salt sea to which it ran! Looking quite as intently at these brown waters as Gerda herself was doing, it occurred to him how different a thing the personality of a river is from the personality of a sea. The water of the sea, though broken up into tides and waves, really remains the same identical mass of waters; whereas the water of a river is at every succeeding moment a completely different body. No particles of it are ever the same, unless they get waylaid in some side-stream or ditch or weir.

Wolf tried to visualize the whole course of the Lunt, so as to win for it some sort of coherent personality. By thinking *of all its waters together,* from start to finish, this unity could be achieved; for between the actual water before him now, into which he could thrust his hand, and the water of that tiny streamlet among the

mid-Dorset hills from which it sprung, there was no spacial gap. The one flowed continuously into the other. They were as completely united as the head and tail of a snake! The more he stared at the Lunt the more he liked the Lunt. He liked its infinite variety; the extraordinary number of its curves and hollows and shelving ledges and pools and currents; the extraordinary variety of organic patterns in the roots and twigs and branches and land-plants and water-plants which diversified its course.

While he was thinking all this he had turned his attention away from Gerda; but now, glancing up the river, he was struck by a gleam of living whiteness amid the greenery. The huntress of water-rats had slipped off her shoes and stockings and was dabbling her bare feet in the chilly brown water. Her face was bent down. She was not being provocative this time. He felt sure of that. Or, if so, the provocation was directed to something older and less rational than the senses of man. She was giving way to some immemorial girlish desire to expose warm, naked limbs to the cold embraces of the elements.

He rose to his feet, and, moving slowly up to her side, sat down by her. He was struck by the fact that she made no movement to pull her skirts down over her knees. But once again he was made aware, he could not quite tell how, that there was no provocation in this. She had indeed, as Darnley had said, something of the "terrible passivity" of the famous daughter of Leda. Certainly Wolf had never seen, in picture, in marble, or in life, anything as flawless as the loveliness thus revealed to him. It was amazing to him that she did not shiver with the cold. The whole scene, as the hour of twilight grew near, had that

kind of unblurred enamelled distinctness such as one sees in the work of certain old English painters. The leaf-buds of the alder under which she sat were of that shade of green that seems to have something almost unnatural in its metallic opacity; and the line of southern sky against which the opposite bank was outlined was of that livid steel-grey which seems to hold within it a suppressed whiteness, like the whiteness of a sword that lies in shadow.

"You're sure you're not cold?" Wolf asked.

"Of course I'm cold, silly! I'm doing this *to* feel cold!"

"What a sensualist you are!"

"Better say nothing if you can't say anything nicer than that."

"Gerda."

"Well?"

"Have you enjoyed yourself today?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you been happy today?"

She did not answer.

All about those white ankles and those white knees the greenness of the earth gathered—the greyness of the sky descended. It was as if such vague non-human powers, made up of green shadows and grey shadows, drew the girl back and away—back and away from all his human words, back and away from all his personal desires.

Commonplace and irrelevant seemed both his sentiment and his cunning in the face of these two great silent Presences—that of the earth and that of the sky—which were closing in upon her and upon himself.

But it was getting too cold. He must make her put on her things and come home.

"That's enough now," he said. "On with your stockings, like a good girl. I don't know when your people expect you back; but anyhow I mustn't keep Mrs. Otter waiting."

He took her by the wrist and pulled her up the bank. Then he began vigorously rubbing her ice-cold ankles with his hands.

"You do take care of me nicely," she said, when finally he pulled her frock over her knees and smoothed out the wrinkles from her cream-coloured coat. "Bob never used to stop for a minute. He was always doing up his tackle or washing his fish or something. And if I *did* ask him to stop he thought I wanted him to mess me about—you know?—when it was only, like now, that I just *couldn't* get my boots on! They get so stiff and funny when you take them off. I never understand why."

But Wolf's mind was in no mood to deal with the abstract problem of damp leather. He was wondering in his heart whether Gerda's mania for water-rats had anything to do with the close resemblance between Mr. Weevil and these harmless rodents.

"What we've got to think about now," he said, "is the shortest way to Blacksod."

"Oh, don't worry! We can be at my house in three-quarters of an hour and then you can take the short-cut to Barton."

Wolf was very much struck by the competent geographical skill with which she now proceeded to guide him, over hedge and over ditch, until they reached a navigable lane.

"We'll be home in half an hour now," she said, and the two walked rapidly side by side between the cold, fresh shoots of the hawthorn-hedges and the dark sheen of the celandine-leaves.

"I think I'd be all right now, married to *you*," said Gerda, suddenly.

She made the remark in as unemotional and matter-of-fact a tone as if she had said, "I think I'd be all right now if I used low-heeled boots."

In that chilly twilight, with the white mist rising around them, everything seemed so phantasmal, that this surprising observation gave him no kind of shock. But he did remember how startled he had felt when Christie Malakite introduced the same idea.

"I wonder how I should feel married to *you!*" murmured Wolf in response, deliberately putting a nuance of irresponsible lightness into his tone.

"I think we'd get on splendidly," she retorted, with an emphasis that was more boyish than girlish. They walked for a while in silence after this, and Wolf became vividly aware how completely a definite responsible project of such a kind tended to break the delicious spell of care-free intimacy. It broke it for him, anyway. But it must have been just the reverse with her. The beauty of the situation with her evidently had to find its justification in some continuity of events beyond the mere pleasure of the passing moment.

But it was impossible to prevent his thoughts hovering round this bold idea, now it *had* been flung into the air. Christie Malakite had been the first to toss the fatal little

puffball upon the wind. *She* had done it with the utmost gravity, the gravity of some remote being altogether outside the stream of events. He remembered the peculiar steady look of her brown eyes as she uttered the words. But that this airy nothing of speculation should have received a new impetus from Gerda herself was another matter. He began to wonder what kind of relations existed between these two young girls.

Splashing up the water from a puddle on his right with the end of his stick, he hazarded a direct question on this point.

"I had tea yesterday with Christie Malakite," he said, "and she told me she was a friend of yours. I liked her so very much."

"Oh, I shan't ever be jealous of Christie!" was his companion's reply to this. "I don't care if you have tea with Christie every day of your life. *She's for no man,* as the game says."

"What game, Gerda?"

"Oh, don't you know? That old game! Kids play it together. *We* called it 'Boys and Girls'; but likely enough where you come from they call it something else! But it's the same old game, I reckon."

"Why do you say Christie Malakite's 'for no man,' Gerda?"

"Don't ask so many questions, Mr. Wolf Solent. *That's* your fault—asking questions! *That's* what'll make me cross when we're married, more than anything else."

"But it's such a queer expression—'She's for no man.'

Does it mean she's got lovers who aren't human? Does it mean she's got demon lovers?"

He spoke in a mocking, exaggerated manner, and his tone was irritating to his companion.

"Men think too much of themselves," she replied laconically. "I like Christie very much and she likes me very much."

This silenced Wolf; and they walked together in less harmony than at any previous moment in that afternoon.

They hit the town by a narrow alley between the town-hall and Chequers Street. Wolf looked at his watch and compared it with the town-hall clock. It was a quarter past six. There was still plenty of time for him to reach Pond Cottage before eight, when the Otters dined.

They drifted slowly down Chequers Street, Gerda making all manner of quaint, humorous remarks about the people and things they passed; and yet, through it all, Wolf was perfectly aware that she had not forgiven him the hard, frivolous tone he had adopted about her friend. That she was able to chatter and delay as she was now doing had something magnanimously pathetic and even boyish about it. Most girls, as he well knew, would have punished him for the little discordance between them by hurrying home in silence and shutting him out without the comfort of any further appointments. To act in any other way would have seemed to such minds to be lacking in proper pride. But Gerda appeared to have no pride at all in this sense. Or was it that her pride was really something that actually did resemble that high, passive nonchalance which permitted the old classical

women to speak of themselves quite calmly, as if they were external to themselves; as if they saw their life as an irresponsible fate upon which they could, as it were, lie back without incurring any human blame?

They said good-bye at the gate of Torp's yard; and when Wolf enquired how soon he could see her again, "Oh, any day you like, except tomorrow and Monday," she replied. "I've enjoyed myself very much," she added, as she held out her hand. "I'm glad you made me go."

Wolf was on the point of asking her what her engagements were on Sunday and Monday; but he thought better of it in time, and taking off his cap and waving his stick he turned and strode away.

It was very nearly dark when the last little villa on the King's Barton road was left behind.

He walked slowly forward under a starless sky, revolving his adventure. He recognized clearly enough that his first infatuation had changed its quality not a little. Gerda was now not only a maddeningly desirable girl. She was a girl with a definite personality of her own. That bird-like whistling! Never had he known such a thing was possible! It accounted as nothing else could do for her queer, unembarrassed silences. In fact, it was the expression of her silences—and not only of hers! It was, as he recalled its full effect upon him, the expression of just those mysterious silences in Nature which all his life long he had, so to speak, waited upon and worshipped. That strange whistling was the voice of those green pastures and those blackthorn-hedges, not as they were when human beings were conscious of them, but as

they were in that indescribable hour just before dawn, when they awoke in the darkness to hear the faint, faint stirrings—upon the air—of the departing of the non-human powers of the night!

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that it was with quite a startled leap of the heart that he became conscious of hurried, uneven steps behind him. What kind of steps were they? They didn't sound like the steps of a grown-up person—either man or woman—they were so light in the dark road. And yet somehow they didn't resemble the footsteps of a child. Wolf became aware of an odd feeling of uneasiness. With all his habitual mysticism he was a man little subject to what are called *psychic* impressions. Yet on this occasion he could not help a somewhat discomfortable beating of his heart. The last thing he desired was to be overtaken by something unearthly on that pleasant Dorset road! Had the extraordinary phenomenon of the girl's whistling unsettled his nerves more than he realized?

His first simple and cowardly instinct was to quicken his own steps. In fact, it was with a quite definite effort that he prevented himself from setting off at a run! What was it? Who was it? He listened intently as he walked; and this listening in itself induced him to diminish his speed rather than to increase it.

At last the mysterious maker of this uncertain wavering series of footsteps arrived close at his heels.

Wolf swung round, grasping his stick tightly. Nothing on earth could have prevented a certain strained unnaturalness in his voice as he challenged this pursuer.

"Hullo!" he cried.

There was no answer, and the figure came steadily along till it was parallel with him.

Then he did, in a rush of relief, recognize this night-walker's identity.

Even in the darkness he recognized that shabby, derelict personality he had seen in the street with Lob Torp the day before. It was the Vicar of King's Barton!

He was surprised afterwards at this sudden recognition; though it was not the only occasion in his life when he had used a kind of sixth sense.

But whatever may have been its cause, Wolf's clairvoyance on this occasion was not shared by his overtaker.

"It . . . is . . . very . . . dark . . . tonight," said the clergyman, in a voice so husky and hoarse that it resembled the voice attributed to the discomposed visage of the King of Chaos by the poet Milton.

Wolf's own voice was quite natural now.

"So dark that I took *you* for some kind of ghost," he said grimly.

"Hee! Hee! Hee!" The Vicar laughed with the laugh of a man who makes a mechanical, appreciative noise. This hollow sound would doubtless have passed harmlessly enough in the daylight. In the darkness it was ghastly.

"You came up very quickly," remarked Wolf. "You must be a good walker, Mr. Valley."

"Who . . . are . . . you . . . if . . . you . . . don't . . . mind . . . my . . . asking?"

"Not at all, Mr. Valley. I am the new secretary at the Squire's."

The man stopped dead-still in the road; and, in natural politeness, Wolf stopped too.

"You are . . . the . . . other . . . one . . . Then . . . I . . . must . . . see you later . . . I buried him. . . . I said prayers for him every day . . . He . . . was . . . very kind to me. I must see you . . . later. . . ." Having uttered these words, the Vicar seemed to gather up out of the dark some new kind of strength; for he moved forward by Wolf's side with a firmer step.

For nearly half a mile they walked side by side in silence.

Then the quavering voice out of the obscurity began again.

"Valley . . . is my name. . . . You've got it quite right. T. E. Valley. . . . I . . . drink more than's good for me. . . . I'm a little drunk tonight . . . but you'll excuse me. In the dark it isn't noticeable. But you're quite right. T. E. Valley is quite right. I was in the Eleven at Ramsgard. . . . I play still. . . . I play with the boys. . . ."

Once more there was no sound but that of the two men's feet in the road and the thud—thud—thud of Wolf's stick.

Then the voice recommenced. "The poor people here are very kind to me . . . very kind to T. E. Valley. But for the rest . . ."

He again stopped dead-still in the road and Wolf stopped with him.

"For the rest . . . except . . . Darnley . . . they are

all . . . You won't tell them, will you? They are all devils! Devils! Devils!" His voice rose in a kind of helpless fury. Then, after a moment's pause: "But they can't hurt T. E. Valley. None of 'em can . . . drunk or sober . . . and that's because I'm God's Priest in this place. . . . God's Priest, Sir! However you like to take it!"

This final outburst seemed to restore the shadowy little man to his senses; for until Wolf brought him to the gate of the Vicarage and bade him farewell there, his words became steadily more coherent—his intonation more normal and more sober.

The door of Pond Cottage was opened for Wolf by Dimity Stone.

"I've kept dinner back till it's as good as ruined," grumbled the old woman.

"Where are——" Wolf began.

"In there . . . waiting!" she answered, as she moved off.

He opened the drawing-room door.

"I am so very sorry, Mrs. Otter," he said humbly.

They all rose from their seats; but it was Jason who spoke first.

"*Everything's* only waiting," he chuckled grimly. "That sofa is a better place for waiting than a headmaster's study!"

"My son doesn't mean that you've kept us a minute," said Mrs. Otter. "Dimity's only just ready. But we'll sit down at the table while you wash your hands; so that you can feel quite happy."

"Don't be long, Solent!" cried Darnley, as Wolf turned to go upstairs. "Mother won't let us touch a morsel till you come."

As he entered his bedroom he heard Mrs. Otter's voice. "Dimity! Dimity! We're quite ready!" And then, just as he was closing the door, he caught something about "these secretaries" from Jason.

BREAKFAST IN POND COTTAGE ON THAT SUNDAY MORNING proved to be the pleasantest meal that Wolf had yet enjoyed under the Otter roof.

Mrs. Otter, dressed in stiff puce-coloured silk, and happy to have both her sons at the table, spoke at some length to their guest about the morning service in the church to which she and Darnley were presently to go. She explained to him how much she liked the quiet, reverent manner in which Mr. Valley conducted the worship of the parish.

"He makes me sad at other times," she said. "He's an unhappy little man; and everyone knows how he drinks. He ought to have a wife to look after him, or at least a housekeeper. He's got no one in the house. How he gets enough to eat I can't imagine."

"Mother thinks no household can get on for a day without a woman in it," said Darnley.

Jason Otter's pallid face reddened a little. "Of course, we know he wants to be the only man that any of the village-boys admire. It's human nature—that's what it is. These country clergymen are all the same."

"There are the bells!" cried Mrs. Otter, thankful for the opportunity of staving off discord between the brothers. They all four listened in silence, while the faint notes from the Henry the Seventh tower penetrated the walls of Pond Cottage.

"That means it's ten o'clock," said Darnley. "They ring again at half-past, don't they, Mother?"

Wolf felt an extraordinary sense of peacefulness in the air that morning. The sound of the bells accentuated it; and he wondered vaguely to himself whether he wouldn't offer to go to church with the mother and the son.

"By the way," he remarked, "may I ask you people a question, while I think of it?"

They all three awoke from their individual meditations and gave him their undivided attention. Mrs. Otter did this with serene complacency, evidently assuming that the nature of his remark would prove harmless and agreeable. Jason did it with nervous concern, touched with a flicker of what looked like personal fear. Darnley did it with an expression of weary politeness, as much as to say, "Oh, God! Oh, God! Am I not going to have even Sunday free from other people's problems?"

"It's a simple enough thing," Wolf said quickly, realizing that he had made more stir than he intended. "I only wanted to know why this house of yours is called Pond Cottage, when there's no trace of a pond."

There was an instantaneous sign of startled agitation all the way round the table.

"The pond is there all right," said Darnley, quietly. "It's over that hedge, just outside our gate, the other side of the lane. It's rather an uncomfortable topic with us, Solent; because at least three times James Redfern thought of drowning himself in it. He may have thought of it more times than that. Jason found him there three times. We don't like the pond for that reason. That's all!"

Jason Otter got up from his chair. "I'll go and put on

my boots," he remarked to Wolf, "and we'll go and visit the pond. You ought to see it. And there are other things I can show you, too, while mother and Darnley are in church. You've got your boots on, I think? Well! I won't keep you very long."

He left the room as he spoke and Mrs. Otter looked appealingly at her younger son.

"Don't worry, Mother dear," said Darnley, gravely, laying his hand upon her knees.

He turned to Wolf. "You must help us in keeping my brother in good spirits, Solent," he said. "But I know I can trust you."

When Wolf and Jason did finally cross the lane together and enter the opposite field—which they achieved by climbing up a steep bank and pushing their way through a gap in the hedge—the sense of peacefulness in the whole air of the place had intensified to a degree that was so enchanting to Wolf that nothing seemed able to disturb his contentment.

The field he found himself in was a very large one, and only a broken, wavering line of willows and poplars at the further end of it gave any indication of the presence of water. The atmosphere was deliciously hushed and misty; no wind was stirring; and the placid morning sun fell upon the grass and the trees with a sort of largeness of indifference, as if it were too happy, in some secretive way of its own, to care whether its warmth gave pleasure or the reverse to the lives that thrived under its influence. It seemed to possess the secret of complete detachment, this sunshine; but it seemed also to possess the

secret of projecting the clue to such detachment into the heart of every living existence that its vaporous warmth approached.

Wolf was suddenly aware of a rising to the surface of his mind of that trance-like "mythology" of his. All the little outward things that met his gaze seemed to form so many material moulds into which this magnetic current set itself to run.

He surveyed a patch of sun-dried cattle-dung upon which the abstracted Jason had inadvertently planted his foot and across which was slowly moving with exquisite precaution a brilliantly green beetle. He surveyed a group of small crimson-topped daisies over which a sturdy, flowerless thistle threw a faint and patient shadow. He surveyed the disordered flight of a flock of starlings, heading away from the pond towards the village. But of all these things what arrested him most was the least obvious, the least noticeable. It was, in fact, no more than a certain ridge of rough unevenness in the ground at his feet; a nameless unevenness, which assumed, as the misty sunlight wavered over it, the predominant place in this accidental pattern of impressions.

Jason said nothing at all as they walked together slowly across the field. The man had ostentatiously avoided any approach to Sunday clothes that morning; and, without hat or stick, in a very shabby overcoat, he presented rather a lamentable figure, as he led the way forward towards Lenty Pond.

They reached the willows and poplars at last; and Wolf stared in astonishment at what he saw. He found himself standing on the brink of an expanse of water

that was nearly as large as a small lake. The opposite side of it was entirely covered with a bed of thick reeds, among which he could see the little red-and-black shapes of several moor-hens moving; but from where he stood, under these willows, right away to the pond's centre, the water was deep and dark, and even on that placid Sunday a little menacing.

"He could have done it easily if he'd wanted to, couldn't he?" said Jason, gazing at the water. "The truth is he *didn't* want to! Darnley's a sentimental fool. Redfern *didn't* want to drown himself. Not a bit of it. What did he come here for, then? He came to rouse pity, to make people's minds go crazy with pity."

"The man must have been thinking of saying just this to me all the way across the field," thought Wolf. But Jason jerked out now a much more disturbing sentence.

"The boy did upset *one* person's mind. He made one person's mind feel like a weed in this water! And you'd be surprised to hear who that person was."

But Wolf just then felt it very hard to give him his complete attention. For although the mystical ecstasy he had just experienced had faded, everything about the day had become momentous in his hidden secretive life; and he felt detached, remote, disembodied, for all his Sunday clothes. He could hear the cawing of a couple of rooks high up in the sky; and even when they ceased cawing, the creaking of their wings seemed like the indolence of the very day itself. "A weed in the water," he echoed mechanically; while his mind, voyaging over those hushed West Country pastures, followed the creaking wings.

"Who was it, Mr. Otter, who was so upset by Redfern?"

The appeal in Jason's miserable eyes grew still more disturbing. The man's soul seemed to come waveringly forward, like a grey vapour, out of its eye-sockets, till it formed itself into a shadowy double of the person who stood by Wolf's side.

"Can't you guess?" murmured Jason Otter. "It was I . . . I . . . I . . . You're surprised. Well, anyone *would* be. You wouldn't have thought of that, though you *are* Mr. Urquhart's secretary and *have* come from a college! But you needn't look like that; for it's true! Darnley sentimentalizes about his death, which was unfortunate, of course, but perfectly natural—he died of pneumonia, as any of us might!—but what drove me to distraction was this playing upon a person's pity. He always did it—from the very first day. Darnley yielded to it at once, though he never liked the boy. I resisted it. I am of iron in these things. I know too much. But by degrees, can't you understand, though I didn't yield to it, it began to bother my mind. Pity's the most cruel trap ever invented. You can see that, I suppose? Take it that there were only one unhappy person left, why, it might spoil all the delight in the world! That is why I'd like to kill pity—why I'd like to make people see what madness it is."

Wolf drew away from him a step or two, till he stood at the very edge of the pond, and then he remarked abruptly, "Your mother told me that Redfern was one of the most good-looking young men she has ever seen."

Having flung out these words, he began flicking the dark, brimming water with the end of his stick, watching

the ripples which he caused spreading far out towards the centre. Exactly why he made that remark just then he would have found it hard to explain. The wraith-like phantom-soul that had emerged from Jason's eye-sockets drew back instantaneously, like a puppet pulled by a string; and over the two apertures into which it withdrew there formed a glacial film of guarded suspicion.

"*I* have seen better-looking ones," said Jason Otter drily. "He used to help that fool Valley in his High Church services. I don't know whether the Virgin Mary ever appeared to him; but I know he used to take her flowers, because he used to steal them out of our garden! My mother let him steal because it was—— Hullo! What's up now? Who's this?"

Wolf swung round and observed to his surprise the tall figure of Roger Monk advancing towards them across the field.

"It's something for you. It's something about you," said Jason, hurriedly. "I think I'll walk round the pond."

"Why do that?" protested Wolf. "There'll be no secret about it, even if it *is* for me."

"He'll like to find you alone best. These servants of these landowners always do," replied the other. "Besides, Mr. Urquhart hates me. He knows I know what he is. He's not a common kind of fool. He likes having good meals and good wine, but he's ready to risk all that for I don't know what!"

"I tell you I have no secrets with Urquhart," rejoined Wolf. "There's absolutely no need for you to leave us."

"This gardener looked at me very suspiciously yesterday," whispered Jason. "I saw him through the hedge, in

his garden. He was planting something, but he kept looking at the hedge. He must have known I was there. He must have been wondering whether he dared shoot at me with a shotgun. So good-bye! I'm going to walk round the pond very slowly."

Wolf moved toward Mr. Monk, leaving his companion to shuffle off as he pleased. The gigantic servant looked like a respectable prize-fighter in his Sunday clothes. When the two men met he took from his pocket a telegram and handed it to Wolf, touching his hat politely as he did so.

"This came early," he said. "But there was no one else to send; and I had to tend to things before I could bring it myself. If there's any answer, 'twill have to go by way of Blacksod, for our office shuts at noon."

Wolf opened the telegram. It was from his mother, and ran as follows:

"ARRIVE RAMSGARD SEVEN O'CLOCK SUNDAY NIGHT TRADESMEN HAVE NO SENSE COULD SLEEP AT LOVELACE."

"There's no answer, Monk," he said gravely; and then, after prodding the ground thoughtfully with his stick, and looking at the figure of Jason Otter, which was now stationary behind a poplar-tree, "This is from my mother," he added. "She is coming down from town tonight."

"Very nice for you, Sir, I'm sure," murmured the man. " 'Tain't every gentleman has *got* a mother."

"But the difficulty is, Monk," Wolf went on, "that my mother wants to stay down here. You don't happen to know of any cottage or any rooms in a cottage that we could get for a time, do you?"

Roger Monk looked at him thoughtfully. "Not that I knows of, Sir," he began, his gipsy-like eyes wandering from Wolf's face to the landscape in front of him, a portion of which landscape included the figure of Mr. Otter, hiding behind the poplar-tree.

"That is to say, Sir, unless by any chance . . . but that ain't likely, Sir. . . ."

"What do you mean, Monk?" enquired the other, eagerly.

" 'Twere only that I myself live lonesome-like in me own place . . . and seeing you're helping Squire with his writings . . . and Lenty Cottage be neat set up, I were just thinking——"

Wolf swung his stick. "The very thing!" he cried excitedly. In a flash his imagination became abnormally active. He visualized this gardener's house in all its details. He saw himself, as well as his mother, snugly ensconced there for years and years . . . perhaps for the rest of their lives!

"But we should be a nuisance to you, Monk, even if the Squire *were* amenable, shouldn't we?"

The man shook his head.

"Well, I'll come straight home with you now, Monk, if I may," said Wolf impatiently. "Were you going home now?"

"I was."

"Well, I'll just run and tell Mr. Otter; and then I'll come with you."

He left the man standing where they had been talking, and hurried round the edge of the pond. There was something peculiarly appealing to him in the idea of this

cottage. How pleasant it would be, he thought, when he and his mother were living together there some five years hence, if he happened to say to her, as he came in to tea from his Sunday walk, with a bunch of primroses in his hand, "I came past Lenty Pond today, Mother, where I first heard about the chance of our settling here!"

He found Jason sitting on the roots of the poplar, leaning his back against the tree-trunk and holding the tails of his overcoat stretched tightly over his knees, so that he should be entirely concealed from view.

"That man hasn't gone," was his greeting to Wolf. "He's standing there still."

"I know he is, Otter. He's brought a telegram for me. My mother's coming down tonight. Monk says he doesn't see any reason why she and I shouldn't take rooms in his cottage."

Jason looked up at him from where he sat upon the poplar-root, and the whimsical manner in which he hugged his coat-tails was accentuated by a smile of hobgoblinish merriment.

"You mean to live in it?" he remarked. "You and your mother? I don't believe old Urquhart would consider such a thing for a moment! These squires like to show off their servants' quarters. They like to take their guests round and say: 'That's where my head-gardener lives. He works at *his* garden when he's finished with mine! Those are "Boule de neige" roses!' But when it comes to honest people lodging in places like that—goodness! Urquhart wouldn't consider it. But you can try. But my advice to you is to be very careful in this

matter. You never know what troubles you'll have when you deal with people like this Monk. But you can try. There! you'd better go off with him. He's peeping and spying at this moment. He's thinking I'm holding you back because of the money you pay us."

Wolf shook his head and made a movement to be gone, but the other bent forward a little and whispered up at him: "I'll walk slowly round the pond; *then* if he looks back he won't think you ought to wait for me."

With this complicated and obscure sentence floating on the surface of his mind, Wolf left his companion to his own devices and rejoined Roger Monk.

Not more than twenty minutes' walking brought them to the gardener's cottage. To Wolf's great satisfaction the place proved to be quite out of sight of the manor-house on the Ramsgard side of the orchards and the kitchen-gardens. It stood, indeed, in Lenty Lane, a little east of the drive-gates, and turned out to be a solid little cottage, pleasantly coated with white paint, and approached from the lane by a neat gravel-path, on either side of which was a row of carefully whitewashed small round stones. Wolf for some reason didn't like the look of those white stones. Once more he regarded Lenty Cottage. The idea of its excessive neatness and tidiness, combined with the idea of its being so long empty except for this one man, troubled his nerves in some odd way. What *did* it suggest to him? Ah, he had it! It suggested the peculiar lonely trimness . . . so extraordinarily forbidding . . . of a gaoler's house outside a prison-gate, or a keeper's house outside a lunatic-asylum.

"Well, let's see the inside," he said, turning to his companion. "Mr. Urquhart might as well have put me up here at first."

The other gave him one of his equivocal glances. "'Twere the matter of meals, I expect, Sir," he said cautiously. "But if the lady comes, things will be different, no doubt."

"Then you'd be pleased to have us here?"

This time the gardener's look was direct and eager.

"I'd be glad enough to have a gent like yourself sleeping under this here roof," he cried.

They entered the house together and the matter was soon arranged between them. When things were settled, Wolf observed the man rubbing one of his hands up and down the back of a chair. "I'd give a hundred pounds to get a place in them Shires again!" he burst out suddenly.

Wolf looked at him in astonishment. "You don't like it here, Monk," he murmured.

"Like it?" The man's voice sank to a whisper. "'Tis easier to enter a gentleman's service than to leave it, Sir, when that gentleman be the sort of Nebuchadnezzar my master be!"

"You aren't a Dorset man, then?" enquired Wolf.

"I were born here," replied the other, "but I left home when I were a kiddie, and worked in they Shires."

This remark made clear to Wolf a great deal about Roger Monk. The upper layers of the man's mind were sophisticated by travel. The deeper ones retained their indigenous imprint.

"Well, I must go back to Pond Cottage now," Wolf

said calmly. "Mrs. Otter and Mr. Darnley ought to be back from church by this time, and I must talk to them. We'll arrange about terms, Monk, after I've seen Mr. Urquhart. Do you suppose I should find him at home now, if I looked in on my way to the cottage?"

A frown of concentrated concern clouded the countenance of the man in front of him.

"It certainly would be best," he remarked, "if it could be done. What he'll say to it, I don't know, I'm sure."

With these words ringing in his ears, Wolf, some fifteen minutes later, found himself admitted to Mr. Urquhart's presence. He discovered his employer in his study, reading with fascinated interest the book which his new secretary had brought him.

"These Evershotts will be the making of our history," he chuckled, in high glee. "You did well with old Malakite. Five pounds for this? I tell you, it's worth twenty! You're a capital ambassador, Mr. Solent! . . . Eh? What's that? Your mother coming here? . . . Monk's front-rooms?"

He straightened out his legs and smoothed back his glossy hair from each side of that carefully brushed parting. With his great white face drooping a little on one side, with the flabby folds under his eyelids pulsing as if they possessed an independent life of their own, he made an unpleasant impression on Wolf's mind.

Mr. Urquhart's study was a small, dingy room, the walls of which were entirely covered by eighteenth-century prints. The Squire sat in a low, leather chair, with the Evershott chronicle on his knees; and as Wolf settled himself opposite him in a similar chair, he began

to feel that, after all, he was probably exaggerating the peculiarities of King's Barton Manor.

"It's my nervous imagination, I expect," he said to himself. "Urquhart's no doubt like hundreds of other eccentric men of leisure. And as for the gardener's chatter—I suppose servants are always glad to grumble to a stranger."

"Didn't my predecessor live in Monk's house?" he found himself saying.

The squire lifted his hand from the book he held and half raised it to his well-shaven chin. "Redfern? A little while, perhaps. I really forget. Not long, anyway. That drunken individual at Pond Cottage persuaded him to go to them. It was with them he died. They told you *that*, I suppose?"

Mr. Urquhart's voice was so placid and casual as he made these remarks that Wolf was seized with a sort of shame for letting his imagination run riot so among all these new acquaintances. "It's the difference from London! That's what explains it," he thought to himself.

Mr. Urquhart now stopped scratching his chin with his delicate finger-tips, and, bowing his head a little, fumbled once more with the pages of the book upon his knee. Wolf sank back into his deep armchair and stared at the man's tweed trousers and shiny patent-leather shoes.

He drew a long breath that was something between a sigh of weariness and a sigh of relief. His recent interviews with Jason and Monk had given him the feeling of being on the edge of a psychic maelstrom of morbid conflicts. The comfort of this remote room and the ease of this leather chair made him at once weary of agitations

and glad that he still could feel like a spectator rather than a combatant.

After all, why should he worry himself? As the philosophical Duke of Albany murmured in *King Lear:* "The event! Well . . . The event!"

"How will your mother appreciate sharing her kitchen with my man?" said Mr. Urquhart suddenly.

The remark irritated Wolf. What did this easy gentleman know about the shifts of poverty? He was himself so bent upon the arrangement that these little matters seemed quite unimportant.

"Oh, she won't mind that!" he responded carelessly.

"What put all this into Roger's great, stupid, silly head?" the squire went on, in his silkiest voice. "Is he tired of my company? Does he want to leave my service and enter your mother's? What's up with the man? It isn't the money. I know *that* much. Roger cares less for money than any man I've ever dealt with. What can he be up to now?"

Wolf remained silent, letting him run on. But in his mind he set himself once more to wonder how far he really *had* exaggerated the sinister element in his employer's character.

But Mr. Urquhart leaned forward now and regarded him intently. "You won't play me a trick, will you, like the other one? But you're not tricky, Mr. Solent, I can see that! On my soul, I think you're an honest young man. Your face shows it. It has its faults *as* a face; but it isn't tricky. . . . Well . . . well . . . well! . . . When does your mother arrive? I shall be interested to have the honor of meeting her again. My cousin Carfax

was at one time—you know, I suppose?—excessively in love with her. . . . Not tonight, eh? Well, perhaps that's as well. Mrs. Martin shall go over there and make everything straight."

Wolf rose to his feet at this point, anxious to take his leave before the man had time to read him any passages from the Evershott Diary. Once outside the house, he took stock of the situation. He had settled matters with the occupier and with the owner of his new abode. The final arrangement he had to make was with Mrs. Otter. Therefore, off he hurried to Pond Cottage, where he found his hostess just returned from church.

But here he met with nothing but sympathy—whether, in her secret heart she was glad to get rid of him, Wolf could not say. She may have all the while regretted the loss to her eldest son of that chamber whose walls Wolf had so arbitrarily denuded. Well! They could put those pictures back on those walls now! And he mentally resolved to pay as few visits as possible to the bedroom of Mr. Jason Otter. He had no wish to behold the countenance of that "god of rain" again!

He left Pond Cottage soon after lunch, explaining that he would return that night, but would have supper in Ramsgard with his mother. The afternoon proved to be as misty and warm as the earlier hours of the day; and as he retraced the track of Thursday's drive with Darnley, he did not permit the various agitations into which he had been plunged to destroy his delight in that relaxed and caressing weather. He found that travelling on foot in full daylight revealed to him many tokens of the Spring that he had missed on his evening drive.

Once or twice he descended into the ditches on either side of the road, where the limp whitish-pink stalks of half-hidden primroses drooped above their crinkled leaves, and, with hands and knees embedded in the warm-scented earth, pressed his face against those fragile apparitions.

The sweet, faint odour of these pale flowers made him think of Gerda Torp, and he began worrying his mind a good deal as to the effect of his mother's arrival upon the progress of his adventure.

Long before he reached the outskirts of Ramsgard he was reminded of his approach to the famous West Country School by the various groups of straw-hatted boys—tall, reserved, disdainful—who seemed exploring, like young Norman invaders, these humble pasture-lands of the West Saxons.

One or two of the boys, as they passed him by, made hesitating half-gestures of respectful recognition. One of them actually lifted his straw-hat. Wolf became a little embarrassed by these encounters. He wondered what kind of a master these polite neophytes—for it must have been the newcomers at the place who blundered in this way—mistook him for! Did he look like a teacher of French? Or did they take him for one of that high, remote, aristocratic company—not masters at all, but Governors of the ancient School?

When he got closer to the town, he had no difficulty in espying both cemetery and workhouse across an expanse of market-gardens and small enclosed fields. The look of these objects, combined, as they were, with outlying sheds and untidy isolated hovels, gave him a sensation

that he was always thrilled to receive—the peculiar sensation that is evoked by any transitional ground lying between town and country.

He had never approached any town, however insignificant, across such a margin, without experiencing a queer and quite special sense of romance. Was it that there was aroused in him some subtle memory of all the intangible sensations that his ancestors had felt, each one of them in his day, as, with so much of the unknown before them, they approached or left, in their West Country wandering, any of these historic places? Did, in fact, some floating "emanation" of human regrets and human hopes hover inevitably about such marginal tracts—redolent of so many welcomes and so many farewells?

When he arrived at last in the centre of the town and came to the gate of the Abbey, it was a few minutes to four o'clock. There was a languid afternoon service ebbing to its end in the eastern portion of the dusky nave; and, without entering the building, but lingering in the Norman entrance, Wolf contemplated once more that famous fan-tracery roof.

Those lovely organic lines and curves, up there in the greenish dimness, challenged something in his soul that was hardly ever stirred by any work of art; something that was repelled and rendered actually hostile by the kind of thing he had seen in that bedroom of Jason Otter.

This high fan-tracery roof, into whose creation so much calm, quiet mysticism must have been thrown, seemed to appeal with an almost personal sympathy to Wolf's deepest mind. Uplifted there, in the immense stillness of

that enclosed space, above the dust and stir of all passing transactions, is seemed to fling forth, like some great ancient fountain in a walled garden, eternal arches of enchanted water that sustained, comforted, and healed. The amplitude of the beauty around him had indeed just then a curious and interesting psychic effect. In place of giving him the sensation that his soul had melted into these high-arched shadows, it gave him the feeling that the core of his being was a little, hard, opaque round crystal!

Soothed, beyond all expectation, by this experience, and fortified with a resolute strength by thinking of his soul after this fashion, Wolf had nearly reached Selena Gault's door, when he remembered that he ought to make sure of a room for his mother at the Lovelace Hotel before he did anything else.

Hurrying round by the station, therefore, where he verified the time of the London train, he entered the office-hall of the famous hostelry. No backwater of rural leisure could have been more pulseless and placid than that mellow interior, with its stuffed fox-heads and mid-Victorian mahogany chairs. But it was with a shock of dismay that he learned from the dignified lady in charge of the hotel-books that owing to the approach of the annual Spring Fair every room in the place was already occupied. Wolf cursed the Fair and those horse-loving magnates. But there was nothing for him but to return to Miss Gault's; for the smaller Ramsgard Inn was at the further end of the town, and it was now five o'clock.

He crossed the public gardens. He struck St. Aldhelm's

Street just above the bridge and moved westward under the long wall. He pushed open the green door and entered the garden of hyacinths. The mechanical act of opening that little gate, for no other reason than that it was a gate from a street into a private enclosure, brought suddenly into his mind his similar entrance into the Torp yard; and the vein of amorousness in him, like a velvet-padded panther in a blind night, slipped wickedly past all the magic of yesterday's walk and caused his heart to beat at the imaginary image—for he had never actually seen that provocative picture—of the young girl astride the tombstone!

No sooner had the mute servant admitted him into Selena's drawing-room and closed the door behind him, than he realized that his hostess was not alone. Not only were all the cats there, but playing wildly with the cats, like a young Bassarid with young tigers, was a curly-headed, passionate little girl, of olive complexion, who, even before Miss Gault had finished uttering the syllables of her name, seized him by both hands and held up an excited, magnetic mouth to be kissed. Off she went again, however, to her play with the cats, which seemed to arouse her to the limit of her nervous endurance, for her cheeks were feverishly vivid and her dark eyes gleamed like two great gems in the handle of a dagger—a dagger that someone keeps furtively moving backwards and forwards between a red flame and a window open to the night.

As she pulled the cats to and fro and tumbled over them and among them, on sofa and hearth-rug, she kept up an incessant, excitable chatter; a chatter that struck

Wolf's mind as resembling, in some odd manner, a substance rather than a *sound,* for it seemed to supply a part of the warm, dusky atmosphere in which she played, and indeed seemed to require no vocal response from the other persons in the room. It was like the swirl of a swollen brook in a picture of Nicolas Poussin, in the foreground of which a young brown goatherd plays for ever with his goats.

"Olwen Smith!" broke in Miss Gault, when she and Wolf had seated themselves, after their first exchange of greetings, and he had hurriedly given her a description of Mr. Urquhart and Mr. Urquhart's library. "Olwen Smith!"

The little girl got up from the floor in a moment, and came and stood by her friend's knee.

"You mustn't be noisy when a gentleman's here; and, besides, you've got on your Sunday frock. Tell Mr. Solent your name and where you live. Mr. Solent doesn't like noisy little girls, or little girls that talk all the time and interrupt people."

"I live at Number Eighty-Five North Street Ramsgard," repeated the child hurriedly. "I was eleven last Thursday. Grandfather keeps the school hat-shop. Mother went away when I was born. Miss Gault is my greatest friend. Aunt Mattie is my mother now. I like the white cat best!"

The child uttered these sentences as if they had been a lesson which she had learned by heart. She stood obediently by Selena Gault's side; but her dark eyes fixed themselves upon Wolf with an expression that he never afterwards forgot, so wild, so mocking, so rebellious, and yet so appealing did it seem.

"Olwen loves my cats; but not nearly so much as my cats love *her*," said Selena Gault tenderly.

The little girl cuddled up to the black-gowned figure and laid her head against the old maid's sleeve. Her wild spirit seemed to have ebbed away from every portion of her body except her eyes. These refused to remove themselves from those of the visitor; and, as his own mood changed this way and that, these dusky mirrors changed with it, reflecting thoughts that no child's conscious brain could possibly have understood.

"But you know you love your Aunt Mattie as if she *were* your mother," said Selena Gault. "She's been so good to you that you'd be a very ungrateful little girl if you didn't love her."

"I heard grandfather tell Aunt Mattie the other night that she was no more *his* child than I was *her* child," responded Olwen Smith, mechanically stroking Miss Gault's hand like an affectionate little automaton, while her feverish mocking eyes seemed to say to Wolf, "There, watch the effect of *that!*"

"Mattie's mother died about twenty-five years ago, child," expostulated Miss Gault. "Her name was Lorna. She and your grandfather used to have dreadful quarrels before she died. That's why Mr. Smith, when he gets angry, says things like that. Of course Mattie is his daughter; and it's very wrong of him to say such things."

"Aunt Mattie's *funny*," murmured the little girl.

"Hush, child!"

"But she is, *rather!* Just a tiny little bit funny, isn't she, Miss Gault?"

Selena smiled at Wolf—that peculiar hypnotized smile

with which older people, who have given their souls into children's keeping, transform their pets' worst faults into qualities that are irresistibly engaging.

"Aunt Mattie's got a nose like yours," said Olwen Smith.

"Like mine?" murmured Selena Gault, reproachfully. "You mustn't be rude, Olwen dear. That's one thing I *can't* have in my house."

The brown head was buried closer in the black silk gown, but the child's voice sounded clear enough.

"Not like yours, Miss Gault—like *his!* Exactly like his!"

Selena Gault had occasion at that moment to turn clean away from both her visitors; for the mute servant entered the room carrying the tea-tray. The arrangement of this tray was evidently a matter of meticulous ritual in this house, and Wolf surveyed it with silent satisfaction, especially as the turbulent little girl ran off to play with the cats and left Miss Gault free not only to fill his cup, but also to attend unreservedly to his remarks.

The tea-tray was placed upon a round table at Miss Gault's side. A black kitchen-kettle—Miss Gault declared that no other kind boiled *good* water—was placed upon the hearth. The servant herself did not retire, as most servants are wont to do at such a juncture, but remained to assist at the ceremony of "pouring out," a ceremony which was so deftly accomplished that Wolf soon found all his difficulties and annoyances melting away in the fragrance of the most perfect cup of tea he had ever tasted.

The general effect of Miss Gault's drawing-room, in

the pleasant mingling of twilight and firelight, began to take on for his imagination the particular atmosphere that he was wont, in his own mind, to think of as "the Penn House atmosphere." This implied that there was something about this room which made him recall that old bow-window in Brunswick Terrace, Weymouth, where in his childhood he used to indulge in those queer, secretive pleasures. There was not a single piece of furniture in this room of Miss Gault's which did not project some essence of the past, tender and mellow as the smell of potpourri.

He broke the silence now by a reference to his conversation with Darnley in the Blacksod book-shop. "Otter said——" he began.

"Hush!" cried Selena Gault; and then in a completely different tone, addressing the silent child, who was listening intently: "Olwen dear, you can go on playing! You can make as much noise as you like now! We've finished our conversation."

"I don't want to play any more, Miss Gault. I hate all your cats except this one! I want to hear Mr. Solent tell you what Otter said!"

"I'll have to send you home, Olwen, if you don't behave better. It's rude to interfere with grown-up people's conversation."

"I wasn't interfering; I was listening. I'd never have known about Aunt Mattie not being grandfather's real daughter if I hadn't listened. . . ."

"Be quiet, child!" cried Selena Gault. But the passionate little girl's shrill voice rose to a defiant shriek, as she jumped up from the sofa, flung the cat upon the

floor, shook back her tangled curls, and screamed aloud. "And I'd never have known about Aunt Mattie not being my real mother if I hadn't listened!" . . .

If Miss Gault had not managed the child with perfect tact before, she rose to the occasion now.

"It's all right, Olwen dear," she said in the calmest and most matter-of-fact voice. "I daresay it's because grown-up people talk such a lot of nonsense that they get so cross when children listen. There! Look! You've frightened your own favourite!"

It was when matters were at this point of psychic equilibrium that Wolf decided that no more moments must elapse before he informed his hostess of his mother's arrival. The nervous electricity with which the air of the room was already vibrating, encouraged rather than deterred him.

"Miss Gault!" he began suddenly when the tall black figure had subsided into some kind of peace in her green chair. "I've just had some rather serious news which I'd better tell you at once."

Like a weary caryatid, sick of the burden of life, but unyielding in her resolution to bear it without reproach and without complaint, Selena Gault leaned forward toward him.

"You needn't tell me, boy; I can guess it. Ann Haggard's coming down here."

He nodded in assent to her words, but a look of irritation crossed his face.

"My mother and I have the same name," he protested.

"When's she coming? Oh, what a mistake you'll make if you let her come! What a mistake you'll make!"

"I've not had much choice," remarked Wolf drily. "She's due now in a few minutes."

"*What?*" gasped the lady, her deformed lip twitching like some curious aquarium-specimen that has been prodded by a visitor's stick.

"She's due at seven o'clock."

"In Ramsgard again—after twenty-seven years! What a thing! What a thing to happen!" gasped Selena Gault.

"I don't know where the deuce I'm going to put her! That's where I want your advice. The Lovelace is all filled up with people come in for the Spring Show."

Miss Gault's face was like an ancient amphitheatre full of dusky gladiators. She took firm hold of the arms of her chair to steady herself.

But at that moment a diversion offered itself which distracted the attention of both of them. Olwen Smith, who had been listening with fascinated intensity to what they were saying, now burst in upon them.

"O Mr. Solent!" she cried. "*Do* let your mother have our front-room for the night. Aunt Mattie takes lodgers, though grandfather does sell the School hats! I *know* Aunt Mattie would love to have your mother. Wouldn't she, Miss Gault? Do tell him she must come to us. Do tell him, Miss Gault! He'll let her come if you'll only say so!" And with that the child sidled up against their hostess's knees with such beguiling cajolery that Wolf was surprised at the coldness with which the woman received her appeal.

She made a very faint movement with her two hands, just as if the child had not been at her side at all—a

movement as if she were pressing down a load of invisible earth over the roots of an invisible plant.

"Hush, child!" she said irritably. "You mustn't interrupt us like that. I've told you so often you mustn't. I'm sure your Aunt Mattie wouldn't wish to have a guest for only one night. No one likes an arrangement of that sort."

But the child, who had been watching her face with intense scrutiny till this moment, now flung herself down upon the floor and burst into furious crying. "I—want—her—to—come—to us!" she wailed. "I want her to come! It's always like this when anything nice happens. You're unkind, Miss Gault! You're very unkind!"

And then quite suddenly her tears stopped, her sobs ceased; and, very solemnly, sitting upon the floor, hugging her knees, looking up at the figure above her with a tragic, lamentable face, "You are *prejudiced* against me!" she said.

The word "prejudiced" sounded so unexpected and so queer out of her mouth that it charmed away the old maid's agitation. "It's all right, my dear," she murmured, stooping down and lifting her up, and covering her hot forehead with kisses. "It's all right, Olwen. Mr. Solent shall bring his mother to your house."

She fell into a deep reverie, staring into vacancy. Past the child's curly head, which she held pressed against her, she stared, past the puzzled and rather sulky profile of Wolf, past the thick green curtains bordered with red-and-gold braid, out into the gathering night, out into many nights lost and gone.

Wolf now rather impatiently looked at his watch and compared it with the clock upon the mantelpiece.

"It's half-past six," he said brusquely, interrupting Miss Gault's thoughts.

The lady nodded gravely, and rising to her feet with the child's hand still in hers, "I'll tell Emma to take Olwen home," she said, "and then she can tell Mattie Smith to expect you. Say good-bye to Mr. Solent, little one."

Olwen held out her hand with one of the most complicated looks he had ever seen on a child's face. It was repentant, and yet it was triumphant. It was mocking and mischievous, and yet it was, in a queer way, appealing and wistful.

"Well, I'll see you again," said Wolf, stooping down and kissing the child's feverishly hot little fingers, "unless they send you off to bed before we get to the house."

Olwen was obviously immensely relieved that he had refrained from hugging her or kissing her face.

Very sedate and dignified was the curtsey she now gave him, turning round to manœuvre it as Miss Gault opened the door; and he was left with that honourable glow of satisfaction with which clumsy people are sometimes rewarded who have been self-controlled enough to respect the nervous individuality of a child.

When Miss Gault returned and had closed the door, she stood for a space regarding her visitor with the sort of grave, concentrated look, not unmixed with misgiving, that a commander in an involved campaign might give to a trusty but over-impetuous subordinate whose limitations of mind prohibit complete confidence.

"It will be awkward for her to go straight to these Smiths, you know. But she'd have to meet them, I suppose, sooner or later; and it *may* be all right. It's like taking the bull by the horns, anyway; which is what Ann always did."

Wolf was silent. He was watching the hands of the clock.

"Why did you let her come down here?" the old maid broke out. "Are you her shadow? Are you tied to her apron-strings? Can't you see what it means to me, and to others who remember *him,* to have to see her, to have to speak to her? Haven't you felt yourself that this is *his* country, his corner of the world, his possession? Haven't you felt that? And yet you let his enemy, his vindictive enemy, invade his very burying-ground!" . . .

Wolf's only retort to this impassioned speech was to snatch at the lady's hand and give it a hurried kiss. "You mustn't take it too seriously," were his parting words.

When he reached the station, he was met by the news that the train was to be about an hour late.

"This will worry our little Olwen!" he thought in dismay. "They'll send her to bed for a certainty. They'll think we're not coming at all. They'll think we've changed our minds. And where shall we get supper when we *are* there? Damn these teasing problems! I wish Mother had waited till tomorrow."

The station was not a very pleasant place to spend an hour in; so Wolf mounted the hill which rose behind the parallel tracks of the railroad and the river. Here there was a sort of terrace-road, perched high above the town and itself overshadowed by the grassy eminence known

as "The Slopes," beyond the summit of which lay the wide-stretching deer-park of the lord of the manor.

Feeling sure that, if the train came sooner than it was expected, he would hear it in time, as soon as he reached the terrace-road below "The Slopes" he began pacing to and fro along its level security, gazing down on the lights of the town as they twinkled intermittently through the darkened valley beneath him. The sky was overcast; so that these scattered points of light resembled the phantasmal reproduction of a sidereal firmament that had already ceased to exist. Mists that in the darkness were only waftures of chillier air rose up from the muddy banks of the Lunt and brought to his nostrils on this Spring night odours that suggested the Autumn. As he paced that terrace, inhaling these damp airs, his mind seemed to detach itself from the realistic actualities he was experiencing. It seemed to float off and away on a dark stream of something that was neither air nor water. What he desired at that moment, as he had never desired it before, was a support in which he could lose himself completely—lose himself without obligation or effort! He, the mortal creation of Chance, craved for some immortal creation of Chance, such as he could worship, wilfully, capriciously, blindly. But he stretched out his arms into that darkness in vain. His voice might have been the voice of a belated rook on its way to Babylon Hill, or the scraping of one alder-branch against another above the waters of the Lunt, or the faint infinitesimal slide of tiny grains of gravel, as some minute earthworm in the midst of the empty little path at the top of "The Slopes" came forth to inhale the Spring

night! A bubble of airy vibration, his appeal was lost as absolutely as any single drop of water that rolled at that moment down the green back of a frog emerging from the cold surface of Lenty Pond.

He kept visualizing the mud-scented darkness in which he seemed to be floating as a vast banked-up aqueduct composed of granite slabs covered with slippery black moss. Out of the spiritual tide that carried him along, there whirled up, in spurts of phosphorescent illumination, various distorted physical aspects of the people he had met these last few days. But these aspects were all ill-assorted, incongruous, maladjusted. . . . All these morbid evocations culminated finally in the thought of his mother; for what dispersed them and shook them indeed into nothingness now, with an abrupt materialistic shock, was the clear, sharp sound of the clattering gates of the level-crossing.

Wolf slid with a jerk into the normal world as he heard this sound, like a man falling plumb-down from a skylight upon a creaking floor.

He grasped his stick firmly by its handle, digging it into the ground at every step, and hurried with long strides down the little descent.

Nothing in the world seemed important to him now but to see his mother's face and hear her high-pitched familiar voice. . . .

Standing on the platform, before the train drew in, he found that his heart was beating with excitement.

"I'm simply at an *impasse*," he thought to himself, "about what I feel for Mother. I don't really want her down here . . . interfering with Gerda . . . interfering

with everything. . . . It's odd . . . it's funny . . . it's just like the spouting up of a great white whale . . . spouting up, when no one's thinking of whales . . . when everyone's thinking of the course of the ship!"

When the train actually came in, and he held her at arm's length with both his hands, clutching her wrists almost fiercely, looking her up and down almost irritably, he recognized in a flash that existence without her, however adventurous it might be, would always be half-real . . . just as those famous Ramsgard "Slopes" up there had seemed half-real a few minutes ago!

It was she alone who could give the bitter-sweet tang of reality to his phantasmal life and make the ground under his feet firm.

Her coming, now, as of old, had done, at this moment, just this very thing!

As he looked upon her now—that gallant, ruddy, handsome face, those proud lips, those strong, white teeth, that wavy mass of splendid, grey hair—he felt that, though he might love other persons for other reasons, it was she alone who made the world he lived in solid and resistant to the touch. He felt that without her the whole thing might split and tear—as if it had been made of thin paper!

"Oh, it was awful, my dabchick!" the lady cried, kissing him on both cheeks in an exaggerated foreign manner. "They were all down on us. I never knew what wretches tradesmen could be! They'll be nicely fooled when they find the house shut up. But they deserved it. They behaved abominably. . . ." She caught herself up with a gasp, and turned, full of despotic abruptness, to-

wards the patient Ramsgard porter. "Those are all mine! Three big ones and three little ones! You can come back for the other people's when you've taken mine out! Is that bus there? It always used to be."

Wolf took from her a basket she carried, which appeared full of the oddest assortment of objects; and they both followed the loaded little truck, pushed by the docile porter to the front of the station.

"There it is," cried Mrs. Solent, "the old Ramsgard bus! Put them in . . . carefully now! Carefully now!"

The porter retired, recompensed by a shilling, which Wolf hurriedly produced from his pocket while his mother was opening her purse. When he had helped her into the interior of the stuffy little vehicle, he gave his order to the man on the box.

"Number Eighty-Five North Street!"

"Where are you taking me?" Mrs. Solent asked, as the bus rumbled off.

"To a room in the town for one night, Mother. The Lovelace was full. But I've got a lovely cottage for us at King's Barton, near Mr. Urquhart's drive-gate."

"Where is this room? I remember every house in North Street."

"It's at Mr. Smith's, the hatter's."

Mrs. Solent's dark-brown eyes glowed like the eyes of some excited wood-animal.

"*That* man! Not *that* house, of all houses. You don't mean——" She broke off and stared at him intently, while an indescribable smile began to touch the corners of her mouth.

Then she leaned forward and rubbed her gloved hands

together, while her cheeks glowed with mischief.

"Has the good man by any chance got a daughter called Mattie?"

"*Aunt* Mattie?" murmured Wolf, feeling as if he were struggling to catch two ropes, which, at the same time, dangled before him. "That *is* what the child called her."

"The child?" It was his mother's turn to look puzzled now.

"Little Olwen Smith."

Mrs. Solent's smile died away.

"It can't be the same," she said. "Unless Lorna's child's got married."

"It's the same, all right, Mother. It's your man, all right. He was the hatter, wasn't he?"

She nodded.

"Well! It's the same, Mother."

Her inscrutable smile began to return and she leaned back with a sigh.

"To go straight to Albert's house—— But it'll be fun. It'll be sport! I'm not going to take it seriously. . . . Aunt Mattie? . . . little Olwen? . . . goodness! But they must have come down in the world, if he lets out rooms to visitors . . . or did he invite me? Am I destined to be Albert Smith's guest the first night I set foot in this place?"

"Did you and Father know him well?" enquired Wolf, as the bus swung round the corner by the ancient conduit.

"Your father knew Lorna well—Albert's minx of a wife. Lorna was even sillier about him than that idiot Selena."

"What happened, Mother?"

"Never mind now, Wolf! I'm in a mood to be amused by *everything.* Don't look so sulky! I tell you I'm going to amuse myself here. You don't seem to realize that I lived in this town for ten years."

"Listen, Mother," said Wolf hurriedly, "I know what you mean when you talk of 'amusing' yourself. Now look here, Mother, I won't have you getting into any rows down here! I've got my job here; and you've *got* to be nice to everybody. Do you understand?" In his excitement he laid his heavy hand upon her knee. "You've got to be nice to everybody—to everybody!"

The flickering oil-lamp which lit the inside of the bus shone down upon those shining wood-animal eyes. They glowed with excitement. They positively gleamed as the jolting of the vehicle jogged both mother and son up and down on their seats.

"Your father taught me to be unconventional," she said. "And I'm not going to be all sugar-and-spice in my old haunts."

The rambling old conveyance was drawing up now outside Number Eighty-Five.

"Mother, you *must* be good, and let bygones be bygones."

She turned upon him then, while the bus-man ran up the steps of the house to ring the bell.

"Your father never gave up his amusement for me, and I'm not going to give up my amusement for you! I'm going to be just myself with all our old acquaintances. I'm going to begin with Albert! There! Don't be silly! Get out and help me out. We *can't* go anywhere else

now. . . . Who's that at the door? Is *that* Lorna's child? . . ."

Just half-an-hour later Wolf and his mother were seated at a massive mahogany table in the hatter's dining-room, sharing the Smiths' Sunday supper. Olwen was *not* in bed. With feverish cheeks and enormous dark eyes she stood at the elbow of her grandfather, listening to every word of the talk and scanning every detail of Mrs. Solent's appearance.

"I would never have believed it possible," the grey-haired lady was saying with radiant glances at them all, "that you should have changed so much, Albert, and that Lorna should have come to life in Mattie. You're not so pretty as your mother, my dear. Of course, we must allow that! But goodness! You've got her figure and her look. How does it feel to be so like someone else? It must be queer—almost as if you inherited their feelings, their troubles, everything! But I *am* glad to see you, Mattie. It gives me—even me—a rather queer feeling. No, you're not as pretty as your mother; but Albert mustn't be hurt if I say I think you're much nicer! You needn't scowl at me, Wolf. Mattie doesn't mind, do you? And Albert knows me too well to be surprised at *anything* I say."

"Times change, Mrs. Solent—times change!" murmured the master of the house, in a low voice. "I was all shaky when little Olwen said you were coming. It seemed like the dead coming to life. But I feel all right now, as I set eyes upon you." And he helped himself to a lingering sip of the glass of mild whiskey-and-water that stood in front of him.

He was a sad, lean, commonplace little man, with a deprecatory bend of the head and a mingling of rustic cunning and weary obsequiousness in his watery, spectacled eyes. He looked as if he had been spending the day in long Low Church services. The smell of hassocks and stuffy vestries hung about his clothes, and the furtive unction of an official who had collected many threepenny bits in an embroidered bag weighed upon his stooping shoulders.

While Mrs. Solent ate her cold mutton and hot caper-sauce with hungry relish and rallied the nervous churchwarden, Wolf took the opportunity of studying in quiet self-effacement the expressive countenance of Mr. Smith's daughter. Mattie turned out to be a girl with a fine figure, but an unappealing face. She looked about twenty-five. She was not pretty in any sense at all, in spite of what Mrs. Solent had said. Her thick, prominent nose was out of all proportion to the rest of her face. Her chin, her forehead, her eyes, were all rendered insignificant by the size of this dominant and uncomely feature.

But though Aunt Mattie's eyes were small and of a colour that varied between grey and green, they possessed a certain formidable power. A person gazing into them for the second or third time found himself looking hastily away, as if he had been caught trespassing in a very rigidly preserved estate.

Wolf was surprised how completely at ease the girl showed herself. He had expected her to be extremely disconcerted by this intrusion. But not at all. She replied calmly and with quite the appropriate nuance of humour to his mother's rather exaggerated badinage; and with

himself she seemed perfectly natural and unaffected. All this was astonishing to him; though why it should have been so, he would have been ashamed to explain. Perhaps he had expected the Smith family to display social tendencies at variance with those of the upper middle-class to which he himself belonged. If so, he was certainly guilty of unjustifiable snobbishness. For though the hatter of Ramsgard School did not behave like a nobleman, he behaved with quite as much dignity and ease as most of the professional gentlemen with whom Wolf was acquainted! This unpremeditated supper-party in that dingy high-ceilinged dining-room, with its great cut-glass chandelier hanging over their heads and its gold-framed picture of some ancestral Mr. Smith gazing down upon them, was neither awkward nor embarrassed. Mrs. Solent's evident recklessness found no rocks or reefs in the behaviour of the others upon which its mischief could lash itself into foam!

Before the evening was over and it was time for him to start for his night-walk back to King's Barton, Wolf had begged more than once for a definite promise from Mattie Smith that she would bring Olwen over to see them when they were established in their new abode at Lenty Cottage. The girl was complaisant and gracious over this invitation, to which the child responded breathlessly; but Wolf knew enough of the ways of women to know that there were subtle withdrawings and qualifications under that heavy, benevolent mask, into which it would have been unwise to probe.

"Which day does the Spring Fair begin, Father?" Mattie said suddenly to the old gentleman.

"The Fair, my dear?" responded the hatter. "To-morrow, I believe; and it lasts till the end of the week; but someone told me after church—no! it was *before* church—that Thursday is the horse-show."

"Oh, that completes it all!" cried Mrs. Solent. "That's the one last touch. *Don't* I remember the Fair! I'd like to go tomorrow, the moment the gates are open! I'd like to go every day."

"We'll go on Thursday, Mother," said Wolf. "Everyone will be there then and you'll be able to see how many of 'em remember you."

"The horse-show *is* the great day," said Mattie Smith acquiescingly.

"I haven't changed very much, then, Albert?" murmured Mrs. Solent in response to a furtive appraising glance from the discreet churchwarden.

Mr. Smith looked a little embarrassed at having been caught observing her.

"No, you haven't changed! You haven't changed!" sighed the weary little man; and the tone in which he uttered these plaintive words seemed drawn from a vast warehouse of accumulated school-hats—shelves upon shelves of hats—the burden of which seemed weighing him down in a Dead Sea of diurnal desolation.

"*Your* mother is your *real* mother, isn't she?" interrupted Olwen in a shrill voice, gazing at Wolf from the protection of Mattie's knees.

Providence came to his rescue with an answer that was really quite an inspiration.

"Mothers *are* as mothers *do*," he responded.

But he caught, all the same, a reddening of Mattie's

cheeks and a hurried turning away of the churchwarden's eyes. Mr. Albert Smith kept pouring out whiskey for himself and for Wolf; but though Mrs. Solent drank only a little coffee, she was the one who held the evening together by her high spirits. Wolf watched Mattie whispering to the child about going to bed; but as he knew well enough that Olwen wouldn't go to bed till the party broke up, he began to look from one to another, waiting till a lapse in the conversation should give him a chance to bid them good-night and start on his walk home.

But Mrs. Solent's excitement was unsubduable; and there seemed something about this unusual supper-party that made him reluctant to bring it to an end. The dark old furniture, the dark old wall-paper, the dark old great-grandfather in his heavy frame, projected some kind of hypnotism upon the sliding moments, that made it as hard for him to move as if he were under a spell.

No sound came from the street outside. No sound came from the rest of the house. Like a group of enchanted people they continued to sit there, facing one another across the table, listening to Mrs. Solent's rich, voluble voice.

Wolf had long begun, in his insatiable manner, to drink up every peculiarity of the room in which they sat—of the furniture upon which the heavily-globed gas-jets of the candelabra shed so mellow a glow. As he grew tired of smoking cigarettes, he became aware of a faint scent of apples. Where this scent originated he could not detect. It seemed to proceed equally from every portion of the apartment. And as he gave himself up to it, it

brought to his mind a kind of distilled essence of all the fruit and the flowers that had ever been spread out upon that massive brown table; spread out upon former editions of "The Western Gazette"; editions old enough to contain news of the death of Queen Adelaide or of Queen Charlotte!

"I *must* go now," he thought. "I *must* go now." And he began to suspect that what really held him back from making a start upon his walk was not any attraction in the Smith ménage, but simply the great invisible struggle that had already begun between that dead man in the cemetery and this woman who was so extraordinarily alive!

She had come prepared to avenge herself in her own magnificent way—not basely, but still with formidable success. She had not come to Ramsgard to efface herself. And now, being here, being encamped, as Miss Gault said, on the very edge of his burying-ground, she could not refrain, just out of pure, suppressed high spirits, from stirring up the mud of the ambiguous past. Well! The event must work itself out. In *no sense* was he responsible. . . .

He did manage to rise at last and to kiss his mother good-night. He would have kissed Olwen, too, but she impatiently drew away. His final appeal to Mattie to come over and see them, "any day but Thursday, when we'll all be at the horse-show," was received with more warmth and cordiality than this girl had yet displayed.

What *were* the thoughts, day after day, year after year, that beat about in the secretive brain behind that heavily-

featured face? What was this queer attraction which he felt for her, so different from the interest excited in him by her father and by the little girl?

Wolf couldn't help pondering on these things as he made his way out of the silent town, accompanied by hardly any mortal sound except the creak of his own heavy boots and the thud of his own heavy stick.

It was not until he was clear of the last houses of Ramsgard, clear of both workhouse and cemetery, that the Smith house, the Smith daughter, the Smith granddaughter, faded from his brain.

Then, as the grass-scented mists grew cooler against his face, rolling up towards the arable lands from the hushed Blackmore meadows, the old serpent of lecherous desire lifted once more its head in that spacious night. Once more his mind reverted to Gerda Torp—not to Gerda as she was when she sent her bird-call so far over Poll's Camp, but to Gerda as she was to his wicked imagination when he listened to the lewd whisperings of Lobbie Torp and Bob Weevil, to the Gerda he had never seen and perhaps would never see—the Gerda who used a tombstone for a hobby-horse in that littered monument-yard in Chequers Street!

WOLF TOOK GOOD CARE NOT TO REVEAL TO HIS MOTHER his own secret reservations as to the desirability of Lenty Cottage. But that first impression of something uncannily neat and trim about it still obstinately persisted in his own mind after the stir of their arrival was over.

There was no word spoken about their keeping a servant; but Mrs. Martin, the Squire's housekeeper, promised that their maid, Bessie, should come in two or three times a week to clean up. But how far his mother—who, as Wolf knew, disliked cooking—would be able to deal with their meals, remained to be seen.

On the morning of Wednesday, after their first two nights in their new abode, it struck Wolf that it would be amusing, before entering on his labours with Mr. Urquhart, to pay a visit to King's Barton Vicarage.

He found the clergyman working in his garden, and followed him into his forlorn house, the whitewashed exterior of which was stained with faint yellows, greens, and browns by the varied moods of the weather. He followed him up an uncarpeted staircase and across an uncarpeted landing.

The rooms downstairs, the doors of which stood wide open, were evidently used as religious classrooms; for the only furniture they contained was a miserable collection of wooden forms and battered cane-bottom chairs. Of the rooms at the top of the staircase, the doors of which stood open too, one appeared to be the vicar's

bedroom—the bed was unmade and the floor was littered with tattered magazines—and another the priest's sitting-room or study.

The whole house looked as though its owner had long since relinquished every kind of effort to get that personal happiness out of life which is the inheritance of the meanest. Its shabby desolation seemed to project, in opposition to every human instinct, a forlorn emptiness that was worse than squalor. Its effect upon Wolf's senses was ghastly. No one could conceive a return to such a house as a return "home"! What it meant was simply that this wretched little priest *had no home.* The basic human necessity for some degree of cheerfulness in one's lair was outraged and violated.

The room into which Wolf was now led had at least the redemption of a small fire of red coals. But except for this, it was not a place where a stranger would wish to prolong his stay. It was littered from end to end with cheap novels. Chairs, tables, and even the floor, were piled up with these vulgarly-bound volumes. The vaporous March light filtering in through dingy muslin curtains threw a watery pallor upon these abortions of human mediocrity.

"You seem to be fond of reading," remarked Wolf to his host, as he sat down on the only chair that was not in use.

"Mostly stories," responded T. E. Valley, turning his head round with a whimsical grimace, as he fumbled at the lock of a small cupboard hanging against the wall. "Mostly stories," he repeated. Having cleared a chair and the fragment of a table, he sat down opposite his

guest with a bottle of brandy between them and two glasses.

"*You* are not unhappy, then," remarked Wolf, trying to overcome his discomfort. "Books and brandy . . . and a fire for chilly days. . . . You might be much worse off than you are, Vicar . . . much worse off."

T. E. Valley smiled wanly. "Much worse off," he repeated, refilling his glass. "But you know those stories are hardly literature, Solent—hardly theology, Solent. It *is* curious," he went on, meditatively, resting his chin upon his clenched hands and supporting his elbows on the table. "It *is* curious that with Urquhart and Jason Otter always working against me, and with most of the parish despising me, I am not more often in despair. Especially as I have so poor a conceit of myself. I know myself through and through, Solent; and I am the weakest, feeblest character alive! And yet, as you say, I really am not, *not at bottom, I mean*, an unhappy person. It is curious. I can't understand it."

He was silent for a space; while Wolf found himself giving way to a strange, almost sensual spasm of nervous sympathy. There was something about the man's abject humility that excited him in a way he could not have explained.

"It doesn't matter what T. E. Valley does," he began again, his voice rising to a shrill squeal, like the voice of a prophet among mice. "It doesn't matter whether I drink or whether I stay sober! The blessed Sacrament remains the same, whatever happens to T. E. Valley!"

Wolf looked at him and exulted in the man's exultation. "He's got hold of it," he thought, "whatever he

likes to call it. He's got hold of it. This awful house might be a prison, an asylum, a slave-galley. The fellow's a saint! He's got hold of it!"

But it was his practical reason rather than his nervous sympathy that dictated his next words. "You don't worry yourself about conduct, then, or about duty?"

The little man's disordered El Greco eyes grew bright within their hollow sockets. "Not a bit!" he cried. "Not a bit!"

"And morality?" enquired Wolf.

There was a pause at this; and the light in those animated eyes went out suddenly, just as if Wolf had put an extinguisher over them.

"You mean the matter of unholy love," murmured T. E. Valley.

"If you call it so," said Wolf.

"That *is* another question," the man admitted, and he gave vent to a sigh of infinite sadness. "Why it should be so, it's hard to tell; but every kind of love, even the most insane and depraved—even incest, for instance—is connected with religion and touches religion. When I get drunk it's a matter of chemistry. When I get angry it's a matter of nerves. But when I love *in the wrong way*——"

The priest of King's Barton rose to his feet. With a shaky hand he deliberately poured back into the decanter his unfinished drink. Then, with awkward shuffling steps, steps that made Wolf aware for the first time that instead of boots he wore large, ragged, leather slippers, he came round the table to his guest's side.

"I'm nothing," he mumbled almost incoherently. "I'm nothing. But don't you know," he said, seizing Wolf's

hand in his dirty, feverish fingers, "don't you know that love sinks down into the roots of the whole world? Don't you know that there are . . . levels . . . in life . . . that . . . that . . . defy Nature?"

Wolf's brain became suddenly clearer than it had been all day since he first got out of bed that morning. It seemed to him that between this confessed "morality" of Tilly-Valley and what he had already divined as the unconfessed "immorality" of Mr. Urquhart, there was a ghastly reciprocity. He suddenly felt a reaction in favour of the most simple earth-born heathenism. He deliberately finished his glass of brandy, and stood up.

"I don't think any of us knows very much about love," he mumbled. And then he went on rather lamely: "I think there are a great many different kinds of love, just as there are a great many different kinds of malice." He stopped again, his mind struggling with the difficulty of expression. "I don't think," he blurted out, "that most of the kinds of love we run across sink down to the bottom of the universe!"

Having said this, he uttered a short, uncomfortable schoolboy-chuckle. "Well, well," he added gently, "I'm not so certain about any of this as to be rude to anyone over it! Well, good-bye, Valley," and he held out his hand. "By the by, my mother will expect a call from you soon. You *will* come, won't you? Drop in at tea-time. I'm generally in then; only don't let it be tomorrow, because we're going to the Show. Shall we see you there?" And he shook the priest's hand with affectionate cordiality, searching his mind with his eyes. . . .

It was just lunch-time when he returned to Lenty Cot-

tage. His mother had been weeding in the garden all the morning; and she brought into the small front-room, where they had their light meal, a breath of earth-mould that was very acceptable after his recent conversation.

"You look very well pleased with yourself, Wolf," she said, as they sat down opposite each other. "What have you been doing to make you feel so complacent?"

"Acting as oil and wine, Mother," he answered, "between the squire and the vicar."

She threw back her head and laughed wickedly.

"You're a nice one to settle quarrels! But I suppose you settled this one by shouting them both down, and that's what's given your dear face—as grandmamma used to say—that 'beyond yourself' look! There's a letter for you under that book; but you shan't have it till I've finished this good meal and drunk my coffee."

Wolf looked at the book in question, which was a large edition of Young's "Night Thoughts" bound like a school-prize.

"It's a child's hand," said his mother, watching his face with gleaming brown eyes. "Is it from that little Smith girl, do you think? Or have those people you stayed with, those funny Otter people, got any children?"

Wolf shook his head. Could it be from Olwen Smith? It appeared unlikely; but the child did seem to have taken a fancy to him. It was possible. But then, in one of those sudden clairvoyances that emanate so strangely from unopened letters, he felt certain that it wasn't from a child at all. It was from Gerda!

"You're mad to read it, Wolf, I can see that. But I

won't have my good lunch spoilt. I think it would be nice if we had our coffee at once, don't you? *Do* go and bring it in! It's on the kitchen-stove."

He obeyed with alacrity, as he always did in these caprices of his mother's, and they sipped their coffee in suspended excitement, their eyes shining across the table like the eyes of two animals.

"Oh, it'll be so amusing, going to the Horse Show," she cried. "I wonder how many of them I shall recognize? Albert used to be ever so embarrassed when I made a fuss over him in public. And I did, you know, I often did; just to show I didn't care a fig about Lorna's silliness!"

Obscurely irritated by the flippancy of this allusion to his father's misconduct, and definitely impatient at the enforced delay about the letter, Wolf suddenly burst out: "I've been to tea with Selena Gault, Mother. She wrote and invited me." He did not say that he had been the first to take the initiative in this affair. He felt it to be revenge enough without that. But Mrs. Solent was a match for him.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Wolf, that you went to cheer up that old monster. That *was* sweet of you! Think of it! My son sitting down to tea with all the Ramsgard old ladies! I'm sure she invited every one of the masters' wives and mothers to meet you. 'The son of my old friend, William Solent.' I can hear her say it! Well—do tell me, Wolf! For this is really getting interesting. What *did* you think of the great Gault? Of course, you know how it is with me. I never *can* endure deformity! I feel sorry and so forth; but I just can't see it about. It was over the Gault

that your father and I had our final quarrel. No, you *must* listen to me! He was as insensitive about things like that as in everything else. He had absolutely no fastidiousness. The Gault had never before met any man who could even look at her. I mean—you know!—look at her as men *do* look at us. And it just went to her poor, dear head. She fell madly in love—if you can call it love, in a monster like that—and the extraordinary thing about it was that it didn't horrify your father. I don't want to be catty; but really—you know!—with a deformity like that—— You'd have thought he'd have run to the end of the world. But not at all! What are you doing, Wolf? Take your hands from your head!"

But Wolf, with his long, bony middle fingers pressed against his ears, contented himself with making a shameless grimace at the woman who had given him birth.

Quick as lightning Mrs. Solent ran to the side-table, and snatching up the letter that was beneath the book, made as though she would throw it in the fire.

This manœuvre was entirely successful. Her son rushed upon her; and the half-playful, half-serious struggle that ensued between them ended in his wresting the letter out of her clenched fingers.

He then pushed her down by main force into an armchair and hurriedly handed her a cigarette and a lighted match.

"Now *please* be good, Mother darling!" he pleaded. "I'll tell you everything when I've read it."

He sat down in the opposite chair and tore open the letter. His mother puffed great rings of smoke into the air between them and surveyed him with glittering eyes—

with eyes that had in their brown depths an almost maudlin passion of affection.

Miss Selena Gault was forgotten.

The letter was written in pencil and in a handwriting as straggling and unformed as that of a little girl of ten. "Olwen would have composed a much more grown-up production," he thought, as he read the following words:

MY DEAR MR. SOLENT:

I am going out water-rat hunting with a basket for marigolds and to see if there are any moor-hens down there. I'm going to start directly after dinner with Lob and go down stream just like we did before. Miss Malakite wants us to have tea with her about five. So do come there if you can't come to the Lunt.

This is from your little friend, Gerda.

"It *is* from a child," he said as casually as he could, stepping up to his mother's side and waving the letter in front of her. He felt a tremendous reluctance to let her read it; and yet, being the woman she was, he dared not put it straight into his pocket. Nothing of this was hidden from Mrs. Solent; but she had had her little victory in the matter of Miss Gault, and she was in a mood to be indulgent now.

"All right, Wolf, put it into your pocket. I don't want to see it. I expect you'll find much nicer barmaids in Blacksod than you ever did in Hammersmith. I won't interfere with your light-o'-loves. I never *have*, have I?"

"No, you never have, Mother darling," he responded, with a rush of affection born of immense relief. And slipping Gerda's note into his coat-pocket, he leaned forward and took her handsome, ruddy face between the palms of his hands.

"But I'm off, now, my treasure; and don't expect me back till late tonight!" He hesitated for a moment, and then added: "You'd better not stay awake; though I know you *will;* but I shall be coming home with the Otters, and I'll let myself in quietly."

He kissed her quickly and placed both his hands for a moment upon the rough mass of her grey hair. She smiled back at him gaily enough, but he wondered if that little sound he seemed conscious of in the cavity of her strong throat was an evidence of some other emotion. If it was, she swallowed it as completely and effectively as if it had been a little silver minnow swallowed by a watchful pike.

"I shall just go to bed, then, and read in bed," she cried jestingly, when he let her go. "I'm in the middle of a thrilling story about a young man who has every vice there is! I'm sure he's got *some* vices that even Selena Gault's never heard of. I'll go on with that; and if I want a little variety, I'll read the book Cousin Carfax gave me about Chinese Rugs; and if *that* doesn't satisfy me, I'll read Casanova's Memoirs. No, I won't! I'll read Canon Pusey's Sermons or something of that sort . . . something that just rambles on and isn't modern or clever! So run off, and don't worry about me. By the way, I had my first caller this morning, when you were over at the Manor."

"Who was that, Mother?" enquired Wolf, flicking his stick against his boot and thinking of the tombstone in Mr. Torp's yard.

"Mrs. Otter!" she cried gaily. "And I believe we'll get

on splendidly. She told me how fond you and her son Jason were of each other."

"Jason?" muttered Wolf. "Well, take care of yourself, darling! Don't work too hard in the garden. Remember tomorrow!" And he opened the door hastily and let himself out. "Jason?" he muttered once more, as he strode down Lenty Lane.

His walk to Blacksod that early afternoon was one long orgy of amorous evocations. He skirted the town in such an absorbed trance that he found himself in the river-meadow before he realized that he'd left the streets behind. Nothing could have been more congruous with his mood that afternoon than this slow following of the waters of the Lunt! Past poplars and willows, past muddy ditches and wooden dams, past deserted cow-sheds and old decrepit barges half-drowned in water, past tall hedges of white-flowering blackthorn, past low thick hedges of scarcely budded hawthorn, past stupid large-bodied cattle with shiny red hides and enormous horns, past tender, melancholy cattle with liquid eyes and silky brown-and-white flanks, he made his way through those pleasant pastures.

So beautiful was the relaxed Spring atmosphere, that by degrees the excitement of his sensuality ebbed a little; and the magic of Nature became of equal importance with the thrill of amorous pursuit.

Though the sky was overcast, it was overcast with such a heavenly "congregation of vapours" that Wolf would not have had it otherwise. There were filmy clouds floating there that seemed to be drifting like the scattered

feathers of enormous albatrosses in a pearl-white sea; and behind these feathery travellers was the milky ocean on which they floated. But even that was not all; for the very ocean seemed broken here and there into hollow spaces, ethereal gulfs in the fleecy whiteness; and through these gulfs was visible a pale yellowish mist, as if the universal air were reflecting millions of primrose-buds! Nor was even this vaporous luminosity the final revelation of those veiled heavens. Like the entrance to some great highway of the ether, whose air-spun pavement was not the colour of dust, but the colour of turquoise, there, at one single point above the horizon, the vast blue sky showed through. Transcending both the filmy whiteness and the vaporous yellowness, hovering there above the marshes of Sedgemoor, this celestial Toll-Pike of the Infinite seemed to Wolf, as he walked towards it, like some entrance into an unknown dimension, into which it was not impossible to pass! Though in reality it was the background of all the clouds that surrounded it, it seemed in some mysterious way nearer than they were. It seemed like a harbour into which the very waters of the Lunt might flow. That incredible patch of blue seemed something into which he could plunge his hands and draw them forth again, filled like overflowing cups with the very ichor of happiness. Ah! That was the word. It was *pure happiness*, that blue patch! It was the very thing he had tried so clumsily to explain to that poor Tilly Valley, that both he and Mr. Urquhart so woefully lacked! And this was the thing, he thought, as he walked slowly on through the green, damp grass, after which his whole life was one obstinate quest. Ay! Where did it

grow, this happiness? Where did it bubble up free and unspoiled? Not, at any rate, in such "love"—half sex, half reaction from sex—that these two disordered people were pursuing!

Not in asceticism, nor in vice! Where then? He began to stride forward with all his mind and all his soul fixed on that blue patch over Sedgemoor. Not in any human struggle of that kind! Rather in some large, free, unrestricted recognition of something actually in Nature, something that came and went, something that the mind could evoke, something that required nothing save earth and sky for its fulfilment!

Between himself and that blue patch there stretched now the great trunk of a bending willow, covered, as if by a liquid green mist, with its countless newly-budded twigs. The trunk seemed attracted down to the waters of the Lunt; and the waters of the Lunt seemed to rise a little, as they flowed on, in reciprocal attraction. And through the green buds of this bending trunk the patch of blue looked closer than ever. It was not any opening highway, not any ethereal road, as he had imagined at first. It was actually a pool of unfathomable blue water; a pool in space! As he looked at it now, those green willow-buds became living moss around its blue edge; and a great yellowish fragment of sky that leaned towards it became a tawny-skinned centaur, who, bending down his human head from his animal body, quenched his thirst in its purity. A yellow man-beast drinking draughts of blue water!

Wolf stopped dead-still and gazed at what he saw, as ever more nearly and more nearly what he saw became

what he imagined. This was what he wanted! This was what he sought! The brown earth was that tawny-skinned centaur; and the reason why the world was all so green about him was because all living souls—the souls of grass-blades and tree-roots and river-reeds—shared, after their kind, in the drinking up of that blue immensity by the great mouth of clay!

He moved on now again and slowly passed the bent tree. His thoughts relaxed and grew limp after his moment of ecstasy; but such as they were, like languid-winged herons, they flapped heavily over the dykes and ditches of his life.

He felt obstinately glad that through all those detestable London years—the weight of which, like chains that are thrown away, he had never realized till they were over—he had just ploughed through his work at that college, his head bent, his shoulders hunched, his spirit concentrated, stoical, unyielding! What had it been in him that had kept him, for twelve heavy years, stubbornly at work on all that unbelievable drudgery? What had it been in him that had saved him from love-affairs, from marriage—that had made it horrible for him to satisfy his sexual instincts with casual light-o'-loves from tap-rooms and music-halls? What had it been? He looked at a great alder-root that curved snake-like over the brown mud beneath the bank; and in the tenacious flexibility of that smooth phallic serpent of vegetation he seemed to detect an image of his own secretive life, craftily forcing its way forward, through a thousand obstacles, towards the liberation which it craved.

And what was this liberation?

Happiness! But not *any* kind of happiness; not just the happiness of making love to Gerda Torp.

He looked closely at the manner in which the alder-root dipped so adroitly and yet so naturally into the river. Yes! It was a kind of ecstasy he aimed at; the kind that loses itself, that merges itself; the kind that demands nothing in return!

How could this ecstasy be called love? It was more than love. It was the coming to the surface of something unutterable.

And then, like an automatic wheel that revolved in his brain, a wheel from one of whose spokes hung a bodiless human head, his thoughts brought him back to that Living Despair on the Waterloo steps. And he recalled what Jason Otter had said about pity: how if you had pity and there was one miserable consciousness left in the universe, you had no right to be happy. Oh, that was a wicked thought! You had, on the contrary, a desperately punctilious reason to be happy.

That face upon the Waterloo steps *gave* you your happiness. It was the only gift it could give. Between your happiness and that face there was an umbilical cord. All suffering was a martyr's suffering, all happiness was a martyr's happiness, when once you got a glimpse of that cord! It was the existence in the world of those two gross vulgar parodies of life, *ennui* and *pleasure*, that confused the issues, that blighted the distinctions.

For about half a mile he walked steadily forward, letting the violence of this last thought be smoothed away by the feel of the damp soil under his feet, and the

cool touch, imperceptible in detail, through his leather boots—of all the anonymous weeds and grasses that were beginning to feel the release of Spring.

Ah, there they were!

He came upon them quite suddenly, as he clambered over a wooden paling between the end of a thick-set hedge and the river-bank, the wooden boards of which, worm-eaten and grey with lichen, jutted out over the water.

They were seated side by side on a fallen elm-tree, arranging the contents of a great wicker-basket that lay on the ground between them.

"Hullo!" cried Lob, jumping to his feet.

Wolf took the boy in his arms and began a sort of genial horse-play with him, tumbling him over in the grass and holding him down by force as he kicked and struggled. But Lob soon wearied of this, and, lying quietly under the man's hands, turned his mud-flicked, grass-stained face towards his sister.

"You see I be right, Sis! So hand over thik ninepence. He *be* come, same as I said 'a would. So hand over what I've won!"

Wolf became aware that a fit of sudden shyness had fallen upon both himself and Gerda. He continued to kneel above the prostrate Lob, pinioning the child's arms and putting off the moment when he must rise and face her. Gerda, too, seemed to prolong with unnecessary punctiliousness her fumbling with the ragged recesses of her faded little purse, as she emptied pennies and bits of silver into her lap.

"Ninepence! It was ninepence!" the boy kept shouting,

as he sought in vain to lift up his eager grass-stained face high enough to see what the girl was doing: "It was sixpence if he went to Malakite's! It was ninepence if he came here!"

Wolf, bending over his prisoner, found himself watching the progress of a minute ladybird who with infinite precaution was climbing the bent stalk of a small grass-blade close to the boy's head. But he was so conscious of Gerda's presence that a slow, sweet, shivering sensation ran through his nerves, as if in the midst of a great heat his body had been plunged into the cool air of a cavern.

"There, Lob!" said Gerda suddenly, holding out sixpence and three pennies.

Wolf let the child go and stood up.

Their eyes met through the boy's violent scramble and snatching clutch. They met through his cry of "Finding's keepings, losing's seekings! Bet me enough to make a shilling! I be a prime grand better, *I* be!"

And, as their eyes met, the shyness that they had felt before changed into a thrilling solemnity. For one quick moment they held each other's gaze; and it was as if they had been overtaken simultaneously by an awe-struck recognition of some great unknown Immortal, who had suddenly appeared between them, with a hand upon each.

Then the girl turned to her brother.

"I bet you, Lob," she said, "you won't find a blackbird's nest round here with eggs in it!"

"How much?" the boy responded, standing in front of her with his hands behind his head, in the pose of a young, indolent conqueror.

"How much!—how much!" mocked Wolf, with heavy

humour, seating himself on the tree-trunk by Gerda's side. "What a young miser we are!" As he took his place by her side, the floating barge upon which it seemed to him they were embarked rocked with a motion that gave him a sense of sweet dizziness.

Lob looked at his sister gravely, weighing the matter in his mind.

"You won't hunt rats with *him* when I'm not there?" he bargained.

She shook her head.

" 'Tis early for them nesties; but I do know for three o'n already; up along Babylon Hill. They be all hipsy-hor hedges, looks-like, in *this* here field; and blackbirds be fonder o' holly-trees and bramble-bushes. But they bain't so sly, the bloody old yellow-beaks, as them thrushes be. I think I'll do it, Sis."

"I think I may take her bond," muttered Wolf under his breath.

"I haven't heard one of them since we came," said Gerda cunningly. "They like the hills better than down here on the flat. I wouldn't have betted so much if I wasn't sure I'd win."

"*I* ain't betted nothink," said Lob quickly, "so you can't win anyways. It's either us both loses, or it's me what wins."

Gerda nodded assent to this unchivalrous issue.

"Well, I may as well have a look round," decided the boy; "only mind—no tricks! If you rat-hunt with *him* when I ain't there, 'twill be threepence whatsoever."

She indicated assent to this also.

Lob began to swagger slowly away.

"I knows why you wants me to shogg off," he called back; and he added an outrageous expression in shrewd Dorset dialect which had the effect of bringing an angry flush to Gerda's cheeks.

"Be off, you rogue," cried Wolf, "or you'll get more than you've bargained for!"

But there came flying through the air, from the child's impudent hand, a well-aimed puffball, which burst as it touched Gerda's knee, covering her dress with a thin, powdery brown dust.

Neither she nor Wolf moved a muscle in response to this attack; and Lobbie wandered slowly off till he was lost to sight. Then the girl got up and began shaking her skirt. The cream-coloured cloak hung loose and open, and Wolf saw that she was dressed in an old, tight-fitting, olive-green frock.

When she had finished brushing the puffball-powder from her clothes, she took off her hat and laid it carefully, absent-mindedly, upon the tree-trunk by his side.

He instantaneously threw his arms round her and held her tightly against him, while in the silence between them he felt his heart beating like an invisible underground water-pump.

But she unloosed his hands with deft, cool fingers. "Not now," she said. "Let's talk now."

In some mysterious way he was grateful to her for this. The last thing he wanted was to spoil the strange, lovely solemnity that had fallen upon them like the falling of slow, thin, noiseless rain.

He rose and took her hand, and they began moving away from the log.

"Wait! I'll leave a signal for that little rascal," he said, putting his stick and his cloth-cap by the side of the cream-coloured hat. But he did not give up her hand; and together they walked carelessly and aimlessly across that wide field, taking a course at right angles to the course taken by her brother. Wolf had hitherto, in his attitude to the girls he had approached, been dominated by an impersonal lust; but what he now felt stealing over him like a sweet, insidious essence, was the actual, inmost identity of this young human animal. And the strange thing was that this conscious presence, this deep-breathing Gerda, moving silently beside him under her cloak, under her olive-green frock, under everything she wore, was not just a girl, not just a white, flexible body, with lovely breasts, slender hips, and a gallant swinging stride, but a living conscious soul, different in its entire being from his own identity.

What he felt at that moment was that, hovering in some way around this tangible form, was another form, impalpable and delicate, thrilling him with a kind of mystical awe. It changed everything around him, this new mysterious being at his side, whose physical loveliness was only its outward sheath! It added something to every tiniest detail of that enchanted walk which they took together now over one green field after another. The little earth-thrown mole-hills were different. The reddish leaves of the newly-sprung sorrel were different. The droppings of the cattle, the clumps of dark-green meadow-rushes, all were different! And something in the cold, low-hung clouds themselves seemed to conspire, like a great stretched-out grey wing, to separate Gerda

and himself from the peering intrusion of the outer world.

And if the greyness above and the greenness beneath enhanced his consciousness of the virginal beauty of the girl, her own nature at that hour seemed to gather into itself all that most resembled it in that Spring twilight.

Gate after gate leading from one darkening field into another they opened and passed through, walking unconsciously westward, towards the vast yellowish bank of clouds that had swallowed up that sky-road into space. It was so far only the beginning of twilight, but the undried rains that hung still in motionless water-drops upon millions of grass-blades seemed to welcome the coming on of night—seemed to render the whole surface of the earth less opaque.

Over this cold surface they moved hand in hand, between the unfallen mist of rain in the sky and the diffused mist of rain in the grass, until the man began to feel that they two were left alone alive, of all the people of the earth—that they two, careless of past and future, protected from the very ghosts of the dead by these tutelary vapours, were moving forward, themselves like ghosts, to some vague imponderable sanctuary where none could disturb or trouble them!

They had advanced for more than a mile in this enchanted mood, and were leaning against a wooden gate which they had just shut behind them, when Wolf pointed to an open shed, about a stone's throw away, the floor of which he could make out, from where they stood, to be strewn with a carpet of yellow bracken.

"Shall we try *that* as a shelter?" he asked. The words

were simple enough. But Gerda detected in them the old, equivocal challenge of the male pursuer; and as he pulled at her wrist, trying to lead her towards the shed, she stiffened her body, snatched her hand away, and drew back against the protective bars of the gate. Very quickly then, so as to smooth away any hurt to his pride, she began to speak; and since silence rather than words had hitherto been the link between them, the mere utterance of any speech from her at all was a shock strong enough to quell his impetuousness.

"Did you like me directly you saw me, that day in our house?"

He looked at her attentively, as, with her fair head bare and her arms spread out along the top bar of the gate, she asked this naïve question.

It suddenly came over him that she had not really the remotest conception as to how rare her beauty was. She regarded herself, of course, as a "pretty" girl, but she had no notion that she moved through Blacksod like one of those women of antiquity about whose loveliness the noblest legends of the world were made! A certain vein of predatory roguery in him led him to play up to this simplicity.

"I liked you best when you were whistling to me," he said. But in his senses he thought: "I should be a madman not to snatch at her!" And in his soul he thought: "I shall marry her. As sure as tomorrow follows today, I shall marry her!"

"I liked *you* best when you were hunting for me at Poll's Camp," said Gerda. "But I can't understand——"

"What can't you understand, Gerda?"

"I can't understand why I don't want you to touch me just now. But oh! if you only knew what things they say in the town about girls and men!"

She looked him straight in the face with an ambiguous tilt of her soft, rounded chin. Something had come between them—something that troubled him seriously, though not with the sense of any unscalable barrier.

"What things do they say in the town?" he asked.

At this she clapped her hands to her cheeks, and a look of troubled bewilderment crossed her fixed gaze.

He began to wonder if the girl, for all her coquetries, was not abnormally innocent. Perhaps the extreme lewdness of lads like Bob Weevil had, in some of those furtive conclaves between young people that are always so complete a mystery to older persons, given her some kind of startled shock.

Slowly her hands fell to her sides, and the troubled look faded; but she still faced him with a faint, tremulous frown, while the delicate curves about her eyes took on that expression of monumental beseeching, such as one sees sometimes in antique marbles.

His craving to take her in his arms was checked by a wave of overpowering tenderness.

As she stood there, with her back to the gate, her personality struck home to him with such a sharp, sudden pang of reality, that it made certain tiny little blossoms of the blackthorn-hedge become strangely important, as if they had been an apparition of wonderful white swans.

"Well, never mind what they say in the town! You and I are by ourselves now. It's only you and I that count

today. And I won't tease you, Gerda, you darling—no, not with one least thing you don't like!"

He was silent, and they remained motionless, staring at each other like two stone pillars bearing the solemn weight of the unknown future. Then he possessed himself of one of her hands, and it was a new shock to him to feel how ice-cold her fingers had grown.

"Don't act as if we're strangers, Gerda!" he pleaded. "I do understand you—much more than you think I do. And I'll take care of you for ever! It isn't as if time mattered one bit. I feel as if I'd known you all my life. I feel as if everything here"—and he glanced round at those strangely important white blossoms—"were an old story already. It's funny, Gerda, isn't it, how natural and yet how weird it is, that we should have met at all? Only a week ago I was in London, with no remotest idea that you were in the world—or this gate, or this black-thorn-hedge, or that shed over there!"

Her cold fingers did respond a little to his pressure now, and her eyes fell and searched the ground at her feet. Without a sigh, without a breath, she pondered, floating upon some inner sea of feeling, of which no one, not even herself, would ever know the depths.

"You *are* glad we've met, Gerda, dear?" he asked.

She raised her eyes. They had the tension of a sudden, difficult resolution in them.

"Do men ever leave girls alone after they've married them?"

The words were so unexpected that he could only press her cold fingers and glance away from those troubled eyes. What his own gaze encountered was a single tar-

nished celandine, whose bent stalk lay almost flat on a wisp of rain-sodden grass.

"When we're married," he responded gravely, after a pause, during which he felt as if with his own hands he were launching a rigged ship into a misty sea, "I'll leave you alone just as much as you want!"

"A girl I know said once that my whistling was only whistling for a lover. *You* don't think that, do you?"

"Good God! I should think not! Your whistling's a wonderful thing. It's your genius. It's your way of expressing what we all want to express."

"What do we all want to express?"

He chuckled right out at this, and, forgetting all vows and pledges, flung his arms round her shoulders and hugged her tightly to his heart. "Oh, Gerda, Gerda!" he cried breathlessly, as he let her go, "you'll be soon making me so damnably fond of you, that I'll be completely at your mercy!"

"But what do we all want to express?" she repeated.

He felt such a rush of happiness at the change in her voice that he could only answer at random.

"God! my dear, *I* don't know! Recognition, I suppose. No! not exactly that! Gratitude, perhaps. But that's not quite it. You've asked a hard question, sweetheart, and I'm damned if I can give you the answer." He drew her towards him as he spoke, and this time she seemed to yield herself as she had never done before. But the warmth of her body, as he pressed it to him, dissolved his tender consideration so quickly that once more she drew back.

Hurriedly anxious to rush in between her thoughts and

herself, he began saying the first thing that came into his head.

"I think what we all want to express is . . . something . . . addressed . . . to . . . to the gods . . . some kind of . . . acknowledgement——"

He stopped abruptly; for she had once more fixed upon him that wild, bewildered look.

"You're not angry with me, Gerda, darling?" he blurted out.

She did not take any notice of these words of his, but the look he dreaded began to fade away under the genuine concern of his tone.

She now pulled her cream-coloured cloak tightly across her olive-green frock; and instead of relinquishing the garment when she'd done this, she kept her arms crossed against her breast, holding the gathered folds of the woollen stuff. Then her lips moved, and, looking away from him, sideways, over the wide field, she said very quietly:

"If you feel it's no good, and you couldn't think of marrying a girl like me, you'd better let me go home now."

He never forgot the solemn fatality she put into those words; and he answered in the only way he could. He took her head gently between his hands and kissed her upon the forehead. This action, in its grave tenderness and its freedom from any fever of the blood, did seem to reassure her.

But the attraction of her sweetness soon excited his senses again and he began caressing her in spite of

himself. She did not resist him any more; but the reaction from the former tenseness of her nerves broke down her self-control, and he soon became aware of the salt taste of tears upon his lips. She did not cry aloud. She cried silently; but the sobs that shook her showed, in the very power they had over her, the richness and vitality of her youthful blood.

The fact that he had launched his boat and hoisted his sail—the fact that he had already resolved to marry her, come what might—was something that in itself dispelled his scruples.

"It's cold here," he murmured, when at last she had lifted up her tear-stained face and they had exchanged some long kisses; "it's cold here, Gerda, darling. Let's just *see* what that shed over there's like! We needn't stay a minute there if it's not a nice sort of place."

A species of deep, lethargic numbness to everything except the immediate suggestions of his voice and touch seemed to have taken possession of her.

His arm round her, her cream-coloured cloak hanging loose, her cheeks pale, she let herself be led across the intervening tract of grass to the open door of the little shed.

Before they reached it, however, she turned her face round and glanced shyly at him. "You know I'm quite stupid and ignorant," she said. "I know nothing about anything."

Wolf did not pause to enquire whether this hurried confession referred to what might be named "the ritual of love" or just simply to her lack of book-learning. His

senses were by this time in such a whirl of excitement that the girl's clear-toned voice sounded like the vague humming of a sea-shell in his ears.

"Gerda?" he murmured huskily, with a faint, a very faint interrogation in his tone.

Emotions, feelings, desires, some exalted, some brutal, whirled up from the bottom of his nature, like storm-driven eels roused and stirred from the ooze of a muddy river!

Together they stood at the entrance to that little shed and surveyed the interior in a silence that was like the hovering of some great falcon of fate, suspended between past and future. The place was an empty cow-barn, its roof thatched with river-reeds and its floor thickly strewn with a clean, dry bed of last Autumn's yellow bracken.

The queer thing was that as he drew her across that threshold his conscious soul seemed to slip out of his body and to watch them both from the high upper air as if it were itself that falcon of fate. But when, with their feet upon that bracken-floor, they faced each other, there suddenly floated into Wolf's mind, like the fluttering of a whirling leaf upon disturbed water, an old Dorset ditty that he had read somewhere, with a refrain about Shaftesbury-town.

"I know nothing about anything," repeated the girl in a low voice; but as he held her tightly against his beating heart, it was not her words but the words of that old song which hummed through his brain.

> There'll be yellow bracken beneath your head;
> There'll be yellow bracken about your feet.
> For the lass Long Thomas lays in's bed
> Will have no blanket, will have no sheet.

My mother has sheets of linen white,
My father has blankets of purple dye.
But to my true-love have I come tonight
And in yellow bracken I'll surely lie:

In the yellow bracken he laid her down,
While the wind blew shrill and the river ran;
And never again she saw Shaftesbury-town,
Whom Long Thomas had taken for his leman!

The smell of the bracken rose up from that bed and took the words of this old song and turned them into the wild beating of the very pulse of love.

To the end of his days he associated that moment with these dried-up aromatic leaves and with that remembered rhyme. The sweetness of his paramour, her courage, her confiding trust, her "fatal passivity," were blended with the fragrance of those withered ferns and with that old ballad.

Meanwhile the chilly March airs floated in and out of the bare shed where they were lying; and the shades of twilight grew deeper and deeper. Those twilight shades, as they settled down about their heads, became like veritable sentinels of love—wraith-like, reverential, patient. They seemed to be holding back the day, so that it should not peer into their faces. They seemed to be holding back the darkness, so that it should not separate them, the one from the other!

And as they lay—happy and oblivious at last—just as if they were really lying on the deck of some full-sailed ship which a great dark-green wave was uplifting, Wolf found himself unaccountably recalling certain casual little things that he had seen that day—seen without knowing that he had seen them! He recalled the under-

side of the bark of a torn-off willow-branch that he had caught sight of in his walk by the Lunt. He recalled the peculiar whitish-yellowness hidden in the curves of an opening fern-frond which he had passed somewhere on the road from King's Barton. He recalled the sturdy beauty, full of a rich, harsh, acrid power, of a single chestnut-bud, which he had unconsciously noted in the outskirts of Blacksod. He recalled certain tiny snail-shells clinging to the stalk of some new-grown dock-leaf whose appearance had struck his mind somewhere in those meadows. . . .

When, after the slow ebbing of what really was a very brief passage of time, but what seemed to Wolf something more than time and different from time, they stood together again outside the hut, there came over him a vague feeling, as if he had actually invaded and possessed something of the virginal aloofness of the now darkened fields.

With his hand over Gerda's shoulder he drank up a great mystery from those cool, wide spaces. His fingers clutched the soft collar of the girl's cloak. He was conscious of her breathing—so steady, so gently, and yet so *living*—like the breath of a warm, soft animal in the velvet darkness. He was conscious of her personality as something quivering and quick, and yet as something solitary, unapproachable.

Suddenly she broke the silence.

"Do you want me to whistle for you?" she asked, in a low, docile voice.

The words reached his ears from an enormous distance. They came travelling to him over rivers, over mountains,

over forests; and as they took shape in his consciousness, something quite different from what he had felt for her swelled up in his throat. He took her head between his hands and kissed her as he had never in his life kissed any woman.

"Lob will hear it," he said with a rough, happy laugh. "But let him hear it! What does it matter now?"

But she moved a few paces away and he watched her whitish shadowily-blurred face as if it had been the face of an immortal.

And he knew, without *seeing* that it was so, that her expression as she whistled was like the expression of a child asleep, or of a child happily, peacefully dead.

And, though it was into the night that she now poured those liquid notes, the tone of their drawn-out music was a tone full of the peculiar feeling of one hour alone of all the hours of night and day. It was the tone of the hour just before dawn, the tone of that life which is not sound, but only withheld breath, the breath of cold buds not yet green, of earth-bound bulbs not yet loosed from their sheaths, the tone of the flight of swallows across chilly seas as yet far off from the warm pebbled beaches towards which they are steering their way.

Gerda's whistling died away now into a silence that seemed to come surging back with a palpable increase of visible darkness in its train.

But the girl remained standing just where she was, quite motionless, about ten paces away from him.

He also remained motionless, where he was, without sign or word.

And just as two straight poplar-trees that in some con-

tinuous storm had been bent down so that their branches have mingled, when the storm is over rise up erect and are once more completely separate and completely themselves, so this man and this girl, whose relation to each other could never be quite the same again, remained distinct, removed, aloof, each standing like a silent bivouac-watcher, guarding the smouldering camp-fire of their own hidden thoughts.

Thus, and not otherwise, had stood, in the green dews of some umbrageous Thessalian valley at the very dawn of time, Orion and Merope, joined and yet so mysteriously divided by this sweet fatality! So in the same green dews had stood Deucalion and Pyrrha, while the earth waited for its new offspring. They also, those primeval lovers, had pondered thus, content and happy, bewildered and sad, while over their heads the darkness descended upon Mount Pelion, or the white moonlight flooded with silver the precipices of Ossa!

As he thought of these things, he made up his mind that he would refrain from any sentimental attempt to bridge the impassable gulf between what Gerda was feeling then and what he was feeling. . . . No casual words of easy tenderness should spoil the classical simplicity of their rare encounter! For classical it had been, in its arbitrariness, in its abruptness, in its heroic defiance of so many obstacles; as he had always prayed that any great love-affair of his might be.

Their words to each other, when at length they did break the spell and wander back hand in hand to where they had separated from Lob, were simple and natural—

reduced, in fact, to the plain level of prosaic, practical anxieties.

"It's the devil!" grumbled Wolf; "but there it is, sweetheart, and we've got to face it. It's not only *my* mother, but *your* mother we shall have to deal with. I know only too well that I've never been to Oxford. I know I have no 'honourable' in front of my name and I know that what Mr. Urquhart gives me will be barely enough for three people to live upon. There it is, my sweet, and we've got to face it."

"I don't think your mother will want to live with us," said the girl quietly.

Wolf winced at this. Somehow or other he had grown so used to thinking of his mother and himself as one person, that it gave him a very queer feeling—as if Gerda had inserted a tiny needle of ice into his heart—to think of the two of them under separate roofs.

A moment later, however, and the feeling passed, crushed under the logic of his reason. It was, of course, inevitable—so he said to himself—that Gerda, young girl though she was, should want a hearth of her own.

"No," he answered, emphatically enough. "We must live by ourselves."

"Father won't give us anything," said Gerda.

"That's all right," he chuckled, laughing surlily but not maliciously. "I've no desire to be supported out of tomb-making! No, no, sweetheart; what we've got to find is some tiny shanty of our own, almost as small as our cow-shed, where neither your mother nor my mother can interfere with us."

"Do you think Mrs. Solent will be *very* angry?" she enquired.

This time her words produced a more serious shock. He felt as if one of his arms or legs had been amputated and was stuck up as a ninepin for Gerda to throw things at, not knowing what she did.

"I'll deal with her, anyway," he replied.

"We'll have to have our banns read out in church," said Gerda.

"We shall!" he conceded, bringing out the syllables like pistol-shots; "but all that part of it will be awful."

Gerda snatched her fingers from him and clapped her hands together. "Don't let's be married!" she cried gaily. "It'll be far more fun not to be; and if I have a child it'll be a bastard, like the kings in history!"

But Wolf had already formed a very definite image in his mind of the enchanted hovel where he would live with this unparalleled being, free from all care.

"We can't manage it without being married, Gerda; and as for bastards——"

"Hush!" she cried. "We're talking nonsense. Gipoo Cooper told me I should never have a child."

Wolf was silenced by this; and then, after a pause, "I don't believe Urquhart would make any fuss," he said meditatively. "It wouldn't interfere with my work."

"What you don't realize," she protested in a low voice, "is how completely different my family is from yours. Why, Father never says a word like he'd been educated or been to School."

But Wolf refused to let this pass.

"Perhaps *you* don't realize, Missy," he flung out, in

a clear, emphatic voice, "that my father died in Ramsgard Workhouse!"

Her commentary upon this information was to snatch his hand and raise it to her lips.

" 'Tisn't where a gentleman dies," she responded, "that makes the difference. 'Tis where he's born."

"Oh, damn all this!" he cried abruptly. "I don't care if your father talks his head off with Dorset talk; and all Blacksod knows that my father threw himself to the dogs. I'm going to live for the rest of my life in Dorsetshire, and I'm going to live alone with my sweet Gerda!"

He hugged her to his heart as he spoke.

"I'm very thankful that you like my whistling," she said, rather breathlessly, when he let her go. "I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't."

"Like it!" he cried. "Oh, Gerda, my Gerda, I can't tell you what it's like. I've never heard anything to touch it and never shall; and that's the long and short of it!"

Thus discoursing, the lovers arrived at the prostrate elm-trunk where they had left their belongings. It looked so familiar and yet so different now, as they stumbled upon it in the darkness, that Wolf received the kind of shock that people get when, after some world-changing adventure, they encounter the reproachful sameness of some well-known aspect of hearth and home. And there was Lob! The boy was crouched in a posture like that of a reproachful goblin. He was engaged in cutting with his pocket-knife—in spite of the darkness—deep, jagged incisions in the handle of Wolf's stick! Much time was to pass before those unevennesses in the handle of that

oak cudgel ceased to compel its owner to recall with bitter-sweet vividness the events of that incredible March Wednesday!

"I know'd you'd go rat-hunting," was his sulky greeting. Evidently to Lob's mind no other occupation than this could account for their protracted absence from his side. "I know'd you'd do it. Girls is never to be trusted, girls isn't. 'Tis in their constitution to betray."

"Good Lord, Lob!" cried Wolf. "Where did you get that sentence? Have you been composing that speech ever since we left?"

"Look here, Sis," declared the boy, standing in front of her with the air of a robber-chief. "You've got to fork out! You've got to give threepence to I, or never no more will I take your word!"

But the girl's tone was now the self-composed, elder sister's tone.

"I hope you only took one egg, Lob; like I always tell you to."

"I won," he repeated obstinately. "I won; so you pays."

"Show me the egg," said Gerda. "Where is it? I hope it *wasn't* the only one. Have you blown it without making that silly big hole you always make? Show it to me, Lob!"

"I can't show it to 'ee, for I ain't got it," grumbled the boy. "I got a nest, all right; and I got a egg all right. There were four on 'em—all wonderful specks—in thik nest; and I minded what you always says to I, and I only took one."

"Where is it, then? Show it to us, Lob!"

Lob moved nearer to Wolf. "You won't let she cheat I of thik threepence," he pleaded querulously.

"Where is that egg, Lob?" repeated the young girl. "He's up to something; you mark my words!" she added.

"They girls be never to be trusted, be they?" grumbled the boy, sidling up still closer to Wolf.

"You know perfectly well you can always trust me, Lob!" protested Gerda indignantly. "It's you who we can't trust now; isn't it, Mr. Solent?"

The man looked from one to the other. It amused him to listen to such contending voices from these two blurred spots of whiteness in the dark; while he himself, full of an unutterably sweet indolence, acted as their languid umpire. He was delighted, too, as well as amazed, by the intense gravity with which Gerda took this trifling disagreement. How quaint girls were! If he had caught Lob stealing his very watch in the darkness and transferring it to his own pocket, he felt, just then, that he would hardly have noticed the incident!

"Haven't I won over she, Mr. Solent?" whined the child. "I found thik nestie fields and fields away from where us be now. 'Twere in monstrous girt hedge, thik nestie, and I scratched myself cruel getting my hand in."

"Why haven't you got the egg, then?" insisted the girl, in a hard, accusing voice.

" 'Cos I broke the bloody thing!" wailed the boy desperately. "I were crossing one of they darned fields and I treadit in a girt rabbit-gin and came near to breaking me neck, let alone thik bloody egg."

"Lob, I'm right-down ashamed of you!" cried Gerda, in a voice quivering with moral indignation.

"What be up to now, then?" responded the boy. "What be all this hullabaloo about, when a person tells straight out what a person gone and done? If it be so turble hard to 'ee to lose threepence, why did 'ee go rat-hunting with *him* here and leave anyone all lonesome-like? For all *you* care, a chap might have been tossed, this here dark night, by some o' they girt bullicks!"

His voice grew plaintive; but Gerda was unmoved.

"You never found any nest at all, Lob, and you know you didn't."

Lobbie's voice sounded now as if he very soon might burst into tears.

"I shan't have no shilling! I shan't have no shilling without I gets the threepence you betted wi' I!"

Wolf began fumbling in his pocket; but the girl stopped him with a quick movement.

"Lob," she said sternly, "you've never lied to me before, in all the rat-hunts, and nuttings, and blackberryings, and mushroomings we've ever had together. What's come over you, Lob? Oh, I *am* ashamed of you! 'Tisn't as if I were Mother or Dad. 'Tisn't as if we hadn't always done everything together. You're not nice company, any more, Lob, for people to go about with! I shall always have to say to anyone in the future, 'Take care, now, you can never depend upon what Lob Torp says!' "

Wolf, seating himself in the darkness upon the fallen tree-trunk, listened in amazement to this dialogue. The moods of women, except for those of his mother, were a phenomenon the ebbings and flowings of which had hardly presented themselves to his deeper consciousness. He obtained now, in listening to Gerda's righteous anger,

an inkling of the supernatural power which these beings have of bringing to bear upon the male conscience exactly that one accusation, of all others, which will pierce it to its heart's core!

He had no conception of how Gerda had found out that the boy was lying, and he felt at that moment a faint and perhaps scandalous wave of sympathy pass through him for Lobbie Torp.

Lob himself felt this at once with a child's clairvoyance.

"She's cross about the threepence," he whispered, leaning against the man's knee, "but you'll pay it, won't you, Mr. Solent?"

Wolf had grown weary by this time of the whole discussion. He took advantage of the darkness to transfer from his own pocket to that of this fellow wrong-doer at least twice as much as he was demanding.

"Come on," he said, when the clandestine transaction was accomplished, "let's get back to the Blacksod road before we're completely benighted!"

He rose and moved on between them, Lob in penitent and rather shamefaced silence carrying the great wicker-basket, at the bottom of which reposed a few fading marigolds and some handfuls of watercress.

The excitement of climbing over the railings at the very edge of the river-bank, and the pride she took in being able to show her power of guiding her lover through the darkened fields, quickly restored Gerda's good-humour.

"We'll drop Lob at the beginning of Chequers Street," Wolf said, when they at last felt the hard road from

Nevilton to Blacksod under their feet. "Do you think," he went on, "that Miss Malakite will expect us still, so long after tea-time?"

"I was going to stay to supper with her," said Gerda; "so I don't think it'll matter. She'll give us tea, though, late as we are! She won't have noticed the time at all, very likely. She never does, when her father's away and she's reading."

With the sister and brother leaning against him naturally and familiarly, each on one of his arms, Wolf with his oak-stick held firmly in the hand adjoining the now somewhat dragging and tired bird's-nester, strode along towards the lights of the town, in a deep, diffused warmth of unalloyed happiness. The days of his life seemed to stretch out before him in a lovely Spring-scented perspective.

The few misgivings that remained to him about his marriage fell away in that hedge-scented darkness—a darkness that seemed to separate the earth from the sky with the formless presence of some tremendous but friendly deity, under whose protection he bore those two along. And as he felt Gerda press his arm softly and lightly against her young body, the sensation came over him that he had only to walk on and on . . . on and on . . . just like this . . . in order to bring that secret "mythology" of his into relation with the whole world.

"Whom Long Thomas has taken for his leman," he repeated in his heart; and it seemed to him as if the lights of the town, which now began to welcome them, were the lights of a certain imaginary city which from his early childhood had appeared and disappeared on the margin

of his mind. It was wont to appear in strange places, this city of his fancy . . . at the bottom of teacups . . . or the window-panes of privies . . . in the soapy water of baths . . . in the dirty marks on wall-papers . . . in the bleak coals of dead Summer-grates . . . between the rusty railings of deserted burying-grounds . . . above the miserable patterns of faded carpets . . . among the nameless litter of pavement-gutters. . . . But whenever he had seen it, it was always associated with the first lighting up of lamps, and with the existence, but not necessarily the presence, of someone . . . some girl . . . some boy . . . some unknown . . . whose place in his life would resemble that first lighting of lamps . . . that sense of arriving out of the cold darkness of empty fields and lost ways into the rich, warm, glowing security of that mysterious town. . . .

"Whom Long Thomas has taken for his leman," he repeated once more. And he thought to himself, "It's all in that word . . . in that word; and in coming along a dark road to where lamps are lit!"

THEY GOT RID OF LOBBIE AT THE CORNER OF CHEQUERS Street, and moved on, side by side, past the lighted shop-windows. It was a further revelation to him of the ways of girls, to notice that Gerda repeatedly stopped him, with a childish clutch at his coat-sleeve, before some trifle in those lighted windows that attracted her attention. Her eyes were dreamy with a soft languorous happiness; while her little cries of pleasure at what she saw made ripples in the surface of her mental trance like the rising of a darting shoal of minnows to the top of deep water.

As for his own mood, the lights of the town, its traffic and its crowds, threw him upon a rich, dark, incredible intimacy with her, whose sweetness reduced everything to a vague reassuring stage-play. Everything became a play whose living puppets seemed so touchingly lovable that he could have wept to behold them, and to know that she was beholding them with him!

When they reached the door of the Malakite book-shop, however, he became conscious of so deep an unwillingness to face the look of Christie's steady brown eyes that he impetuously begged off.

"I can't do it tonight," he said; "so don't 'ee press me, my precious!"

Their farewell was grave and tender; but he left her without looking back.

It was then that hunger came upon him; and making

his way to the Three Peewits, he ordered a substantial supper, beneath the not altogether sympathetic gaze of Queen Victoria.

He remained for nearly two hours lingering over this meal, while at the back of his mind the ditty about Shaftesbury-town and Yellow Bracken mingled with the fragrance of the old hostelry's old wine. When at last he rose from the table, it occurred to him that Darnley Otter had mentioned on the previous day that both the brothers might be here this night. Led by a mysterious desire, just then—not quite understood by himself—for masculine society, he entered the little inner parlour of the Three Peewits. Here he found himself in a thick cloud of tobacco-smoke and a still thicker murmur of men's voices. The change from his erotic musings into so social and crude an atmosphere was more bewildering to his mind than he had expected. He gazed round him, befogged and blinking.

But Darnley Otter rose at once to greet him, leading him to an aperture in the wall, where drinks were served. Standing there by Darnley's side, he made polite, hurried bows to the different members of the company, as his friend mentioned their names, and while his glass was filled and refilled with brandy, he found his eyes turning inevitably to the place where Jason sat—sat as if he had been doing nothing else since he came into that room but wait for Wolf's arrival. The man was watching him intently now, and without a trace of that whimsical humour with which he had departed from him to walk round the edge of Lenty Pond.

Wolf began at once summoning up from the recesses

of his own nature all the psychic power he could bring to bear, to cope with this new situation. As he chatted at that little counter with Darnley, in the midst of a rambling, incoherent flow of talk from all parts of the room, he deliberately drank glass after glass of brandy, amused at the nervousness with which Darnley observed this proceeding, and growing more and more determined to fathom the mystery of that self-lacerated being on the other side of the room.

It seemed to him now that Jason's head, as he saw it across that smoke-filled space, resembled that of some lost spirit in Dante's Inferno, swirling up out of the pit and crying, "Help! Help! Help!" It was curious to himself how ready he felt just then to respond to that cry. "I must have drunk up this new strength from possessing Gerda," he thought to himself.

Darnley's trim beard continued to wag with gentlemanly urbanity, as he laughed and jested with various people in different parts of the room, but Wolf could see that he was growing more and more nervous about his brother. Nor was this nervousness without justification. Jason had turned his face to his neighbour, who was a grim farmer from Nevilton, and was uttering words that evidently seemed to startle the man, if not to shock him; for his face grew grimmer than ever, and he kept shifting his chair a little further away.

Things were at this pass when the door opened with a violent swing, and there came in together Mr. Torp, Mr. T. E. Valley, and a tall handsome browbeating individual, who was presently introduced to Wolf as Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill.

The vicar of King's Barton seemed to have been drinking already; for he staggered straight up to the counter, pulling the plump stone-cutter unceremoniously after him by the lapel of his coat. The heavy-jowled Mr. Manley moved across the room and seated himself by the side of the farmer from Nevilton, whom he addressed loudly and familiarly as Josh Beard. Wolf noticed that Mr. Beard, in a very sour and malicious manner, began at once repeating to this newcomer whatever it had been that Jason Otter had just said to him; while Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill proceeded with equal promptness to cast looks of jocose and jeering brutality at the unfortunate poet.

"My friend Mr. Torp was in the bar-room; so I brought him in," said T. E. Valley, shaking hands with Wolf as if he had not seen him for years.

" 'Tis no impertinence, I hope, for I to come in," said the stone-cutter, humbly; and it struck Wolf's mind as a kind of mad dream—not a nightmare, but just one of those dreams where men and houses and animals and trees are all involved and interchanged—that this grotesque figure of a man should be the father of Gerda!

"Mr. Torp and I are old friends," said Wolf, with cordial emphasis, "and I can't tell you how glad I am to see you again, Vicar! Will you let me order you something? The brandy here seems to me uncommonly good."

In answer to Wolf's appeal, the barmaid, whose personality, as she appeared and disappeared at that square orifice, grew more and more dreamlike, brought three large glasses of the drink he demanded, two of which he

promptly handed to Valley and Torp, while the third he appropriated for himself.

" 'Tis wondrous," remarked Mr. Torp, receiving his glass with unsteady hand; " 'tis wondrous for a man what works with chisel and hammer all day, to sit and see what folks be like who never do a stroke. I bain't one o' they myself who do blame the gentry. What I do say be this, and I don't care who hears it. I do say that a man be a man while he lives; and a gent be a gent while he lives. Durn me if that ain't the truth."

"But when we're dead, Mr. Torp," called out the voice of Jason from the further end of the room, "what are we when we're dead?"

"Evenin', Mr. Otter, evenin' to 'ee, Sir! Dead, say 'ee? I be the man to answer that conundrum. Us be as our tombstones be! Them as has 'Torp' writ on 'um in clean, good marble, be with the Lord. They others be with wold Horny."

Several mellow guffaws greeted this speech, for Gerda's parent was evidently a privileged jester among them; but to the dismay of his brother, who was now talking in a quiet whisper to Wolf, the hollow voice of Jason floated once more across the room.

"Ask that drunk priest over there why he took young Redfern from a good job and turned him into a pious zany."

There was a vibration in his tone that at once quieted the general clatter of tongues, and everyone looked at Mr. Valley.

"I don't . . . quite . . . understand your . . . question . . . Mr. Otter," stammered the little man.

The bull-like voice of Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill broke in then.

"His reverence may be hard of hearing. Shall *I* do the asking of him?" And the great bully-boy hesitated not to roar out in thundering tones: "Mister Otter here be asking of 'ee, and this whole company be waiting to know from 'ee, what god-darned trick you played on young Redfern afore he died."

"I must beg you, Mr. Manley," said Darnley Otter, whose face, as Wolf watched it, had become stiff as a mask, "I must beg you not to make a scene tonight."

"I am still quite . . . quite . . . at a loss . . . a loss to understand," began the agitated clergyman, moving forward a step or two towards his aggressor.

But Mr. Torp interrupted him. "Ask thee bloody questions of thee wone bloody millpond and don't lift up thee's roaring voice among thee's betters!"

There was a considerable hum of applause among the company at this; for Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill was universally disliked.

But the farmer took no heed of this manifestation of public opinion.

"Do 'ee hear what Jack Torp be saying?" he jeered, stretching out his long legs and emptying his glass of gin-and-bitters. "He's sick as Satan wi' I; and I'll tell 'ee the cause for't."

There was a general stir in the room and a craning forward of necks. The seasoned cronies of the Three Pee-wits had long ago discovered that the most delectable of all social delights was a quarrel that just stopped short of physical violence.

"The cause for't be," went on the master of Willum's Mill, "that I ordered me mother's grave proper-like from Weymouth, 'stead of ferretting round his dog-gone yard, where there bain't naught but litter and rubbish and paupers' monuments."

Having thrown out this challenge, the farmer drew in his legs, placed his great hands upon his knees, and leaned forward. There was a dead silence in that ale-embrowned atmosphere, as if the "private bar" itself, the very walls of which must have been yellow with old leisurely disputes, were aware of something exceptional in that spurt of human venom.

Mr. Torp gave a quick sideways glance to see how the "gentry" were behaving. But Wolf was discreetly occupied in ordering more drinks—he had already had to tell the barmaid to "put down" what he ordered, for his pockets were empty—and Darnley was merely pulling at his beard and keeping his eye on the Vicar.

"Thee's mother's stone!" snorted the monument-maker, with resonant contempt. " 'Twere ready and beauteous, gents all, 'twere ready and beauteous, thik stone! All what passed down street did stop for to see 'un, and did say to theyselves, 'Thik fine stone be too good for a farmer's old woman! Thik fine stone be a titled lady's stone!' "

The farmer's gin-dazed wits could only reply to this by a repeated, " 'Twere a pauper's throw-away; 'twere a workhouse six-foot and nothing!"

Mr. Torp's voice rose higher still. "This Manley here were afeared to leave his mother in ground for a day without a stone on her. He were afeared the poor woman

would come out on's grave to tell tales on him, the old goat-sucker! So while thik fine stone were lying in yard getting weathered-like, as is good for they foreign marbles, this girt vool of a nag's head what must 'a do but drive hay-wagon to Chesil, and bring whoam a silly block o' Portland, same as they fish-folk do cover their bones wi', what have never seed a bit o' marble!"

Under the impact of this eloquent indictment, which excited immense hilarity throughout all the company, Mr. Manley rose unsteadily to his feet and moved towards his enemy. But Mr. Torp, ensconced between Darnley Otter and T. E. Valley, awaited his approach unmoved.

To the surprise of all, the big bully skirted this little group, and, joining Wolf at the liquor-stained counter, bellowed harmlessly for more gin.

It was at this point in the proceedings that more serious trouble began; for Jason Otter, pointing with a shaky forefinger at the Reverend Valley, screamed out in a paroxysm of fury:

"It's you who talk about me to Urquhart and Monk. . . . I've found it out now. . . . It's you who do it!"

The Peewit cronies must have felt that this unexpected clash between two of their "gentry" rose from more subtle depths than those to which they were accustomed; for they were stricken into a silence, at this juncture, which was by no means a comfortable one.

"Mr. Otter here," broke in the owner of Willum's Mill, "Mr. Otter here have been telling pretty little tales of the high doings what go on up at King's Barton. Mr. Otter says Squire Urquhart have sold his soul to that

black son-of-a-gun who works in's garden, and that 'tis bookseller Malakite here in Blacksod whose books do larn 'em their deviltries!"

"I think . . . there . . . is . . . some great . . . mistake . . . in your . . . in your mind, Mr. Manley."

The words were uttered by T. E. Valley in such shaky tones that Wolf was relieved when he saw Darnley take the parson reassuringly by the arm.

"Mistake?" roared the farmer. "I bain't one for to say what I ain't got chapter nor text for saying! My friend, Josh Beard here, of Nevilton, County of Somerset, be as good a breeder of short-horns as any in Darset; and 'a do say 'a have heerd such things tonight such as no man's lips should utter; and heerd them, too, from one as we all do know." And he turned round and leered at Jason Otter with the leer of a tipsy hangman.

"Hold thee's tongue in thee's bullick's-head!" cried the indignant monument-maker. "A gent's a gent, I tell 'ee; and when a quiet gent, like what's with us tonight, be moderate wambly in's head, owing to liquor, 'tisn't for a girt bull-frog like thee to lift up voice."

"Bull-frog be ——" grumbled the big farmer, hiding his inability to contend in repartee with Mr. Torp under an increased grossness of speech. "What do a son-of-a-bitch like thee know of the ways of the gentry?"

"Malakite?" muttered the breeder of short-horns. "Bain't Malakite the old beggar what got into trouble with the police some ten years since?"

"So 'twere," agreed the grateful tenant of Willum's Mill, "so 'twere, brother Beard. 'A did, as thee dost say, get into the devil's own trouble. 'Twere along of his gals;

so some folks said. 'A was one of they hoary wold sinners what Bible do tell of."

" 'Twere even so, neighbour; 'twere even so," echoed Mr. Beard. "And I *have* heerd that old Bert Smith up at Ramsgard could tell a fine story about thik little job."

Wolf's mind was too flustered with brandy just then to receive more than a vague shock of confused ambiguity from this startling hint; but the next remark of the man from Nevilton cleared his brains with the violence of a bucket of ice-cold water.

"Bert Smith may sell his grand school-hats all he will; but they do tell out our way—though I know nought of that, seeing I were living at Stamford Orcus in them days—that thik same poor wisp o' bedstraw dursn't call his own gal by his own name, whether 'a be in shop or in church."

"That's God's own truth you've a-heerd, Josh Beard," echoed the triumphant Mr. Manley. " 'Tisn't safe for that poor man to call his own daughter daughter, in the light o' what folks, as knows, do report. If I didn't respect any *real* gentleman"—and to Wolf's consternation the gin-bemused stare of the farmer was turned upon himself—"and if I weren't churchwarden and hadn't voted Conservative for nigh thirty years, I would show this here stone-chipper the kind of gallimaufry these educated gents will cook for theyselves, afore they're done!"

Wolf's wits, moving now, in spite of the fumes of smoke and alcohol, with restored clarity, achieved a momentous orientation of many obscure matters. He recalled certain complicated hints and hesitations of Selena Gault. He recalled the reckless and embittered gaiety

of his mother. With a shaky hand he finished his last glass and laid it down on the counter. Then he looked across the room at the two farmers.

"I don't know whose feelings you are so careful of, Mr. Manley," he said. "But since I happen to be myself one of these unfortunate 'educated' people, and since Mr. Solent, my father, came to grief in this neighbourhood, I should be very glad indeed to hear anything else you may be anxious to tell us."

His voice, heard now by the whole company for the first time, had a disquieting tone; and everyone was silent. But Jason Otter rose to his feet, and, in the midst of that silence and under the startled attention of all eyes in the room, walked with short quick steps across the floor till he came close up to Farmer Manley, who was leaning his back against the little counter and who had his hands in his pockets; and there he stopped, facing him. No one but Wolf could see the expression on his countenance; and there were all kinds of different versions afterwards as to what actually happened. But what Wolf himself knew was that the excited man was no longer under the restraint of his natural timidity.

His own intelligence was so clairvoyantly aroused at that moment, that he could recall later every flicker of the conflicting impulses that shot through him. The one that dominated the rest was a categorical certainty that some immediate drastic action was necessary. What he did was to take Jason by the shoulders and fling him backwards into an old beer-stained chair that stood unoccupied against the neighbouring wall. In the violence of this action an earthenware jug of water—and Wolf

had time to notice the mellow varnish of its surface—fell with a crash upon the floor. There was a hush now throughout the room, and most of the company leaned excitedly forward. Jason himself, huddled limply in a great wooden chair, turned his devastated white face and lamentable eyes full upon his aggressor.

"I . . . I . . . I didn't mean . . ." he gasped.

"It's all right, Solent," whispered Darnley, accepting a chair by Jason's side, which its owner willingly vacated. "You couldn't have done anything else."

"I don't know about that, Otter," Wolf whispered back. "I expect we're all a little fuddled. Sit down, won't you, and when he's rested we'll clear out, eh? I've had enough of this."

All the patrons of the private bar were gathered now in little groups about the room; and before long, with sly inquisitive glances and many secretive nudges and nods, the bulk of the company drifted out, leaving the room nearly empty.

"I can't . . . understand. . . . I didn't see. . . . Was he going to *bite* you?"

The words were from T. E. Valley; and Wolf was so astonished at the expression he used, that he answered with a good deal of irritation:

"Do *you* bite people, Mr. Valley?"

The priest's feelings were evidently outraged by this. "What do you mean?" he protested querulously.

"I mean," began Wolf. "Oh, I don't know! But to a stranger down here there does seem a good deal that's funny about you all! You must forgive me, Mr. Valley; but, on my soul, you brought it on yourself. *Bite?* It's

rather an odd idea, isn't it? You did say *bite*, didn't you?"

They were interrupted by Mr. Manley of Willum's Mill, who, with Mr. Joshua Beard in tow, was steering for the door.

"Did you hurt the gentleman, Sir?" said Mr. Manley to Wolf, in the grave, cautious voice of a drunkard anxious to prove his sobriety.

"You drove the gentleman into fold, seems so!" echoed Mr. Beard.

In thus approaching Wolf it was inevitable that the two worthies should jostle the portly frame of Mr. Torp, who, leaning against the back of a chair, with an empty pewter beer-mug trailing by its handle from one of his plump fingers, had fallen into an interlude of peaceful coma.

"Who the bloody hell be 'ee barging into?" murmured Mr. Torp, aroused thus suddenly to normal consciousness.

"Paupers' moniments!" jeered the farmer. "Nought but paupers' moniments in's yard; and 'a can still talk grand and mighty!"

The stone-cutter struggled to gather his wandering wits together. In his confusion the only friendly shape he could visualize was the form of Mr. Valley, and he promptly made all the use he could of that.

"The Reverend here," he said, "can bear witness to I, in the face of all thee's bloody millponds and haywagons. The Reverend here do know what they words, 'Torp, Moniment-Maker, Blacksod,' do signify. The Reverend here did see, for his own self, thik girt stone what

I did put up over first young man." He now removed his bewildered little pig's-eyes from Mr. Valley and fixed them upon Wolf. "And here be second young man who can bear witness to I; and, darn it, thee'd best do as I do say, Mr. Redfern Number Two, for thee's been clipping and cuddling our Gerda, 'sknow, and I be only to tell Missus on 'ee, and fat be in fire."

Had not the whole scene become to him by this time incredibly phantasmal, such an unexpected introduction of Gerda's name, on this night of all nights, might have struck a villainous blow at his life-illusion. As it was, however, he could only wonder at the perspicacity of drunken fathers, and pull himself together for an adequate retort.

"My name is Solent, my good sir, as you ought to know," he said. And then he turned to the two farmers, who were nudging each other and leering at him like a couple of schoolboy bullies. "Mr. Torp and I are the best of friends," he remarked sternly.

"Friend of Torp," chuckled Mr. Manley.

"Torp's friend," echoed Mr. Beard.

"Thee'd best keep thee's daughter in house, Jack!" continued Mr. Manley. "Lest t'other one rumple her, same as first one did," concluded Mr. Beard.

Wolf, beyond his conscious intention, clenched the fingers of his right hand savagely; but his wits were clear now, and he mastered the impulse. "Whatever happens, I mustn't make an ass of myself tonight," he thought.

"You'd better go out into the air, gentlemen," he said quietly, "and cool your heads, or you'll get into trouble. Come, Mr. Torp. You and I must have a last glass to-

gether; and you, too, Vicar." And he led them away towards the little counter.

The farmers moved slowly toward the door.

"Redfern Number Two, 'a called un," Wolf heard Mr. Beard saying. "Now what be the meaning o' *that*, me boy?" He couldn't hear the big farmer's answer; but whatever it was, it ended in a sort of bawdy rhyme, of which all he could catch was the chanted refrain, "Jimmie Redfern, *he* were there!" And with that the door swung behind them.

He had just time to obtain three more drinks from the barmaid before she pulled down the little wooden slide and indicated in no equivocal manner that eleven o'clock had struck.

Simultaneously with this a serving-boy entered and began to turn down the lights. "We ought to be starting for home," said Darnley Otter, from where he sat by his brother, whose great melancholy eyes were fixed upon vacancy. "And it's none too soon, either!"

"I'll be getting home-along me own self, now this here lad be meddling with they lights," remarked Mr. Torp, emptying his glass. "Good-night to 'ee all," he added, taking down his coat and hat from a peg; "and if I've exceeded in speech to any gent here"—and he glanced anxiously at Wolf and Mr. Valley—"it be contrary to me nature and contrary to me profession."

"I . . . suppose . . . you won't mind . . ." murmured the voice of T. E. Valley, who had remained at the counter, sipping the drink, to which Wolf had treated him, as if it were the first he had tasted that night, "if I come with you? I don't want to get on anybody's nerves"

—and he looked at Jason Otter, who without being asleep seemed to have drifted off into another world—"but I don't like that walk alone at night."

"Of course you must come with us, Valley," said Darnley. "Though what you can find so frightening in that quiet lane I can't imagine." Saying this he pulled his brother up upon his feet and helped him into his overcoat.

Half-an-hour later they were all four making their way past the last houses of Blacksod. Darnley and Jason were walking in front; Wolf and T. E. Valley about six paces to the rear. They were all silent, as if the contrast between the noisy scene they had just left and the hushed quietness of the way were a rebuke to their souls.

In one of the smaller houses, where for some reason neither curtain nor blind had been drawn, Wolf could see two candles burning on a small table at which someone was still reading.

He touched Mr. Valley's arm, and both the men stood for a time looking at that unconscious reader. It was an elderly woman who read there by those two candles, her chin propped upon one arm and the other arm lying extended across the table. The woman's face had nothing remarkable about it. The book she read was obviously, from its shape and appearance, a cheap story; but as Wolf stared in upon her, sitting there in that commonplace room at midnight, an indescribable sense of the drama of human life passed through him. For leagues and leagues in every direction the great pastoral fields lay quiet in their muffled dew-drenched aloofness. But there, by those two pointed flames, one isolated conscious-

ness kept up the old familiar interest, in love, in birth, in death, all the turbulent chances of mortal events. That simple, pallid, spectacled head became for him at that moment a little island of warm human awareness in the midst of the vast non-human night.

He thought to himself how, in some future time, when these formidable scientific inventions would have changed the face of the earth, some wayward philosopher like himself would still perhaps watch through a window a human head *reading by candlelight,* and find such a sight touching beyond words. Mentally he resolved once more, while to Mr. Valley's surprise he still lingered, staring in at that candle-lit window, that while he lived he would never allow the beauty of things of this sort to be overpowered for him by anything that science could do.

He submitted at last to his companion's uneasiness and walked on. But in his heart he thought: "That old woman in there might be reading a story about my own life! She might be reading about Shaftesbury-town and yellow bracken and Gerda's whistling! She might be reading about Christie and the Malakite book-shop. She might be reading about Mattie——" His thoughts veered suddenly. "Mattie? Mattie Smith?" And a wavering suspicion that had been gathering weight for some while in his mind suddenly took to itself an irrefutable shape. "Lorna and my father. . . . The little girl said we were alike. . . . That's what it is!"

He did not formulate the word "sister" in any portion of his consciousness where ideas express themselves in words, but across some shadowy mental landscape

within him floated and drifted that heavy-faced girl with a new and richly-charged identity! All the vague fragments of association that had gathered here and there in his life around the word "sister," hastened now to attach themselves to the personality of Mattie Smith and to give it their peculiar glamour.

"How unreal my life seems to be growing," he thought. "London seemed fantastic to me when I lived there, like a tissue of filmy threads; but . . . good Lord! . . . compared with this!—It would be curious if that old woman reading that book were really reading my history and has now perhaps come to my death. Well, as long as old women like that read books by candlelight there'll be *some* romance left!"

His mind withdrew into itself with a jerk at this point, trying to push away a certain image of things that rose discomfortably upon him—the image of a countryside covered from sea to sea by illuminated stations for airships, overspread from sea to sea by thousands of humming aeroplanes!

What would ever become of Tilly-Valley's religion in *that* world, with head-lights flashing along cemented highways, and all existence dominated by electricity? What would become of old women reading by candlelight? What would become of his own life-illusion, his secret "mythology," in such a world?

Stubbornly he pushed this vision away. "I'll live in my own world to the end," he said to himself. "Nothing shall make me yield."

And while a gasping susurration at his side indicated that he was, in his excitement, walking too fast for Mr.

Valley, he discovered that that grey feather of Christie's which served her as a marker in the "Urn Burial" had risen up again in his mind.

And as he walked along, adapting his steps to his companion's shambling progress, he indulged in the fancy that his soul was like a vast cloudy serpent of writhing vapour that had the power of over-reaching every kind of human invention. "All inventions," he thought, "come from man's brains. And man's soul can escape from them and even while using them treat them with contempt—treat them *as if they were not!* It can slip through them like a snake, float over them like a mist, burrow under them like a mole!"

He swung his stick excitedly in the darkness, while he gave his arm to Mr. Valley to help him along. He felt as though he were entering upon some desperate, invisible struggle to safeguard everything that was sacred to him against modern inventions. "It's queer," he thought to himself, "what the sight of that grey feather in the book, and that old woman with the candle, have done to my mind. I've made love to the limit; I've brawled in a tavern to the limit; and here I am, with a tipsy priest on my arm, thinking of nothing but defending I don't know what against motor-cars and aeroplanes!"

He continued vaguely to puzzle himself, as they lurched forward in the darkness, as to what it was in his nature that made his seduction of Gerda, his encounter with Jason, his discovery of Mattie, thus fall away from his consciousness in comparison with that feather and that candle; and he came finally to the conclusion, be-

fore they reached King's Barton, that there must be something queer and inhuman in him. "But there it is," he finally concluded. "If I'm like that . . . I *am* like that! We must see what comes of it!"

THE FIRST PERSON OF THEIR ACQUAINTANCE THEY ENcountered, when Wolf and Mrs. Solent mingled with the lively crowd that filled Ramsgard's famous Castle Field that afternoon, was none other than Mr. Albert Smith. Wolf was amazed at the cordiality of his mother's greeting; and so quite evidently was the worthy hatter himself.

Mrs. Solent was fashionably dressed; but what struck her son more than her clothes at that moment was the incredible power of her haughty profile, as she flung out her light badinage, like so many shining javelins, at the nervous tradesman.

The thought rushed across his brain, as he watched her: "She's never had her chance in life! She was made for large transactions and stirring events!" Letting his gaze wander over the groups about them, Wolf caught sight of Mr. Urquhart's figure in the distance; and he decided that, since sooner or later he would have to greet the man, the best thing he could do was to get it over as soon as possible, so as to be prepared to face his Blacksod friends free of responsibility.

Leaving his companions to themselves, therefore, with a nod at his mother, he plunged into the heart of that motley scene. The day obviously was the culmination of the Wessex Fair. The large expanse of meadow-land lying between the castle-ruins and the railway was encircled by booths, stalls, roundabouts, fortune-tellers'

tents, toy circuses—all the entertainments, in fact, which the annual horde of migratory peddlers of amusement offered, according to age-old tradition, to their rustic clients.

But the centre portion of this spacious fair-ground was carefully roped off; and it was here that the riding and driving competitions took place that gave so special an interest to this particular afternoon.

One segment of this roped-off circle had been converted into a sort of privileged paddock, corresponding to a race-course grand-stand, where the aristocracy of the neighbourhood, whose carriages were drawn up under the railway-bank, could watch the proceedings in undisturbed security.

The opportunity Wolf had seized of approaching Mr. Urquhart was given him by the fact that the Squire of King's Barton was standing alone, close to the rope, at some little distance from the privileged spot where most of his compeers were gathered.

He was watching with absorbed interest a stately parade of prize-stallions, who, adorned with ribbons and other marks of distinction, ambled ponderously by, one after another, as if they were parading in some gigantic super-equine festival that ought to have had super-human spectators! The creatures looked so powerful and so contemptuous beside the stablemen who led them, that Wolf, as he approached this procession, saw for a moment the whole human race in an inferior and ignominious light—saw them as some breed of diabolically clever monkeys, who, by a debased trick of cunning, had been able to reduce to servitude, though not to servility, ani-

mals far nobler and more godlike than themselves.

"It makes you feel like a Yahoo, Sir," said Wolf, as he shook hands with Mr. Urquhart. "I mean it makes *me* feel like a Yahoo. Good Lord! Look at that beast! Don't you get the sensation that those hooves are really making the earth tremble?"

But Mr. Urquhart, though he had grasped his secretary's hand warmly and had seemed pleased to see him, took no more notice of this remark than if it had been some negligible banality uttered by a complete stranger. Wolf, standing by his side, said no more till the procession had passed. His attention began to wander from the great stallions to a mental consideration that made him straighten his own shoulders.

He had suddenly become aware of the felicitous appropriateness of Mr. Urquhart's clothes; and although his own overcoat was a good one and his cloth-hat new, he felt somehow badly dressed in the man's company, a feeling that caused him considerable annoyance.

"Damn this accursed snobbishness!" he said to himself, as he contemplated the vast grey flanks of the winner of the third prize. "Why can't I detach myself absolutely from these things and see them as a visitor from Saturn or Uranus would see them?"

Mr. Urquhart turned to him when the last stallion had passed by. "Do 'ee know who my man brought with him over here?" he said, smiling.

Wolf could only lift his thick eyebrows interrogatively. He continued to feel uncomfortable under his employer's quizzical gaze. "He looks me up and down," he thought

to himself, "as if I were a horse that had disappointed him by not winning even a third prize."

"You mean Monk?" he said. "I can't guess whom he brought with him. I thought he was driving *you.*"

"He put her on the box by his side," went on the squire. "It was that old servant of our good Otters. I was compelled to look at the flowers in her bonnet and the tassels on her cape all the way here."

"You don't mean Dimity Stone?" murmured Wolf; and he contemplated in a rapid inward vision that sly, misogynistic eye fixed sardonically on the old woman's wizened back, and the chivalrous grand air with which the coachman must have conversed with her, as he held the reins.

"I couldn't let her walk," went on the squire. "And the Otters had left her behind. I suppose they hadn't room. They came in a wretched conveyance. I suppose they got it from the hotel." He swung about and surveyed the crowd with indulgent arrogance. "I can just see the good Darnley from here," he said. "There!—can't you? I wonder where that terrible person who's always drunk has hidden himself! I saw *him,* too, a moment ago. And, by gad, there's Tilly-Valley! Let's go and stir him up. He won't expect me to speak to him. You watch his face, my boy, when I nudge his elbow. Eh? What? Come on." And greatly to Wolf's annoyance he found himself compelled to support his limping employer on his arm, while the two of them pushed their way towards the clergyman.

"Tally ho! Run to earth!" was the squire's greeting,

as, with Wolf at his elbow, he came up unobserved to where the little priest was standing. "Afternoon, Valley! Should have thought this sort of thing wasn't in your line; eh? what? Too many horsey rascals about? Too many rowdy young men, eh?"

If Wolf was astonished at Mr. Urquhart's familiar tone, he was still more astonished at the expression on the face of the nervous clergyman.

Stammeringly Mr. Valley found his tongue.

"Fine horses . . . more of them than usual . . . did you see that grey one? . . . the Otters are here . . . they drove over . . . I walked . . . so did others . . . many others . . . it would be nice if there were seats here . . . don't you think so? . . . seats?"

Wolf could hardly bear to listen to these broken utterances of the poor Vicar. There was something about his pinched face, his shapeless nose, his thin neck, his frightened eyes, that produced a profoundly pitiful feeling. This sensation was accentuated by the way a certain vein in the man's throat stood out. Not only did it stand out, it pulsed and vibrated. All the panic that Mr. Urquhart's presence provoked seemed concentrated in that pulsing vein.

"Seats, did you say?" chuckled the squire. "*You* don't need a seat at your age." And leaning heavily on his companion's arm, he tapped the priest with the end of his stick with an air of playful familiarity.

It came over Wolf then, with a rush of sheer rage, that he must get his employer away from this man at all costs. Never had he liked Mr. Urquhart less. There was something in his wrinkled white face, at that moment,

which suggested an out-rush of incredible evil—of evil emerging, like some abominable vapour, from a level of consciousness not often revealed.

Wolf was tolerant enough of the various forms of normal and abnormal sensuality; but what at that instant he got a glimpse of, beneath this man's gentlemanly mask, was something different from viciousness. It was as if some abysmal ooze from the slime of *that which underlies all evil* had been projected to the surface.

"Come along, Sir. We must get back to the rope," Wolf found himself saying in a stern, dry voice. "They're starting the driving-match and I can't let you miss *that!*"

Mr. Urquhart's hilarity seemed to sink fathom-deep at the sound of his secretary's voice. He permitted himself to be pulled away. But Wolf noticed a perceptible increase in his lameness as he drew him along; and glancing sideways at his face, he was startled by the look of almost imbecile vacuity that had replaced what had been there before.

The crowd had thickened perceptibly now; and Wolf realized that he was seeing the most characteristic gathering for that portion of the countryside that he was ever likely to see. Here were smart, self-satisfied young tradesmen from Ramsgard with their wives and their girls. Here were weather-stained carters from Blackmore; cider-makers and cattle-dealers from Sedgemoor; stalwart melancholy-looking shepherds from the high Quantocks; a sprinkling of well-to-do farmers from the far-off valley of the Frome; sly, whimsical dairymen from the rich pastures of the Stour; and, moving among them all, slow-voiced and slow-footed, but with an infinite zest for

enjoyment, the local rustic labourers that tilled the heavy fields watered by the Lunt.

The two men pushed their way back to the taut vibrating rope, beyond which the driving-contest was now proceeding; and as they rested there, Wolf's mind felt liberated from all its agitations, and he drank in the scene before him with unruffled delight. The peculiar smells that came to his nostrils—leather, and straw, and horse-dung, and tobacco-smoke, and cider-sour human breath, and paint, and tar, and half-devoured apples—were all caught up and overpowered by one grand dominant odour, the unique smell of the trodden grass of a fair-field. Let the sun shine as it would from the cold blue heaven! Let the chariots of white clouds race as they pleased under that airy tent! It was from the solid ground under human feet, under equine hooves, that this Dorsetshire world gave forth its autochthonous essence, its bitter-sweet, rank, harsh, terrestrial sweat, comforting beyond conscious knowledge to the heart of man and beast.

Nothing could have been more symbolic of the inmost nature of that countryside than the humorous gravity with which these lean yeomen and plump farmers drove their brightly painted gigs and high dog-carts round that hoof-trodden paddock! The obvious reciprocity between the men who drove and the animals driven, the magnetic currents of sympathy between the persons looking on and the persons showing off, the way the whole scene was characterized by something casual, non-official, nonchalant—all this produced an effect that only England, and perhaps only that portion of England, could have brought

into being. Behind Wolf and his companion surged a pushing, jostling, heterogeneous crowd, giving vent to a low, monotonous murmur; and behind them again could be heard the raucous cries and clangings and whistlings from the noisy whirligigs.

Wolf could make out, here and there among the people round him, the well-known straw-hats—manufactured by Mr. Albert Smith—of the boys of Ramsgard School. "They must be having a 'half' today," he thought; and his mind ran upon the various queer, unathletic, unpopular boys among the rest, who must be feeling, just then, so indescribably thankful for this blessed interlude in their hateful life! The thought of the unknown, undiscovered bullies that probably existed in Ramsgard School at that very moment made him feel sick at the pit of his stomach. "I put my curse on them," he thought. "If I have a vestige of occult power I put my curse upon them!"

A short, stocky man, with powerful wrists, driving a lively but not particularly handsome horse, passed them at that moment inside the paddock. Wolf was wondering why the voices round him were discreetly lowered as this person trotted by, when he noted that the man exchanged a familiar nod with Mr. Urquhart.

"Not a bad turnout for a Lovelace," muttered this latter, when the equipage had passed; "but they never can quite do it!"

Once again Wolf felt a prick of shame at the curious interest which this occurrence excited in him. What was Lord Lovelace to him? He glanced furtively at the squire of King's Barton. The man's baggy eye-wrinkles had, just

then, a look that was almost saurian. From one corner of his twitching mouth a trickle of saliva descended, towards which a small fly persistently darted. . . .

Wolf turned away his eyes. The magic of the scene had completely vanished. The smell of the trodden earth was stale in his nostrils. A loathing of the whole spectacle of life took possession of him. And under his breath he repeated that strange classical lament, a tag in his memory from his school-days, a mere catchword now; but it gave him a certain relief to pronounce the queer-sounding syllables.

"Ailinon! Ailinon!" he muttered to himself, as he leaned his stomach against that vibrant rope. "Ailinon! Ailinon!" And the very utterance of this tragic cry from the old Greek dramas soothed his mind as if it had been a talisman. But the disgust he felt at the pressure of things at that moment extended itself to this whole fair-ground, extended itself even to the prospect of seeing Gerda again. "How can I face her in the midst of all this?" he thought; and he recalled the outline of his mother's profile, so contemptuously lifted towards Albert Smith. "What will she think of the Torp family?" he said to himself, in miserable discomfort.

Struggling against this wretched mood, he straightened his back and clutched the rope with both his hands. Savagely he tried to summon up out of the depths of his spirit some current of defiant magnetism. But the presence of Mr. Urquhart, taciturn and pensive though the squire had become, seemed to cut off all help from these furtive resources.

So he sought to steady himself by pure reason.

"After all," he argued, "those gulfs of watery blue up there are such an unthinkable background to all this, that they . . . that they . . . a trickle of saliva more or less . . . a woman's profile more or less . . ." And then, as he watched those painted gigs come swinging once more round the enclosure, and heard the exclamations of malicious delight, as a chestnut-coloured mare showed a vicious tendency to back her driver against the rope, a sense of terrified loneliness came upon him. What could Gerda, or his mother, or anyone else—man or woman—really feel toward him so that this loneliness should be eased? Emptiness leered at him, emptiness yawned at him, out of that watery blue; and what pointed spikes of misunderstanding he had to throw himself upon before this bustling day was over!

He ran his fingers along the swaying rope, sticky from the innumerable human hands that had clutched it. His mind seemed to hover above the form of Gerda and above the form of his mother, as if it had been a floating mist gathered about two sundered headlands. That familiar grey head, with those mocking brown eyes, and this other, this new strange head, with its sea-grey gaze and its wild, pursed-up, whistling mouth—what would happen when he brought them together?

It would mean he would have to leave his mother. That's what it would mean. Where was Gerda now, in this confused medley? She must be somewhere about; and perhaps Christie, too!

"You won't care if I go off to look for my mother, Sir?" he found himself saying. And the words quite startled him, as if he had spoken in his sleep; for he had

made up his mind that he would never speak of his private affairs to this egoistic gentleman.

"Eh? What's that? Tired of the old man, ha? Want to gad after the petticoats? Well! Take me to the enclosure, out of this crowd, and I'll let you go. I suppose it's hopeless to find Monk in this hurly? He was to have come back for me. But Lord! he's got his own little affairs, as well as another. There! That's better. You needn't go at a snail's pace for me. There! That's all right. I'll find Lovelace in the enclosure, I daresay. He'll wait to see the cart-horses."

Wolf steered the squire as well as he could through the jostling mob of people, and left him at the entrance to the privileged circle.

"You and I know more about some of these good folks than they know themselves," remarked Mr. Urquhart, grimly. "Our History'll make 'em sit up a bit; eh? what? Well, off with 'ee, me boy; and if you want to find your mother, I'd look for her in the refreshment-tent, if I were you. Never know'd but one woman who could see a horse-show out to the end—and she was a tart of Lord Tintinhull's. 'Sack' they used to call her; and 'sacked' she was, at the finish, poor bitch! Well, good luck to 'ee. We'll do some solid work tomorrow, please God!"

Wolf mumbled some inadequate reply to this and strode away. What struck him just then was the contrast between the silky *tone* of his employer's voice and the toll-pike jocularity of his language. "Neither tone nor words are the real man," he thought. "What seething malice, what fermenting misanthropy, that mask of his does cover!"

Crossing the fair-field to the northward, leaving the paddock to his left and the whirligigs to his right, Wolf speedily found his way to the entrance of the great refreshment-tent.

The place was packed with people, some taking their stimulant at little deal-board tables, others eating and drinking as they stood, others again crowding about the massive serving-counter at the end of the tent, where great silvery receptacles, kept hot by oil-flames, were disgorging into earthenware cups a quality of tea that seemed to meet the taste alike of the Lovelaces and of the Torps, so varied were the human types now eagerly swallowing it!

Wolf speedily became aware that Mr. Urquhart's jibe about few petticoats being able to endure a horse-show to the end was not without justification. About three-quarters of the persons filling this huge canvas-space were women.

The first familiar form he encountered as he pushed his way in was that of Selena Gault. This lady was seated alone at a small table placed against the canvas-wall, where she was drinking her tea and eating her bread-and-butter in sublime indifference to the crowd that surged about her. Wolf hurried to her, snatched an unoccupied chair, and sat down at her side.

He felt, for some reason, a sense of profound physical exhaustion; and underneath the pleasant badinage with which he returned his friend's greetings he found himself positively clinging to this lonely woman.

The lady's costume, to which she had given a vague sporting-touch suitable to the occasion, enhanced her

grotesque hideousness. But from her deformed visage her eyes gleamed such irresistible affection that his ebbing courage began steadily to revive.

Their complete isolation in the midst of the crowd—for the people jostling past their table gave them little heed—soon led Wolf to plunge shamelessly into what was nearest his heart. Selena Gault's ghastly upper-lip quivered perceptibly as he told her of his affair with Gerda and his resolve to get married without delay.

"Why, she's here!" she cried. "The child's here! She came in with her father a quarter of an hour ago. She certainly is one of the loveliest girls I've ever set eyes upon. I hadn't seen her since she's grown up. I was amazed at her beauty. Well! You *have* made hay while the sun shone. No! it's no use! You can't possibly see her from where you are. Now turn round and look at me; and let's talk about all this, quietly and sensibly. It's as serious as it could be; and I don't know what's to be done about it."

"There's nothing to be done, I'm afraid, Miss Gault," said Wolf gravely, forcing himself to accept the situation; "nothing except to make some money by hook or by crook! Do you think if I put the case to Urquhart, he'd give me a little more? We're getting on first-rate with the History."

Never were human eyelids lifted more whimsically than were those of Wolf's interlocutor at this mild suggestion.

"Oh, my dear boy!" she chuckled. "You don't know how funny you are. To ask *that* man for money to get married on."

"No good, eh?" he murmured. "No, I suppose not. But you don't think he'll show me the door, do you?"

Miss Gault shook her head. "If he does, we'll put all our wits together and get you something in Ramsgard. There *are* jobs——" she added, thoughtfully puckering her brows.

But Wolf, having twice twisted his head back into its normal position from a hopeless attempt to see further than a few yards in front of him, felt an irresistible impulse to reveal to this woman certain rather sinister deductions that he found he had been involuntarily making from recent glimpses and hints. Composed originally of the veriest wisps and wefts of fluctuating suspicion, they seemed now to have solidified themselves in unabashed tangibility. What they now amounted to was that Mattie was not Mr. Smith's daughter at all but William Solent's; and that Olwen, the girl's little protegée, was actually the incestuous child of old Malakite, the bookseller, and of some vanished sister of Christie's. It was the startling nature of these conclusions that tempted him to fire them off point-blank at the lady by his side, whose morbid receptivity made her a dedicated target for such a shock.

"Is it true that I have a sister in this town?" he enquired boldly, looking straight into Miss Gault's eyes.

The appalling upper-lip vibrated like the end of a tapir's proboscis, and the grey eyes blinked as if he had shot off a pistol.

"What?" she cried, letting her hands fall heavily upon her knees, like the hands of a flabbergasted sorceress,

palms downward and fingers outspread. "*What's* that you're saying, boy?"

"I am saying that I've come to a shrewd certainty," said Wolf firmly, "that Mattie Smith and I have the same father."

Miss Gault astonished him by putting her elbows on to the table and covering her face with her extended fingers; through which her eyes now regarded him. She was not weeping—he could see that. Was she laughing at him? There was something so queer in this gesture, that he felt an uneasy discomfort. It was as if she had suddenly turned into a different person, as different from the Miss Gault he knew, as the new Mattie they were talking about was different from the one he had met in that Victorian dining-room.

He wished she would remove those fingers and stop staring at him so discomfortably. When at last she did so, it was to reveal a countenance whose expression he was at a loss to read. Her face certainly wasn't blubbered with crying; but it was flushed and disturbed. The impression he really got from it was of something . . . almost indecent!

He glanced furtively round, and, hurriedly extending his arm, touched one of her wrists.

"You must have known I'd find out sooner or later," he said. "It doesn't matter, my knowing, does it? *He* couldn't mind. He'd be glad, I should think." And he gave an awkward little chuckle, as he released her hand and began fumbling for a cigarette.

He had only just succeeded in finding the small packet

for which he was searching, when he caught Miss Gault's eyes lit up in excited recognition.

He swung round. Ah! there they were—making their way straight towards them—the portly figure of Mr. Torp, with Gerda leaning lightly on his arm!

He did not hesitate a moment, but leaping up from his chair with an incoherent apology to his companion, he advanced to meet them, his heart beating fast, but his brain in full command of the situation.

Gerda flushed crimson when she saw him, disengaged her arm from her father's, and, coming to meet him with charming impetuosity, held out her hand.

She was dressed in plain navy-blue serge, and wore a dark, soft hat low down over her fair hair. This unassuming attire heightened her beauty; and the embarrassed, yet illuminated look with which she greeted her lover, brought back to his mind so vividly the events of yesterday, that for a moment he was struck with a kind of dizziness that reduced everyone in that crowded tent to a floating and eddying mist.

He caught at her hand without a word and held it tightly for a moment, hurting her a little.

He soon dropped it, however, and said very hurriedly and quietly: "Gerda . . . forgive me . . . but I want to introduce you to my friend, Miss Gault."

Gerda's eyes must have already encountered those of that lady, for he saw her face stiffen to a conventional and rather strained smile. But at this moment Mr. Torp intervened, coming up very close to Wolf and touching

the latter's hand with his plump finger before he could lift it to greet him.

"So you and darter have fixed it up, have 'ee?" he whispered, in a confidential, almost funereal tone. "Don't 'ee be fretted about I nor the missus, Mister. Us be glad in advance, I tell 'ee; and so it be." He caught hold of Wolf's sleeve and put his face close to his face, while Wolf, with a sidelong glance, became aware that Miss Gault had approached them and had been met half-way by Gerda.

" 'Tis they wimming's whimsies what us have got to mind, hasn't?" whispered Mr. Torp. "What they do reckon'll happen to we, 'tis what *will* happen to we, looks so! Don't 'ee take on, Mister, about us being poor folks like. Darter's different from we and allus has been, since her were a babe. She's had grand courtiers ere now, though I shouldn't say it. But Gerdie be a good girl, though turble lazy about house. Her mother once did think it 'ud be young Bob Weevil what 'ud get her; but I knewed a thing or two beyond that, I did! I knewed she were one for the gentry, as you might say. 'Twere barn in her, I reckon! I be a climbing man, me wone self. It's like enough she gets it from I!" And before he withdrew his rubicund face to a discreet distance, the stone-cutter gave him a shrewd wink.

It was then that Miss Gault took the opportunity of bringing Gerda up to them. She had evidently said something very gracious to the girl; for Gerda's quaint society-manner had left her, and she looked pleased, though a little bewildered.

"We've made friends already," said Miss Gault to

Wolf, "and I've told her I knew her well by sight. How do you do, Mr. Torp! I was telling Mr. Solent that I knew your daughter already, though I've never spoken to her; but she's not a young lady one can forget!"

What Mr. Torp's reply to this was Wolf did not hear. Aware that the situation had arranged itself, he found as he kept looking at Gerda's face, as she listened to Miss Gault and her father, that he was beginning to grow nervously hostile to all these explanations. Why couldn't he and Gerda go sraight off now, out of this hurly-burly, out anywhere . . . so as to be at peace and alone?

"Well, good-bye," Gerda was saying. "Perhaps we'll see you again later; but Father and I haven't half gone the round yet, have we, Father?"

"Gone the round! I should think us hadn't!" said Mr. Torp. "Bain't what used to be, this here fair! I do mind when 'twere so thick wi' gipoos and such-like, that a person could scarce move. But Gerdie and I will see summat, don't 'ee fear! They whirligigs . . . why there ain't a blessed season since her was a mommet that we ain't rid in they things; is there, my chuck?"

"No, there isn't, Father. Good-bye, Miss Gault!" she added, with a straight, confiding, grateful glance at her friend's friend. "I'll be at home all tomorrow afternoon, Wolf," she murmured, as she smoothed out her gloves and buttoned her jacket.

Mr. Torp caught the word. "So she *shall* be!" he cried emphatically. "I be a turble stern man, for ordering they to do what they've set their hearts on doing! Well, good-bye to 'ee, Sir! Good-bye to 'ee, Marm! If

all and sundry here were to fling at they coceenuts, there'd be few left, I reckon!"

Watching that quaintly assorted couple moving away out of the tent, Wolf felt a glow of almost conceited satisfaction in the discovery that whatever vein of snobbishness it was in him that had made so much of Mr. Urquhart's clothes and Lord Lovelace's appearance, it fell away completely where Gerda was concerned. "I'm glad the old man is as he is!" he thought, as his eyes followed them into the open air.

"Let's sit down again, shall we?" he said to Miss Gault.

His spirits were a little dashed, however, when he regarded the lady opposite him, as they resumed their seats; for her face seemed to have grown stiff and somewhat remote.

"This is very serious," she said gravely. And then, with an almost plaintive tone, "Why is it that men are so ridiculous?"

"But I thought you liked her, Miss Gault! You were so especially sweet to her."

She sighed and gave him a glance that seemed to say irritably, "And to cap everything you are an incredible fool!"

"You *did* like her, didn't you?"

"So childish that they think of nothing . . . *nothing* . . . when their desire is aroused."

"Why is it so serious, Miss Gault?" he said. And then he added rather maliciously, "My mother would see in a second how refined she is!"

Miss Gault lifted her eyebrows. "I'm not only thinking

of your mother," she said. "There's no reason, that I know of, why I should fuss about *her*. I'm thinking of you and the girl herself, and—and of *all* your friends. Listen, boy"—and she bent on him one of the most tender and reproachful looks he had ever seen—"all this is pure madness—selfish, greedy madness! You *can't* make a girl like that happy—no! not for half a year! Good heavens, child, you're as blind as a—— You're as selfish as one of my cats! It's the girl I'm thinking of, I tell you. You'll make her miserable, you and your mother! She's sweet to look at; but Wolf, Wolf! she and you will talk completely different languages! You can't do these things—not in *our* country, anyhow. I've seen it again and again—these things bring misery—just misery. And how are you going to support her, I'd like to know?"

"She has indeed a different language," cried Wolf, irrelevantly; and his mind reverted to the blackbird of Poll's Camp. And then, as he saw her face droop wearily and her fingers tap the table: "Why did you take it all so nicely just now. Why did you talk of getting me work in Ramsgard?"

She made no reply to this. But after a moment she burst out: "Your father would laugh at you . . . he would! . . . He'd just laugh at you!"

"Well, we'd better not talk of it any more," said Wolf sulkily.

He cast about in the depths of his consciousness, however, with the vindictiveness of defeat, for some line of attack that would disturb and agitate her.

"Miss Gault," he began, while with her gaze fixed upon

vacancy she stared through him and past him into the interior of the great tent, "do you mind if I ask you a direct question? I know that Mattie Smith is my father's child; but what I want to ask you now is—whose child is Olwen?"

A faint brownish flush ran like a stream of muddy water beneath the surface of the skin of her face. She bent her head over the table; and like a great ruffled bird, in a cage, that has been shaken from the top, she began picking up and lifting to her mouth every crumb of bread in sight. Then, with a shaky hand, she poured some spilt drops of cold tea from her saucer into her cup.

"What I want to know," repeated Wolf, "is why my sister Mattie has this child Olwen to look after. Is she a foundling? Is she adopted? Where did she spring from?"

But the daughter of the late headmaster of Ramsgard School remained obstinately silent. She folded her hands mechanically over the heavy teacup and sat straight in her chair, staring into her lap like an image of Atropos.

"Don't you want to tell me, Miss Gault? Is it something you *can't* tell me?"

Still the lady remained silent, her fingers tightly clenched over the cup.

"I knew there was something queer from the start," he went on. "What's the matter with you all? Who *is* this child?"

Then very slowly Miss Gault rose to her feet.

"Come out into the air," she said brusquely. "I can't talk to you here."

They made their way together out of the tent; but they had hardly gone a stone's throw into the cold March sunshine, when they encountered, without a possibility of retreat or evasion, Mrs. Solent and Mr. Smith advancing resolutely and blamelessly towards the place they were quitting.

The hatter of Ramsgard School looked pinched and withered in the hard, glaring light. Wolf received a sudden, inexplicable inkling that the man was wretchedly miserable. The look he got from him as they approached seemed grey with weariness. Mrs. Solent was, however, talking gaily. Her brown eyes were shining with mischief. Her cheeks were flushed. And now, at the very moment of salutation, he could see that proud face toss its chin and that sturdy, well-dressed figure gather itself together for battle. Once more it came over him with a queer kind of remorse, as if he were responsible for it: "She's had no life at all; and she's made for great, stirring events!"

But it was many days before he forgot the manner in which those two ancient rivals faced each other. It had, this encounter between them, the queer effect upon him of making him recall, as he had once or twice already in Dorsetshire, that passage in "Hamlet" where the ghost cries out from beneath the earth. A piece of horse-dung at his feet, as he instinctively looked away while the two came together, grew large and white and round.

"He can't have a shred of flesh left on him down there," he thought to himself, with a kind of sullen anger against both the women. But what puzzled him now was that Miss Gault did not rise to the occasion as he

had supposed she would have done. To his own personal taste she looked more formidable in her black satin gown than his mother did in her finery; but it was clear to him, as he watched them shaking hands, that his mother's spirit was poised and adjusted to the nicest point of the encounter, whereas Miss Gault's inmost being just then seemed disorganized, disjointed, helpless, unwieldy.

That they shook hands at all, he could see, was owing to his mother. Miss Gault's hands hung down at her sides, like the hands of a large, stuffed doll that has been set up with difficulty in an erect position. And they remained like this until Mrs. Solent's arm had been extended for quite a perceptible passage of time. When Selena *did* raise her wrist and take her enemy's fingers, it was to retain them all the while the two were speaking. But Mrs. Solent told Wolf afterwards that there was no warmth or life in that cold pressure. . . .

"Well, Selena, so it's really you! And I couldn't have believed there'd be so little change. You are at your old tricks again, I see, running off with my son!"

"I hope you are well, Ann," said Miss Gault. "You look as handsome as ever."

"I'd look handsomer still, if my son wasn't so unambitious and lazy," replied the other, giving Wolf a glance of glowing possessiveness.

"Men can be too ambitious, Ann," said Miss Gault slowly, speaking as if she were in some kind of trance.

"We passed a *really* pretty girl a minute or two ago," cried Mrs. Solent suddenly; "and Albert here says he knows who she is. You ought to go over to the round-

abouts, Wolf, and try and find her! She was with a labouring-man of some sort, a stocky plump little man; but she was pretty as a picture!"

"Do you mean that Dorset labourers *sell* their daughters, Mother? Or do you mean that all beauty can be had for the asking? All right; I'll hunt for her through all the tents!"

He felt himself speaking in such a strained, queer voice that he was not surprised to observe Miss Gault glancing nervously at Mrs. Solent to see if she had detected it. But Mrs. Solent was too excited just then to notice so slight a thing as a change of tone. As he spoke with his mother in this way about Gerda, something seemed to rise up in his throat that was like a serpent of fury. He rebelled against the look of his mother's face, the proud outline of her scornful profile. "I am glad . . . I am glad . . ." he said to himself, "that Gerda *isn't* a lady, and that her father *is* a stone-cutter!"

And it came over him that it was an imbecility that any human soul should have the power over another soul that his mother had over him. As he looked at her now. he was aware of an angry revolt at the massive resistance which her personality offered.

It did not make it easier for him at this moment that he recognized clearly enough that the very strength in his mother which had been such security to him in his childhood was the thing now with which he had to struggle to gain his liberty—that protective, maternal strength, the most formidable of all psychic forces!

She was like a witch—his mother—on the wrong side in the fairy-story of life. She was on the side of fate

against chance, and of destiny against random fortune. "I don't care how she feels when I tell her about Gerda," he said to himself; and in a flash, looking all the while at his mother's dress, he thought of the yielded loveliness of Gerda's body, and he decided that he would shake off this resistance without the least remorse. "Shake it off! Pass over it; disregard it!" he said to himself.

"I shall come and see you, Selena, whether you like it or not," his mother was now saying. "After twenty-five years people as old as we are ought to be sensible, oughtn't we, Mr. Smith?" she added.

But Mr. Smith had managed to remove himself a pace or two from their company, under cover of a sudden interest in a torn and flapping "Western Gazette," which he proceeded to push into a trampled mole-hill with the end of his stick.

Mrs. Solent glanced at her son shrewdly and scrutinizingly. "You look as if you were enjoying yourself, I *must* say! What's come over you? Are you wishing yourself back in London? Well, come on, Albert Smith! I'm longing for a cup of tea. These people have had theirs."

She was already carrying off her companion, after a nod to Miss Gault, which was received without a sign of response, when Wolf stopped her. "Where shall we meet, Mother, when you're ready to go?"

"Oh, anywhere, child! We can't lose ourselves here."

"Say over there, then? By the roundabouts, in about an hour?"

"All right; very good! Mr. Smith shall escort me there

when we've had our tea. It's strange, Albert, isn't it, that in this place of my whole married life, you're the only friend I've got left?"

Wolf was aware of an expression in her brown eyes, a droop of her straight shoulders, that made him realize that there were strange emotions stirring under the surface of that airy manner.

"The roundabouts, then!" he repeated.

"All right—in an hour or so!" she flung back. "And why don't you and Selena have a turn at the swings?" she added, as she went off.

Her disappearance seemed to make no difference to Selena Gault. In absolute immobility the poor lady remained standing there, staring at the grass. It was as if she'd put her foot upon an adder that struck her with sudden paralysis, so that at a touch she would topple over and fall.

Wolf came close to her. "Don't worry about my mother, Miss Gault, darling," he whispered earnestly. "She's not as flippant as she sounds . . . really she's not! She's like that with everyone. She's like that with me."

Miss Gault looked at him as if his words meant nothing. Her vacant stare seemed to be fixed on something at a remote distance.

"I know; I quite understand," she murmured; and her hands, coming, as it were, slowly to life, began to pick at the little cloth buttons of the braided jacket she wore over her satin gown. The stiffness of these old-fashioned garments seemed to hold her up. Without their support it looked as if she would have fallen down

just where she was—close to the newspaper buried through the nervousness of Mr. Smith!

She seemed to Wolf, as he stood helplessly before her, like a classic image of outrage in grotesque modern clothes. "She's like an elderly Io," he thought, "driven mad by the gadfly of the goddess."

"Dear Miss Gault! Don't you worry about it any more! I swear to you she isn't as malicious as she seems. You must remember that all this isn't as easy for her as she makes out. She's hard; but she can be really magnanimous . . . you'll see! She doesn't realize people's feelings, that's what it is. She was the same about Gerda. Fancy her noticing her like that!" In his desire to soothe his companion he seized one of the black-gloved hands. As he did so he looked round nervously; for he began to be aware that various persons among the groups who passed them stopped to stare at her perturbed figure.

But his touch brought a flood of colour to the woman's swarthy cheeks. She clasped his hand tightly with both her own, holding it for a moment before she let it fall.

"I can't help it, boy," she said in a low tone. "Seeing her brings it all back." She paused for a moment. "No one else ever treated me as a woman," she added, her mouth twitching.

Wolf wrinkled his bushy eyebrows.

"You must let me be as fond of you as he was," he muttered. "You must look after me as you looked after him."

She nodded and smiled a little at that, rearranged the great black hat upon her head, and, after a moment's

hesitation, placed her hand on his arm. "Come," she said, "let's go to the roundabouts."

They moved slowly together across the field. It occurred to him now that he could distract her mind and at the same time satisfy his own curiosity by renewing their interrupted conversation.

"I don't want to tease you with questions," he began presently. "But you promised you'd tell me—you know? —about Mattie and Olwen."

"It's not easy, boy," said Miss Gault with a sigh.

"I know it isn't. That's why I want *you* to tell me and not anyone else."

She walked by his side in silence for a while, evidently collecting her thoughts. "It's the sort of thing one finds so difficult to tell," she said, looking guardedly round them.

"Well! Let me tell *you!*" he retorted, "and you correct me, if I'm wrong."

Miss Gault nodded gravely.

"Mattie's my father's child," he muttered in a low, clear voice, "and Olwen is——"

Miss Gault had managed to turn her face so far away from him that he couldn't see her expression.

"Who told you all this, boy? Who told you?" she interrupted, in such a peevish tone that two solemn-faced members of the Sixth Form of the School, with blue ribbons round their straw-hats and sticks in their hands, glanced furtively at her as they passed.

"Olwen's father was old Malakite," Wolf went on; "and Olwen's mother was Christie Malakite's sister."

Miss Gault still kept her face removed from his steady gaze.

"Aren't I right?" he repeated. "But you needn't tell me. I *know* I am right." He paused, and they continued to cross the field.

"What's become of the mother?" he continued. "Is she still alive?"

Miss Gault did turn at this.

"Australia," she whispered.

"Alive or dead?"

She almost shouted her reply to this, as if with a spasm of savage relief.

"Dead!" she cried.

Wolf held his peace for a moment or two, while his brain worked at top speed.

"What Christie must have gone through!" he murmured audibly, but in a tone as if talking to himself rather than to her. "What she must have gone through!"

Miss Gault's comment upon this was drowned by the brazen noise issuing from the engine of one of the roundabouts which they were now approaching.

"What did you say?" he shouted in her ear.

"I said that Christie Malakite has no heart!" cried Miss Gault; and her voice was almost as harsh as the raucous whistle that saluted them.

He stopped at this, and they both stood motionless, looking at each other covertly, while a magnetic current of inexplicable antagonism flickered between them.

"It wasn't *her* he loved!" Miss Gault shouted suddenly—so suddenly that Wolf moved backwards, as if she had lifted her hand to hit him.

"Who didn't love whom?" he vociferated in response; while two small boys of the Ramsgard Preparatory School nudged each other and peered at them inquisitively.

"What are you staring for? *Urchins!*" cried Miss Gault.

"All the same they're nice boys," she muttered. "Look! I've hurt their feelings now; and they really *are* very polite. Here, children, come here!"

The two little boys, their heads covered with enormous and very new examples of the art of Mr. Albert Smith, pretended not to hear her appeal. They remained in fixed contemplation of a counter of glaring cakes and sweets.

"Come here, you two!" repeated the lady.

They did, at that, sheepishly turn round and begin moving towards her, with an air as if it were a complete accident that their feet carried them in that particular direction rather than in any other.

"I won't hurt you," she said, as softly as she could in the midst of the terrific noise that whirled round them. "What are your names, my dears?"

"Stepney Major," murmured one of the little boys.

"Trelawney Minor," gasped the other.

"Well, Stepney Major and Trelawney Minor, here's half-a-crown for you. Only, when you next meet queer-looking people at the Fair, don't stare at them as if they were part of the Show."

When the two little boys had decamped, radiantly reverential, Miss Gault turned to Wolf.

"Didn't they take off their hats prettily? They *do* bring 'em up well. Little gentlemen they are!"

She seemed glad of the interruption. But Wolf began speaking again.

"What's that, boy?" she rejoined. "Terrible, this noise! Isn't it?"

"Miss Gault!"

"You needn't shout, Wolf. I can hear you. There . . . like that . . . that's better!" And she shifted her position.

"Who didn't love whom? We were talking of the Malakites."

"My dear boy"—and, as she spoke, a smile of the most complicated humour came into her strange countenance, transforming it into something almost beautiful —"my dear boy, I wasn't talking of the Malakites! I was talking of your father and Lorna Smith."

"Mattie's mother, eh? But why did you say—oh, damn that noise!—that Christie had no heart?"

Miss Gault stared at him.

"Haven't you seen her? Didn't you see what she was? Reading the books of that old wretch, keeping house for that old wretch? How can she look the man in the face, I should like to know? They tell me Olwen can't bear the sight of her; and I don't wonder."

"But Miss Gault, my dear Miss Gault, what has Christie done? I should think she was the one most to be pitied."

Wolf bent his shaggy eyebrows almost fiercely upon his companion; and after a moment's encounter with his

gaze Miss Gault glanced away and contemplated the sweet-stall.

"What has Christie Malakite done to *you?*" asked Wolf sternly.

"Oh, if you must have it, boy, you *shall* have it! Listen. I went over there when all that trouble happened. I had some sort of official position; and things like this, unspeakable things like this, were what I had to deal with. The Society sent me, in fact."

Wolf lifted his eyebrows very high at this. He began to detect an aspect of Miss Selena Gault's character that hitherto had been concealed from him.

"What society?" he asked.

"The Society for the Care of Delinquent Girls. And I found Miss Christie, let me tell you, both obstinate and impertinent. She actually defended that abominable old wretch! She wanted to keep Olwen in their house. Fortunately the child can't bear the sight of her . . . or of that old monster either. It's instinct, I expect."

"It doesn't happen to be anything you or Mattie may have let fall?" shouted Wolf in her ear.

"Why, you're defending them now!" Miss Gault retorted, her face dark with anger. "If you knew all, boy, you wouldn't dare!"

Wolf felt extreme discomfort and distaste.

"What else *is* there for me to know, Miss Gault?" he demanded aloud and in a quieter voice; for there had come a pause in the whistling of the engine.

"That old man was one of the most evil influences in your father's life."

"Does Mattie know that?" he enquired.

"Oh, Mattie!" she cried contemptuously. "Mattie knows just as much as we've considered it wise to tell her."

"Who are we?" said Wolf drily.

"Mr. Smith and myself. Don't you see, boy, we had to make ourselves responsible *to the police* for Olwen's bringing up? It's been an unholy business, the whole affair! It gives me a kind of nausea to talk about it."

Wolf found that his protective instincts were thoroughly aroused by this time; and Miss Gault's figure assumed an unattractive shape.

"It's this accursed sex-suppression," he said to himself; and he suddenly thought with immense relief of his mother, and of her scandalously light touch in the presence of every conceivable human obliquity. "I must be cautious," he said to himself. "I mustn't show my hand. But who would have thought she was like this!" He looked Miss Gault straight in the face.

"Does Mr. Urquhart know the history of my sister and the history of Olwen?" he asked abruptly, leaning so heavily on his stick that it sank deep into the turf.

A flicker of relief crossed the woman's agitated features.

"Mr. Urquhart? Oh, you may be sure he has *his* version, just as all the neighbourhood has! It's been the great scandal of the country."

The use of this particular word made Wolf explode.

"Greater than the doings of Mattie's father?" he rapped out.

He regretted his maliciousness as soon as the words were uttered. That scene in the cemetery came back to his mind.

"I didn't mean that, dear Miss Gault!" he cried, pulling his stick violently out of the sod. But she had turned her face away from him, and for a little while they stood silently there, side by side, while the crowd jostled them and the engine renewed its whistling. At last she did turn round, and her face was sad and gentle.

"We won't quarrel, will we, Wolf?" she murmured, bending close to his ear so that he shouldn't lose her words. It was the first time she had dropped that rather annoying "boy"; and the use of his name did much to restore his good-temper.

"It's all right," he whispered back. "Let's go on now, eh?"

The merry-go-round in front of which they had passed was isolated from the rest. They proceeded to push their way through the crowds towards the next one, which was some three hundred yards further on.

Suddenly they saw before them the anxious little figure of Mrs. Otter, leaning on Darnley's arm; while Jason, his melancholy gaze surveying the scene as if he were a Gaulish captive in a Roman triumph, was standing apart, like one who had no earthly link with his relations—or with anyone else.

Wolf felt singularly disinclined to cope with these people at that moment. He had received of late so many contradictory impressions, that his brain felt like an overcrowded stage. But he gathered his wits together as

well as he could, and for a while they all five stood talking rather wearily, exchanging commonplaces as if they had been at a garden-party rather than a fair.

By degrees Wolf managed to edge away from the two ladies, who were listening to Darnley's criticism of the horse-show, and began to exchange more piquant remarks with the dilapidated poet.

"Did you see our clergyman?" said Jason.

"Mr. Valley?"

The man nodded.

"Certainly I did. I talked to him when I first got here."

"Making a fool of himself as usual——"

"Come, Mr. Otter——"

"Well, I daresay it's no affair of ours. It's best to mind one's own business. That's what God's so good at . . . minding His own business! Seen Urquhart anywhere?"

"I was with him just now. Monk drove him over."

Jason Otter's face expressed panic.

"Is *that* man here?" he whispered.

Wolf had already remarked how oddly Jason's fits of mortal terror assorted with the monumental dignity of his grim and massive countenance.

"Why not? I understand he gave a lift to your old Mrs. Stone. You ought to be grateful to him."

"Urquhart pays him to spy on me, and one day he'll beat me like a black dog!"

"Incredible, Mr. Otter!" It became more and more difficult for Wolf to take seriously the man's morbid timorousness. It was impossible to make sport of him;

but he could not prevent a faint vein of raillery from entering into his reply. "He looks a powerfully built fellow."

"I tell you this, Solent, I tell you this"—and Jason clutched Wolf's arm and glanced round to make sure that the others were out of hearing—"one day I shall be picked up unconscious in a ditch, beaten half-dead by that man!"

But Wolf's mind had wandered.

"By the way, Mr. Otter, if you ever want to sell that Hindoo idol of yours, I'll buy it from you!"

The poet stared at him blankly.

"I'll give five times whatever it cost you!"

"It cost me a pound," said Jason grimly.

"Very well; I'll buy it for five pounds. Is that agreed?"

Jason pondered a little.

"Why do you want that thing? To bury it?"

"Perhaps that's it! How discerning you are!" And Wolf smiled genially at him.

"Very well, I'll sell it to you." He paused for a moment. "And if you could let me have that five pounds tomorrow, I should be very much obliged."

"Good Lord!" thought Wolf to himself. "I've done it now! Probably they keep the poor wretch without a penny, to stop him from drinking."

"I'm not sure that I can manage it tomorrow," he said affably, "but you shall have it, Mr. Otter; and I'm sure I'm very grateful to you."

"Shall you bury it?" whispered Jason again, in a voice as sly and furtive as a wicked schoolboy.

"I don't want *you* to have it any longer, anyhow," said Wolf laughing.

Jason put his hand to his mouth and chuckled.

"By the way," Wolf went on, "I've never yet read a line of your poetry, Mr. Otter."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he stared at the man in bewildered amazement. It was as if a mask had fallen from his face, revealing a totally different human countenance.

"Will you really read something? Will you really?"

The tone in which he said this was so childlike in its eagerness that Wolf felt a sudden unexpected tenderness for the queer man, quite different from his previous amused indulgence. "How they must have outraged his life-illusion among them all!" he thought.

"But your mother adores your poetry; and your brother likes it too, doesn't he?"

Jason gave him one deep, slow, penetrating look that was like the opening of a sluice-gate.

"My mother . . . my brother . . ." And the man shrugged his shoulders as if Wolf had referred to the activities of water-flies in relation to human affairs.

"They don't understand it, you mean? They don't get its significance, for all their devotion? Well, I think I realize what you suffer from. But I don't suppose I shall understand it either."

"I've written lately . . . very lately . . . last night, in fact—a poem to him."

"To whom?"

"To him . . . to Mukalog."

Wolf wrinkled his eyebrows and stared intently at

him for a moment. "You'll be altogether happier when you've sold that thing to me, Mr. Otter," he said.

"You'd like to bury him in your garden," Jason muttered. And then quite unexpectedly he smiled so disarmingly that Wolf once again experienced that wave of affection.

"I expect lots of people wish I were dead," he added, with a queer chuckle.

"I don't wish you were dead," said Wolf, looking into his eyes. "But I wish you *would* let me throw away that demon!"

A gleam of nervous irritation flashed from Jason's eyes, and his upper lip trembled.

"He's myself!" he murmured. "He's what I am!" Then after a pause he jerked his thumb towards his brother. "Darnley's a funny one," he whispered, nudging Wolf's arm. "Listen to him talking to the ladies! He ought to have been a member of Parliament. He loves to behave like a grand gentleman."

"He *is* a grand gentleman!" said Wolf drily.

"And as for that great bully of yours, Squire Urquhart," Jason went on, raising his voice, "*he'll* die without any demon to help him. *He's on that road now!*"

These last words were uttered with such concentrated vindictiveness that Wolf opened his eyes wide.

"Did you see how he looked," went on Jason, "when those stallions passed him? He had to hang on to the rope to keep himself from falling. . . . I can tell you what crossed his mind then!"

"What?" enquired Wolf.

"To throw himself under their hooves! To be trodden into the ground by fifty stallions!"

"Are ye talking of stallions, gentlemen?" said a well-known voice; and Roger Monk, accompanied by the waiter of the Lovelace Hotel, stood before them, touching his hat politely.

Darnley and Miss Gault moved forward now, and Mrs. Otter began asking Monk about Dimity Stone and thanking him for picking up the old woman.

"Come on," whispered Jason in Wolf's ear. "Let's clear out of this! You see what *he* is . . . a great lubberly catchpole, not fit for anything except horse-racing! He's got rid of Dimity and joined up with that waiter with the idea of annoying someone. He wouldn't dare to insult anyone alone; but with that sly dog of a waiter —you know what waiters are——" He paused and glanced back furtively at his mother and at the two serving-men. "I'd like," he added, "to see Valley well fooled by those rascals. He'd have to go home alone then; and a good thing, too!"

"You've got your knife into us all, Mr. Otter," said Wolf slowly. "And I think it's a mistake. It's a waste of energy to hate people at the rate you do."

But Jason's attention was still so absorbed in watching Monk and the waiter, that he listened to him only with half an ear; and, indeed, shortly afterwards he shuffled off with barely a word of farewell.

Shrugging his shoulders, under this rebuff, Wolf strode away in pursuit of Darnley and Miss Gault.

When he reached these two, he held out his hand and raised his hat.

"I think I'll leave you now in Mr. Otter's care," he said to Miss Gault. "It's about time I began to look for my mother."

Selena appeared a little disconcerted at his abrupt departure, but Darnley gave him his usual gentle and indulgent smile.

"You always seem to bring me luck, Solent," he said. "But *au revoir!* We may meet on the road; for I expect *my* mother will be tired of this soon."

Wolf shogged off by himself; and as soon as the crowd concealed him from the sight of his friends, he began waving his stick in the air. This was an old trick of his, and he invariably gave way to it when, after any prolonged period of human intercourse, he found himself alone and in the open.

He made his way rapidly to the extreme western corner of the great fair-field, where there were certain small swings patronized rather by children than by grown-up people.

As he threaded his way through all those excitable West Country folk he did his best to reduce to some sort of order the various jolts and jars he had received. So many confused impressions besieged his consciousness that he wished devoutly he were going to return to King's Barton on foot instead of driving.

His thoughts became complicated just at this moment by the teasing necessity of finding some place among those tents where he could make water. Drifting about with this in view, he found himself recalling all manner of former occasions when he had been driven to this kind of search. It took him so long to find what he wanted, that

when he *had* found it and had re-emerged into the sunshine, he experienced an extraordinary heightening of his spirits.

The acrid, ammoniacal smell of that casual retreat brought back to his mind the public lavatory on the esplanade at Weymouth, into which, from the sun-warmed sands, he used to descend by a flight of spittle-stained steps. This memory, combined with an access of pervading physical comfort, drew his mind like a magnet toward his secretive mystical vice. Once more, as he gave himself up to this psychic abandonment, he felt as if he were engaged in some mysterious world-conflict, where the good and the evil ranged themselves on opposite sides.

He rubbed his hands together in the old reckless way, as he walked along; and it seemed to him as if all these new impressions of his took their place in this mysterious struggle. That ravaged face of the Waterloo steps mingled its hurt with what Jason, Valley, Christie, were all suffering; while the sinister magnetism that emanated from Mr. Urquhart fused its influence with that of Jason's idol, and the cruelty of Miss Gault to Christie, and of his mother to Miss Gault!

When this orgy of mystic emotion passed away, as it presently did, leaving him as limp and relaxed as if he had been walking for hours instead of minutes, he became aware that there were two irritating perplexities still fretting his mind, like stranded jelly-fish left high and dry on a bank of pebbles.

He found himself steering his consciousness with extreme care, as he walked along. so as to avoid contact

with these two problems. But, as generally happens, he had not gone far before he was plunged into both of them, mingled confusedly together.

All about him was the smell of trodden grass, of horse-dung, of tar, of paint, of cider, of roasted chestnuts, of boys' new clothes, of rustic sweat, of girls' cheap perfumes, of fried sausages, of brassy machinery, of stale tobacco; and these accumulated odours seemed to resolve themselves into one single odour that became a wavering curtain, behind which these two dangerous thoughts were moving—moving and stirring the curtain into bulging folds—as concealed figures might do on a theatre-stage, between the acts of a play.

The first of these thoughts was about his ill-assorted parents. He felt as if there were going on in his spirit an unappeasable rivalry between these two. He felt as if it were that grinning skull in the cemetery, with his "Christ! I've had a happy life!" that had made him snatch at Gerda so recklessly, with the express purpose of separating him from his mother! It was just what that man would have done had he been alive. How he would have rejoiced in an irresponsible chance-driven offspring!

And then, before he had finished untying this knot of his parents' hostility, he was plunged into the second dangerous thought. This was more troubling to his peace than the other. It was about that grey feather which he had found in that book of Christie's! Why did it rouse such peculiar interest in him, to think of Christie and of Christie's fondness for the works of Sir Thomas Browne? What was Christie to him with her books and her queer

tastes? What stability could there be in his love for Gerda when this troubling curiosity stirred within him at the idea of Gerda's friend?

As he thought of all this, his eyes caught sight of the golden face of a little dandelion in the midst of the trodden grass. He touched the edge of its petals rather wearily with the end of his stick, thinking to himself, "If I leave it there it'll probably be trodden by these people into the mud in a few minutes; and if I pick it up it'll be dead before I get home!"

He decided to give the dandelion a chance to survive. "After all, it *may* survive," he thought; "and if it doesn't —Ailinon! Ailinon! What does it matter?"

Moving on again at random, burdened with perplexities, he suddenly found himself in the midst of a circle of children who were gazing in envious rapture at a gaily decorated swing that was whirling up and down in full, crowded activity. It was a boat-swing, and the boats were painted azure and scarlet and olive-green. . . .

And there, among the children in the swing, was Olwen, and there, by the side of it, watching Olwen swinging, was Mattie Smith herself! To come bolt-up upon her like this, in the midst of so many agitating thoughts, was a shock. He experienced that sort of mental desperation that one feels when one forces oneself awake from a dream that grows unendurable. And in his knowledge that she was his sister he saw her now as a totally different Mattie. But—what a sad face she had! She was so nervous about Olwen that he could regard her for several long seconds unobserved. What heavy ill-complexioned cheeks! What a disproportioned nose! What

a clouded apathetic brow, and what patient eyes! "She's had a pretty hard life," he thought. "I wonder if she knows or doesn't know?"

Olwen was the first to catch sight of him; and her excited waving made Mattie hurriedly glance round.

She recognized him at once, too, and a flood of colour came into her pale cheeks. Wolf felt a curious embarrassment as they shook hands; and it was almost a relief to him to be forced to take his eyes off her in order to respond to Olwen, who was now waving to him frantically from her flying seat.

The child could not of course stop the machinery of the swing; and when she saw that he had answered her signal, she contented herself with just sweeping him into that rapturous topsy-turvy world—of people, grass, horses, trees, ruins, and hills—which rose and fell around her as she rushed through the air!

The cries of the children, the clang of the machinery, the voices of the showmen, covered Wolf and Mattie with a protective screen of undisturbed privacy. In the light of subsequent events they both looked back upon this moment with peculiar and romantic tenderness.

Directly she gave him her hand—even while he still held it—he had begun to talk to her of their relationship.

"I've known it since I was fifteen," she said; "and I'm twenty-five this month. That was what made it so awkward when you and your mother came to our house. *She* knows it, of course; and she let me see that she knew it. But I saw she had kept it from you. Has she told you about it since? What I *cannot* make out is whether Father

knows. He knows about Olwen, of course. In fact, he and Miss Gault were the ones who took Olwen away from Mr. Malakite."

She paused, and gave Wolf a quick, furtive look; but what she saw in his face appeared to reassure her, for she smiled faintly.

"It's all so hard to talk about," she said in a low voice. "I'd never have thought I could talk to *you* about it. But it seems easy, now I'm actually doing it! I was young then, you see . . . only fifteen; and Father and Miss Gault thought I knew nothing. But I'd heard the servants talking; and I read about it in the 'Western Gazette.' Why do you think it was I wasn't more shocked . . . Wolf?"

The hesitancy with which she brought out his name enchanted him. He snatched at her hand and made a movement as if he would kiss her; but she glanced hurriedly at the swing and drew back.

"I'm pretty hard to shock, too, Mattie dear," he said. "I expect we inherit *that!*" he added lightly.

"It was when they brought me to see Olwen at the 'Home,'" the girl continued, "that I made Father have her at our house, for Nanny . . . she was my nurse then . . . and me to take care of! I knew she was at the 'Home,' . . . oh, Wolf, she was such a sweet little thing! . . . for I heard them talking about her. And I made Father take me to see her, and we were friends in a second."

"So it was you that persuaded Mr. Smith to take her into his house?" said Wolf. "And you were only a child yourself."

Mattie gave a quaint little chuckle. "I was a pretty obstinate child, I'm afraid," she said. "Besides, Olwen and I both cried terribly and hugged each other. I was mad about children," she added gravely; "just mad about them, when I was young."

"Was your father hard to persuade?" enquired Wolf.

The girl gave him one of her lowering sulkily-humorous glances.

"I made a fuss, you see," she said solemnly. "I cried and cried, till he agreed. It was Miss Gault who opposed it most. Oh, Wolf, it's terrible how Miss Gault has made the child hate Christie. Christie has seen her several times. I managed *that* for her! But Miss Gault must have said something. I don't know what. But the last time Olwen would hardly speak to her."

Wolf frowned. "Of course, it's possible, I suppose, that it's some kind of instinct in the little girl——" he began ponderingly.

"No! No!" cried Mattie. "It's Miss Gault. I know it's Miss Gault!"

"Christie told me she might be here this afternoon," said Wolf, looking about him from group to group of the noisy young people around them.

"Did she?" said Mattie, with a nervous start. "Did she really, Wolf?" And she, too, threw an anxious glance round the field. "I wouldn't like her feelings to be hurt," she added. "They *would* be, I know, if she tried to speak to Olwen."

Wolf's mind reverted violently to the solitary grey feather in the "Urn Burial." At that moment he felt as though not anyone . . . not Gerda herself . . . could

stop him from following that fragile figure if he caught sight of it in this crowd!

But Mattie was now waving her hand to Olwen, whose airy boat had begun to slacken its speed.

They moved together towards the swing; and Wolf rushed forward to help the child to the ground. As he lifted her out, he felt his forehead brushed by the floating ends of her loosened hair.

She put her thin arms round him and hugged him tight as soon as he set her down.

"Oh, I love swinging so! I love swinging so!" she gasped.

"Would you like to have another one?" he said gravely, looking down at that glowing little face.

Her eyes shone with infinite gratitude. "Aunt Mattie's spent every penny Grandfather gave her," she whispered. "Would you really give me one more? There! You pay it to that man over there; the one with the funny eyes!"

Wolf handed over the coin and lifted the child back into the painted boat. He waited at her side till the machinery started again and then returned to Mattie.

"Didn't you have the least guess about you and me?" the girl said; and it gave him a thrill of pleasure to see what animation had come into her stolid countenance.

"Not exactly a guess," he answered. "But I did have some kind of an odd feeling; as though I understood you and followed your thoughts, even when you were silent. Heavens! Mattie, dear; and you were silent almost all the time!"

"Your mother wasn't very nice to me."

"Well, one can hardly blame her for that, can one? People do feel rather odd in these situations."

"But I was nice to *you,* wasn't I?" the girl went on. "And yet I couldn't bear to think that Father wasn't my real father," she added faintly.

Mattie's face had such a touching expression at that moment—an expression at once so thrilled and so puzzled—that with a quick and sudden movement he flung his arm round her neck and gave her a brusque kiss, full on the mouth.

"Mr. Solent! Wolf!" she protested feebly. "You mustn't! What will *she* think?"

"Oh, *she'll* think you've found a young man," he replied, laughing; "and so you *have,* my dear," he added affectionately.

But though he laughed at her embarrassment, and though she laughed faintly with him, it was clear enough to his mind, as he glanced at the face of the child in the swing, that their kiss had not been received very happily up there.

Two burning eyes flashed down at him like two quivering poniards, and two fierce little hands clutched the sides of the olive-green boat as if they had been the sides of a war-chariot.

"That child of yours is jealous," he whispered hurriedly in his companion's ear. "But don't you worry," he added. "It won't last, when she knows me better."

He moved up to the swing and remained watching the little girl as she whirled past him like a small angry-eyed comet.

By degrees his steady matter-of-fact attention disarmed that jealous heart; and when the swing stopped, and he had gravely kissed her and handed her back to Mattie, all was once more well.

"We must go now and find your grandfather," said Mattie to Olwen.

"I'll come with you," said Wolf. "I left my mother with Mr. Smith; so we'll kill two birds with one stone!"

They moved off together; but suddenly, crossing a gap among the people, Wolf caught sight of Bob Weevil and Lobbie Torp.

"You go on, you two—do you mind? We'll meet later. There's someone I *must* run after."

Both of his companions looked a little hurt at this brusque departure; but with a repeated "We'll meet later! Good-bye!" he swung off in clumsy haste, pushing his way so impetuously through the crowd, that he aroused both anger and derision.

For a time he was afraid that he had lost his quarry completely, so dense had the medley become around the booths; but at last, with a sigh of relief, he came upon them. They were both watching with unashamed delight a young short-skirted gipsy who was dancing wildly to a tambourine. As she danced, she beat her knees and threw bold, provocative glances at her audience.

Wolf approached the two boys unobserved and was conscious of a passing spasm of shameless sympathy when he caught the expression of entranced lechery in the concentrated eyes of the young grocer. Lobbie Torp's interest was evidently distracted by the audacious leaps

and bounds of the gipsy-wench and by her jangling music; but Mr. Weevil could contemplate nothing but her legs. These moving objects seemed to be on the point of causing him to howl aloud some obscene "Evoe!" For his mouth was wide open and great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

The girl stopped breathless at last, but without a moment's delay began to collect money, holding out her musical instrument with long, bare arms, and indulging in liberal and challenging smiles.

It tickled Wolf's fancy at this juncture to note the beaten-dog expression in Mr. Weevil's countenance as he pulled Lobbie away with him and tried to shuffle off unobserved. In their hurried and rather ignominious retreat they ran straight into Wolf's arms.

"Lordie! Hullo!" stammered Lob. "It's Mr. Redfern —I mean, Mr. Solent, ain't it?" said Bob Weevil.

Wolf gravely shook hands with them both.

"It's not easy to keep one's money in one's pocket on a day like this," he remarked casually.

Mr. Weevil gave him a furtive water-rat glance; and Wolf would not have been surprised had the young man taken incontinently to his heels.

"Bob knows all about they gipoos when they do zither like moskitties," observed Lob slyly.

"Shut up, you kid!" retorted the other, "or I'll tell Mr. Solent how I caught you kissing a tree."

"I never kissed no tree," muttered Lob sulkily.

"*What?*" cried his friend indignantly.

"If I did, 'twere along o' they loveyers us seed in Willum's Lane ditch. 'Twere enough to make a person kiss

his wone self, what us did see; and 'twere ye what showed 'em to I."

"I hope you have both enjoyed yourselves this afternoon," began Wolf again. "Christie can't have come," he thought to himself; and he wondered if he should ask Mr. Weevil point-blank about her.

But Mr. Weevil was bent upon his silly, obstinate bullying of Lobbie. He kept trying to inveigle Wolf in this unamiable game.

"Lob thinks we're all as simple as his Mummy in Chequers Street!" continued the youth, with an unpleasant leer.

"Don't 'ee listen to him!" cried Lob. "Everyone knows what *his* Mummy were, afore old man Weevil paid Lawyer Pipe to write 'Whereas' in his girt book!"

"Listen, you two——" expostulated Wolf. "I want to ask you both a question."

"He'll answer 'ee, same as my dad answered Mr. Manley when 'a cussed about his mother's gravestone. 'Bless us!' said my dad, 'and do 'ee take I for King Pharaoh?'"

"What was it you wanted to ask us, Sir?" enquired the elder youth, pompously interrupting Lobbie.

"Oh, quite a simple thing, Mr. Weevil. I was only wondering if Miss Malakite was out here today."

"Certainly she's here, Sir. Certainly she is."

"Us came along o' she, on our bicycles," threw in Lobbie.

"Where is she now, then?" Wolf insisted.

"She went castle-way, I think, Mr. Solent," said Bob Weevil.

"She said to we," interjected Lobbie, "that her reckoned she'd have a quiet stroll-like, long o' they ruings."

Wolf looked from one to the other. "So, in plain words, you deserted Miss Malakite?" he said sternly.

"Lob knows what I said when she was gone," mumbled Mr. Weevil.

"When she were gone," echoed the boy. "I should say so!"

"What *did* you say?" asked Wolf.

"He said her walked like a lame hare," threw in Lobbie.

"I didn't, you little liar! Don't believe him, Mr. Solent! I said she walked lonesome-like with her head hanging down."

"That weren't *all* you said, Bob Weevil! Don't you remember what you said when us were looking at thik man-monkey? No! 'twere when us seed they girt cannibals all covered with blue stripes. That's when 'twere! Dursn't thee mind how thee said 'twas because Miss Malakite hadn't got no young man that she went loppiting off to they ruings 'stead of buying fairings like the rest of they?"

Wolf suddenly found himself losing his temper. "I think you both behaved abominably," he cried, "leaving a young lady, like that, to go off by herself! Well, I'm going after her; and I'll tell her what I think of you two when I've found her!"

He strode off in the direction indicated by the boys' words. It was towards the southern extremity of the fair-field that he now made his way, where a dilapidated hedge and a forlorn little lane separated the castle-field

from the castle-ruins. He hadn't gotten far, however, when, glancing at a row of motionless human backs, transfixed into attitudes of petrified wonder by the gesticulations of a couple of clowns, he became aware that two of those backs were obscurely familiar to him. He approached them sideways, and his first glance at their concentrated profiles revealed the fact that they were Mrs. Torp and old Dimity Stone.

It gave him a queer shock to think that this tatterdemalion shrew in rusty black was actually Gerda's mother. For the least fragment of a second he was aware of a shiver of animal panic, like a man who hears the ice he is crossing bend and groan under him; but he forced himself to walk straight up to them and salute them by name.

"I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Torp," he said cheerfully. "How do you do, Dimity? You and I haven't met for several long days."

"Hark at him, Mrs. Stone," gasped Gerda's mother. "Hark at him, how 'ee do coax a body! He do look and speak just as I was telling 'ee, don't 'ee, now? If I hadn't told 'ee, honest to God, how the gentleman spoke, ye'd have never known it, would 'ee, Mrs. Stone?"

The withered face of Mrs. Torp remained turned toward her companion as she uttered this ambiguous welcome. She seemed unable to give Wolf so much as one single glance from her little vixen eyes, over which two artificial pansies, hanging from the battered bonnet on her head, jiggled disconcertingly.

But old Dimity retained Wolf's fingers quite a long while in her bony hand; and with absorbed and searching

interest, as if she had been a fortune-teller, she peered into his countenance.

"The gentleman be far from what thee or any others have reckoned," repeated the crone slowly. "I've always known you were a deep one, Mr. Solent," she added.

"I'm glad you think better of me than Mrs. Torp does, Dimity," threw in Wolf, and he glanced anxiously over their heads toward the boundary of the field, his mind full of the deserted Christie.

"I think of 'ee as one what *speaks* fair enough," grumbled Gerda's mother, "but 'tis deeds *I* waits for. As I said to Torp this very mornin' . . . 'Thy fair-spoken young gent,' I said, 'be only another Redfern; and all the country do know how daft *he* were!' Squire Urquhart must have 'em daft! Daft must they be for he, as I said to Torp. And that's because it's only the daft 'uns what'll serve for his cantrips—the girt bog-wuzzel 'ee is!"

Wolf detected a very sagacious expression in old Dimity's eye as she dropped his fingers at this.

"This gent bain't no more a Redfern, Jane Torp, than a pond-pike be a gudgeon. What I've a-said to 'ee in neighbour-fashion I'd say now to 'ee on Bible-oath."

There was a dead silence for a moment between the three of them, broken only by the gibberish of the two clowns, which sounded like the chatter of a pair of impudent parakeets amid the slow, rich Dorsetshire speech about them.

Without pausing to think of the effect of his words on Gerda's mother, Wolf could not restrain himself from uttering at this juncture the question which so occupied his mind. "By the way, Mrs. Torp, have you, by any

chance, seen Miss Malakite here this afternoon? I wanted to find her."

Mrs. Torp nudged her companion with the handle of her umbrella.

"So ye're after her, too, are ye, Mister? What do 'ee make o' that, Dimity Stone? Hee! Hee! Hee! The gentleman from London must have a sweetheart for Wednesday and a sweetheart for Thursday. But you have a care, Mr. Solent! Our Gerda bain't one for sharing her fairings; and she'll let 'ee know it! Won't she, Dimity Stone?"

Wolf felt unable to decide whether this outburst, under the pressure of which the thin cheeks of Mrs. Torp tightened over their bones till they were as white as the skin of a toad-stool, was just ordinary Blacksod humour or was malignity. He contented himself with taking off his hat, wishing them a pleasant evening, and hurrying away.

As he moved towards the southern boundary of the field, he found his mind beset with a burden of tumultuous misgiving. Mrs. Torp's malicious "Hee! Hee! Hee!" continued to croak like a devil's frog in the pit of his stomach; and he remembered with hardly less discomfort the queer look that the old Dimity had given him. He *must* find Christie! That was the one essential necessity. Every step he took towards that ragged little hedge increased his nervous agitation.

"Why did chance throw them both in my way at this same moment?" he thought, as he walked automatically forward. And then a still more furtive and dangerous

whisper entered his mind. *"Why didn't I meet Christie first?"*

The ghastly treachery of this final speculation, coming to him on the very morrow of the "yellow bracken," only made him shake his head, as if freeing himself from a thicket of brambles, and stride forward with more reckless resolution than ever.

Long afterwards he could recall every slightest sensation that he had as he crossed that empty portion of the fair-field. One of these sensations was a vivid awareness of the sardonic grimacing of that man in the churchyard. The perversity of his father seemed physically to weigh upon him. He had the feeling that he was himself reproducing some precise piece of paternal misdoing. He felt shamelessly like him! He felt as though his arms were swinging as *his* arms used to . . . his legs striding the very stride of *his* legs!

He had now left the last tent far behind, and was approaching the low thickset hedge that separated the castle-field from the castle-lane.

As he came up to the hedge, he nearly stumbled over a half-skinned, half-eaten rabbit, one of whose glazed wide-open eyes fixed itself upon him from the ground with a protesting appeal.

Mechanically he stooped down, and, lifting the thing up by its ears, placed it among the young dock-leaves and the new shoots of hedge-parsley.

Then he leaned both his arms over the top of the brambles, and, raising himself on tiptoe, peered into the lane beyond.

Ah! He had not then come to no purpose!

A little way down the lane, under a closed and carefully wired gate leading to the castle-ruins, crouched the unmistakable figure of Christie Malakite.

The girl was on her knees, her legs crooked under her and her hands clasped on her lap. By her side, fallen to the ground, were her hat and some sort of paper parcel. She lifted her head and saw him there; but remained motionless, just staring at him without a sign. Wolf tightened his long overcoat round his knees and forced his way straight through the thick brambles. A couple of minutes later he was kneeling by her side on the grass, hugging her tear-stained face against his ribs and stroking her hair with his hands. "I've had a hunt for you . . . a hunt for you!" he panted. "What did you come to this damned place for? Well! I've got you now, anyway. I don't know what I should have done if I hadn't found you. But I've hunted you down . . . like a hare, my dear . . . just like a hare!"

"I'm . . . a . . . little . . . fool!" she gasped faintly. "I'll be all right in a minute. I ought . . . to have . . . known better than . . . to have come here! The boys were kind . . . but, of course, they wanted . . . to enjoy themselves. I was a burden on them . . . and then I felt . . . I felt I couldn't . . . bear it!"

She pressed her face against his coat, struggling to hold back her tears.

Moving his hands to her shoulders, and bending down, he touched the top of her head with his lips. Her hair, neatly divided by a carefully brushed parting, was so silky and fine that he felt as if his kiss had penetrated

to the very centre of her skull. But she did not draw away from him. She only buried her forehead deeper in the folds of his heavy coat.

There was a tuft of loosely-growing stitchwort in the hedge by the gate-post; and this frail plant, as he surveyed it across her crouching form, mingled with his wild thoughts. Had anything like this ever happened to a man before . . . that on the day after such an ecstasy he should feel as he felt now? "I must be a monster!" he said to himself. "Am I going to begin snatching at the soul and body of every girl I meet down here?" With the cluster of stitchwort still illuminating his thought, as a flower-scroll illuminates a monkish script, he now struggled desperately to justify himself.

"This feeling," he protested, "is a different thing altogether. It's pity . . . that's what it is! And, of course, Gerda being so beautiful, pity doesn't . . ."

Christie lifted up her head now, and sat back, hugging her knees and staring at him. He, too, changed his position, so that his shoulders leant against the lower bars of the gate. "It's queer how natural it seems to be . . . to be with you like this," he said slowly.

She gave a little nod. "I used to tell myself stories . . ." she began, searching his face intently as if what she wanted to say lay hidden in its lines. "I feel so different now," she went on, "that it would be easy to tell you. . . ." Once more her voice sank into silence.

"It's better to be alone," he echoed, "unless you can think aloud. I've been walking about this fair-field all the afternoon and talking to everyone; but I couldn't think aloud until this moment."

They were both silent, staring helplessly at each other.

"I wish you were a boy, Christie!" he brought out abruptly.

Something in the peevish gravity of this must have tickled her fancy, for she smiled at him with a free, unrestrained, schoolgirlish smile.

"I used to wish that myself," she murmured gently; and then she sighed, her smile fading as quickly as it had come.

He knitted his heavy eyebrows and scowled at her in deep thought.

Two persistent sounds forced their identities into his drugged consciousness. The first was the brazen clamour of the whirligig engines. The second was the whistling of a blackbird. This latter sound had already assumed that peculiar mellowness which meant that the sun-rays were falling horizontally upon that spot, and that the long March afternoon was drawing to its close.

It was impossible that this bird's voice could fail to bring to his mind the events of yesterday's twilight and that up-turned face at which he had gazed so exultantly in the gathering river-mists. To drown the blackbird's notes, he began hurriedly telling her one thing after another of his afternoon's adventures. When he came to his conversation with Miss Gault, they both instinctively shifted their position; and he found himself helping her to adjust the loosened belt of her old-fashioned cloak with a gesture that was almost paternal.

"One thing I cannot understand," he said.

"Well?" she murmured.

"I cannot understand how Olwen should feel towards you as they tell me she does."

The girl's forehead wrinkled itself into a strained, pinched intensity; but all she said was, "I could never take care of any child as well as Mattie Smith."

"I don't believe you," he retorted bluntly.

He avoided her eyes now; and, as he looked away into the great elm-tree that grew near the gate, he caught sight of a large nest up there.

"Is that a rook's nest?" he asked, pointing it out to her with upraised arm.

Christie turned and peered upwards.

"A missel-thrush's, I think," she said, after a second's hesitation. "Rooks' nests are all sticks . . . and they're higher up, too."

With lifted heads they both stared into the elm-tree, and, beyond the tree, into the cold March sky.

"Why not take us as we are," he said slowly, apparently addressing the missel-thrush's nest, "as two hunted, harassed consciousnesses, meeting by pure chance in endless blue space and finding out that they have the same kind of mind?"

Their heads sank down after this, and Wolf automatically fumbled for his cigarettes and then consciously let them go.

"I've never felt as much at ease with anyone as with you, Christie . . . except perhaps my mother. No, not even except her."

"I think we *are* alike," she said quietly. And then, with the same schoolgirlish simple amusement that had

struck him before, "We're too alike, I think, to do much harm to anyone!"

Her face grew suddenly grave, and she stretched out her thin arm and touched Wolf lightly on the knee. "You must be prepared for one thing," she said. "You must be prepared to find that I haven't a trace of what people call the 'moral sense.'"

"I'll risk that danger!" he retorted lightly. "Besides, if you've got *no* conscience, I'm worse off still. I've got a diseased conscience!"

She didn't even smile at this sally. With a quick wrinkling of her brow, as if under a twinge of physical discomfort, she scrambled to her feet.

"I must get my bicycle," she said, with a little shiver. "Father will be waiting for his supper."

Wolf rose too; and they stood rather awkwardly side by side, while the blackbird flew off with an angry scream.

"Where is your bicycle?" he asked lamely; and as he saw her and felt her, standing there by his side, so pitfully devoid of all physical magnetism, he could not resist a chilly recognition that something of the mysterious appeal that had drawn him to her had slipped away and got lost.

He felt in that second that it had been a piece of pure madness to have wished that all this had happened before yesterday's "yellow bracken."

She glanced up at him with a quick, searching look. Then she tightened her cloak resolutely round her. "It's in the Lovelace stables," she said. "I can easily find it. You needn't come."

"Of course I'll come! I'll go with you and put you on it; and then I'll come back for my mother."

"It's pity I feel," he said to himself. "I've got Gerda for good and all. It's just pity I feel."

They followed the lane westward, skirting the edge of the fair-field. When they reached the foot of "The Slopes," they saw the whole of Ramsgard outspread before them. The sunset-mist, rising up from the River Lunt, threw over the little town the sort of glamour that cities wear in old fantastic prints. Vaguely, under the anæsthesia of this diffused glory in the chilly air, he marvelled at the mad chance that had plunged him into these two girls' lives with this disturbing simultaneousness. He began furtively trying to annihilate with his imagination first one life and then the other from his obstinate preoccupation. But the effort proved hopelessly futile! To conceive of the future without Gerda's loveliness was impossible. But equally was it impossible to cover up this strange new feeling. Only "pity," . . . but a pity that had a quivering sweetness in it!

"You're all right now?" he enquired abruptly, as they crossed the railway-track.

"Absolutely," she answered firmly, evidently recognizing that this allusion to her original trouble was a sign of a certain withdrawal in her companion. "And please, please, believe me when I tell you that I hardly ever . . . no, practically never . . . give way like that."

"What do you think did it?" he blurted out clumsily. "Those silly boys deserting you?"

She made no reply at all to this; and he experienced

a wave of embarrassment that brought a hot prickling sensation into his cheeks.

"You've been very kind to me," she said unexpectedly, in a clear emphatic voice. And then she added very slowly, pronouncing the words as if each of them were a heavy bar of silver and she were an exhausted stevedore emptying the hold of a ship, "Kinder . . . to me . . . than anyone's . . . ever been . . . in the whole of my life."

These words of hers, healing his momentary discomfort, gave him such happiness, that, as they entered the Lovelace stables and she moved in front of him across the cobblestones, he furtively rubbed his hands together, just as he would have done if he had been alone.

"What a good thing you came over here this afternoon," he said, as he wheeled her bicycle out of the yard.

"I don't know about that!" she answered promptly, with a flicker of her peculiar elfish humour; and it turned out to be the tone of these words beyond all others, that remained with him when she was gone. They had the tone of some sort of half-human personality . . . some changeling out of the purer elements . . . upon whose nature whatever impressions fell would always fall with a certain mitigation, with a certain lenient tenuity, like the fall of water upon water, or of air upon air!

THE CHEAP WOODEN CLOCK ON THE MANTELPIECE OF HIS small parlour made itself audible to the ears of Wolf across the little passageway as he stood above his kitchen-stove. Eight times the clock struck; and the old vivid consciousness of what time was and was not caught his mind and held it. It was not a consciousness of the passing of time as it affected his own life that arrested him. Of that kind of individual awareness he had scarcely any trace. To himself he always seemed neither young nor old. Indeed, of bodily self-consciousness—that weather-eye, kept open to the addition of years and months upon his personal head—he had nothing at all. What he lived in was not any compact, continuous sense of personal identity, but rather *a series of disembodied sensations*, some physical, some mental, in which his identity was absolutely merged and lost. He was vividly aware of these momentary sensations in relation to other feelings of the same kind, some long past and some anticipated in his imagination; but he was accustomed to regard all these not from out of the skin, so to speak, of a living organism, but from a detachment so remote and far away as to seem almost outside both the flowing of time and the compactness of personality.

Eight o'clock in the morning of the first day of June was what that timepiece said to him now; and his mind paused upon the recognition of the vast company of clocks and watches all the world over, ticking, ticking,

ticking—sending up, in tiny metallic beats, vibrations of human computation into the depths of unthinkable space.

He pushed open the iron cover of the stove and jabbed with his poker at the fire inside. Then he took up a wooden spoon and stirred the contents of an enamelled pot of porridge that stood there, moving it aside from the heat. A thrill of satisfaction ran through him when he had done this, and he rubbed his hands together and made a "face," drawing back his under-lip in the manner of a gargoyle, and constricting the muscles of his chin.

In less than half-an-hour, he thought, he would be enjoying his breakfast at that kitchen-table with Gerda, lovely and sulky as a young animal after her abrupt awakening.

He ran up the short flight of creaking stairs, carpeted with new linoleum; and with the merest pretence of a tap at the door entered their bedroom. The girl was lying on her back fast asleep, her fair hair spread out, loose and bright in the sunshine, across the indented pillow of her recent bedfellow. Her arms were outstretched above the coverlet, and one of her hands was hanging down over the side of the bed. His entrance did not arouse her, and he stood for a while at her side, meditating on the mysterious simplicity of her especial kind of loveliness.

Then he bent down, kissed her into consciousness, laughed at her scolding, and with one resolute swing of his arms lifted her bodily from the bed, set her on her

feet on the floor, and hugged her to his heart, struggling and indignant. The warmth of her body under the childish white night-gown she wore, buttoned close up to her chin, gave him a rough, earthy, animal ecstasy. He had already discovered that it was more delicious to hold her like this, he himself fully awake and dressed, and she as she was, than under any other circumstances. A pleasant element of the unhabitual and the predatory sweetened for him that particular embrace. "Don't!" she cried, struggling to push him away. "Don't, Wolf! Let me go, I tell you!" But he went on kissing her and caressing her as if it had been the first time he had ever taken her in his arms.

At last, lifting her clean off her feet, with both arms under her body, he put her back upon the bed and drew the bedclothes over her.

"There!" he cried. "How does *that* feel?"

But the girl turned round with her face to the wall and refused to speak.

"Eight o'clock, young lady," he cried brusquely. "Breakfast will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

For answer she only pulled the bedclothes more tightly round her neck.

"If you haven't time to wash or do your hair, you must come down as you are. Where's your dressing-gown?" And he looked vaguely round the room. "Hurry up, now!" he added. "Remember all that's going to happen today."

There was a movement under the twisted sheet.

"You're a wretch!" she gasped, in a muffled voice.

"Never mind what I am. Keep your scoldings till you get downstairs. I've got an exciting piece of news for you."

This brought her round with a jerk.

"What are you hiding up in your mind now? Tell me quick! Tell me, Wolf!"

But he only laughed at her, waved his hand, and went out.

Running downstairs again, he returned to the kitchen, moved the steaming kettle to the side of the stove, turned the spoon in the oatmeal, and then, crossing the little passage where his own grey overcoat and Gerda's cream-coloured cloak, hanging side by side on their adjoining pegs, regarded him with equivocal intentness, he opened the front-door and went out into the road.

In one warm inrushing wave the fragrance of the whole West Country seemed to flow through him as he came forth. Sap-sweet emanations from the leafy recesses of all the Dorset woods on that side of High Stoy seemed to mingle at that moment with the rank, grassy breath of all the meadow-lands of Somerset.

The iron railings in front of that row of meagre, non-descript houses opened upon the airy confluence of two vast provinces of leafiness and sunshine—to the right Melbury Bub, with its orchards and dairies; to the left Glastonbury, with its pastures and fens—while the umbrageous "auras" of these two regions, blending together in the air above the roofs of Blacksod, merged into yet a third essence, an essence sweeter than either—the very soul of the whole wide land lying between the English Channel and the Bristol Channel.

Number Thirty-Seven Preston Lane was the last house in a row of small workmen's cottages at the extreme western limit of the town of Blacksod. What met Wolf's actual eyes as he clicked the little gate in the iron railings and emerged upon the road, was only a small portion of the secret causes of his happiness that June morning. He had long craved to establish himself in just such a nondescript row of unpretentious dwellings on the outskirts of a town. He had always had a feeling that the magic of simple delights came with purer impact upon the mind when unalloyed by the "artistic" or the "picturesque." Large houses and large gardens, pretty houses and pretty gardens, seemed to intrude themselves, with all their responsibilities of possession, between his senses and the free, clear flow of unconfined, unpersonalized beauty. His feeling about the matter had something in common with the instinct that has created the monk's cell—only the cell that Wolf preferred was a lath-and-plaster workman's villa, a place possessed of no single æsthetic quality, except perhaps that of being easily kept very neat and clean.

The fact of living here with Gerda under conditions identical with those of the Blacksod carpenters, bricklayers, and shop-assistants, threw into beautiful relief every incident of his life's routine. Preparing food, preparing fires, the very floor-scrubbing wherein he shared, took on for him, just because of this absence of the deliberately "artistic," a rarefied poetical glamour.

He moved out now into the middle of the road and surveyed the landscape. As he did so, two very distinct and contradictory odours assailed his nostrils. There

were no houses across the way, nothing but a foul-smelling ditch, the recipient of sewage from an adjoining pig-yard; and beyond that, an enormously high hedge, on the top of which, where no child could reach, grew clumps of honeysuckle and sprays of wild roses. The smell of these flowers contended oddly enough with the smell of pigs' dung; and the two odours, thus subtly mingled, had become for him a constant accompaniment to the thoughts that passed through his mind as he went in and out of his tiny front-garden.

The pigsty was on his right as he stood facing the ditch; but on his left there grew in the meadow just beyond the hedge a large ash-tree—a tree from among whose grey upcurving branches a thrush was wont to sing, always increasing the vehemence of its ecstasy till the moment when the road grew quite dark. The bird began singing now, and its thrush-notes made Wolf think of those wild blackbird-notes of Gerda, as they flooded the meadows on the day when she lost her virginity.

Thinking of Gerda as he stared up into the ash-tree, he began to meditate on the extraordinary good luck he had had ever since he had come to the West Country. "I must be born under a lucky star," he thought; and his mind set itself to review the most recent examples of this good fortune.

He recalled the satisfactory manner in which his iron-willed mother had suddenly receded from all her opposition to his union with Gerda. He recalled the equally satisfactory generosity of Mr. Urquhart, who had come forward with an offer to let her go on living at Lenty

Cottage free of rent as long as Wolf himself remained his secretary.

He recalled the extraordinary kindness displayed toward him by Darnley Otter, who had not only lent him the fifty pounds necessary to buy furniture, but had also introduced him to the authorities of the Blacksod Grammar School, where he was now earning a pound a week by giving lessons every morning in English and History.

"Luck! luck! luck!" he said in his heart, rubbing his hands together. Through his thin indoor shoes the magnetism of the earth seemed at that moment pouring into every nerve of his body. Happiness, such as he had rarely experienced, flooded his being; and the fantastic idea came into his head that if he were to die now he would in some subtle way cheat death.

"I must remember this moment," he said to himself. "Whatever happens to me henceforth, I must remember this moment, and be grateful to the gods!"

Just as he opened the iron gate and glanced at the two or three newly-budded plants that were coming out in his little patch of garden, the owner of the pigsty, a ruffianly curmudgeon who earned his living in more than one disreputable way, took it into his head to pour out a great bucket of swill into the pig-trough, an action that caused so ear-piercing a volley of bestial shrieks, that Wolf stopped aghast, his heart almost ceasing to beat, and, turning his head, threw an agitated glance toward that sinister little erection of tarred boardings.

His first idea was that one of the animals was being slaughtered; but the sound of voracious gobbling which now reached his ears reassured him.

"He's only feeding them," he said to himself, and entered the house. In the kitchen he found Gerda already beginning her bowl of porridge.

"What's the news, Wolf?" she enquired, with the indistinct voice of a greedy child, turning, as she did so, her cream-clogged spoon upside-down in her mouth, so as to lick it clean. "What's this you were going to tell me?"

"Guess, sweetheart!" he said contentedly, emptying what was left of the cream-jug over his own oatmeal. "Nothing, in fact, could be better. Urquhart announced last night that he has decided to go slow with our History. You know what a hurry he's been in? But he now says he's decided to make a complete job of it, even if it takes five years to finish."

The infantile sulkiness in Gerda's face only deepened at his words, and with an impatient gesture she stretched out her arms and tossed back her head. Then she tightened the green ribbon with which she had fastened her locks, and fixed upon him a cloudy, satiric frown. She appeared so enchanting in her crossness, that Wolf forgot everything as he watched these movements, and for a moment he just looked at her in silence.

"You don't think much of my news, then?" he said presently. "But you don't realize how awkward it would have been if this confounded book had come to an end this Autumn. Where would we have got another hundred pounds from, eh, sweetheart? Tell me that!"

"A hundred pounds!" the girl muttered sarcastically.

"Yes, a hundred pounds," he retorted. "Two-thirds of our income."

He rose and moved to the stove, to get the kettle to refill their teapot.

"But that's not all; so you needn't look sour. There's something much more amusing than that." She waited impatiently now, and he went on. "Urquhart doesn't want me over there this afternoon and Mother's coming to tea."

The girl's sulkiness changed in a moment to something like pitiful dismay.

"Oh, Wolf!" she exclaimed. "This is the first time."

"She's been twice to lunch," he said.

But Gerda's eyes remained troubled and very wide open, and the corners of her under-lip drooped.

"Darnley was here, too—both times!" she gasped. "We've never had her alone, and I've got no clothes for an afternoon."

"No clothes?"

"You know what I mean, perfectly well," she went on peevishly. "People like your mother don't have the same things on in the morning as they do in the afternoon."

Wolf watched her with narrowing eyelids. He recalled that first walk with her up the slope of Babylon Hill, and his pursuit of her among the earthworks of Poll's Camp. Why did all girls introduce into life an element of the conventional—into that life of which they themselves were the most mysterious expression? He became suddenly aware of the existence, in the beautiful head opposite him, of a whole region of interests and values that had nothing to do with love-making and nothing to do with romance. Was love itself, then, and all its

mysteries, only a kind of magic gate leading into a land full of alien growths and unfamiliar soils?

"Gerda, my sweet Gerda!" he cried reproachfully. "How absurd! What does it matter? It's only my mother. She must take us as she finds us."

The girl pouted and smiled scornfully.

"That's all you know!" she retorted. "Your mother's a woman, isn't she?"

Wolf stared at her. Was there then some queer inner world, parallel to the one that was important to him, wherein women encountered one another, and without whose ritual life was completely unreal to them? "God!" he thought to himself. "If this *is* so, the sooner I get the secret of this 'other reality,' the better for both Gerda and me!"

"Well, I only beg one thing of you, sweetheart," he went on aloud, "and that is that you don't try and make those funny scones again that you made for Christie. I'll get some halfpenny buns or tea-cakes at Pimpernel's."

"Halfpenny buns!" she repeated contemptuously.

He began to raise his voice. "They're the very nicest things! How silly you are! But I don't care what you get, as long as there's plenty of thin bread-and-butter."

"I can't cut it! I never could cut it!" she cried helplessly, her enormous grey eyes beginning to fill with tears.

It was then that Wolf began to realize that it was necessary to be as indulgent to the "realities" of this alien array of feelings as if they had been those of a being of a different planet. He got up from his seat and walked round their square kitchen-table, a table

that according to his own caprice had been left bare of any covering. Standing over the girl, he bent her head back with both his hands and kissed her many times.

It seemed to him, as he did this, that he had done this very same thing in another room, and even in another country. He remained motionless behind her for a moment when he had released her, and lifted his head. Where had all this occurred before? A queer feeling came over him as if she and he were acting a part in some fantastic dream-world, and that he had only to make one enormous effort, to find he had destroyed for both of them the whole shadow-scenery of their life.

But Gerda, knowing nothing of what was passing in his mind, turned round in her chair and pushed him away with all the strength of her young arm.

"Don't be so annoying, Wolf!" she cried. "There! I'm hungry, I tell you. Haven't you got any eggs for us?"

He moved away obediently to the stove, made his arrangements for boiling three eggs—two for himself and one for her—and remained there on guard, his watch in his hand.

The audible ticking of his watch, as he concentrated his mind upon it, answered the louder ticking of the clock in the parlour across the passage. "Time again!" he sighed. And then he thought, "But I've got the power to deal with far more serious jolts to my happiness than this finding out that a girl's 'reality' is not my 'reality'!"

In a minute or two, when he had set a china egg-cup in front of each of them and had placed a brown egg within hers and a white one in his own, and had resumed his seat, he found that his quick adjustment of the wheels

and cogs of his mind had proved successful. "It doesn't matter in the least," he thought, "whether we understand each other or not. My existence is necessary to her, just as hers is to me. Neither of us can really spoil anything as long as that's the case."

Whatever secret ways Gerda had of adjusting the machinery of *her* mind, seemed to have been as successful as his own; for when she had satisfied her hunger and filled her teacup with strong, sweet tea, she lifted her head quite cheerfully.

"I'll go to Pimpernel's myself," she said. "I saw something there yesterday that I'm sure your mother would like. And I'll make toast. That'll be just as nice as bread-and-butter."

Wolf declared himself completely satisfied at this prospect.

"You go up now, sweetheart," he said, "and finish dressing, and make the bed. I'll wash up. I'll just have time for that. There, do go quick! I don't want anyone to knock at the door and find you like that. We've got to keep up the prestige of Preston Lane!"

He spoke jestingly, but there was an element of concern at the back of his mind. He had had some uncomfortable moments now and again, when tradesmen's boys had come to the door at an early hour. He hated to think of their ménage being a laughing-stock to all the Lob Torps and Bob Weevils of the town.

It was a complete puzzle to him the way in which Gerda made such a fuss about the conventions where his mother was concerned, while to the Bob Weevils of the place she let down every barrier as completely as if

she'd drifted into Blacksod from the primeval woods of Arcady.

As he watched her now, rushing upstairs like a young Mænad, he remembered how the fancy had come into his mind, that afternoon at Poll's Camp, that the West-Saxon Torp blood in her had been crossed at some very early stage with an altogether different strain.

Hurriedly gathering the dishes together on the edge of the sink, he proceeded to do what would certainly not have passed unobserved by a more practical mistress of the house. He proceeded to hold cups, saucers, plates, bowls, knives, forks, and pots and pans under a tap of perfectly cold water, rubbing them and scraping them with his bare fingers, and then drying them violently—greasy as most of them were—with the kitchen-towel. As he did this, he caught a glimpse out of the window of a stunted little laburnum-tree, which grew in their back-yard; and he noticed, as he had often noticed before, how one of its boughs was leafless and seemed to be stretching out, in a sorrowful, fumbling sort of way, towards their neighbour's fence, above which grew a sturdy lilac-bush, covered now with glossy heart-shaped leaves.

On this occasion, however, for some unaccountable reason, the sight of this forlorn branch brought vividly to his mind the figure of Christie Malakite, as he had seen her that day, crouched in the castle-lane. And with that image there came to him—as if a door had unexpectedly opened in the remotest wall of his mind's fortress—a deep, sickening craving, it was hard to tell for what—a craving that pierced him like the actual thrust of a

spear. The bareness and tension of that extended branch had won his sympathy before; but today, as he rubbed the porridge-pot furiously with the greasy towel and emptied the hot kettle-water into it, the sight of the thing seemed to disturb the complacency of his whole being.

A minute or two later, when he saw it again from the window of their small privy, which abutted upon the same back-yard, he got a sense of being hemmed in, burdened, besieged, while some vague, indistinct appeal, hard to define, was calling upon him for aid.

He moved out to the foot of the staircase, and, with his hand upon the bannister, stood motionless, lost in strange thoughts. These glimpses of certain fixed objects, seen daily, yet always differently, through bedroom-windows, scullery-windows, privy-windows, had, from his childhood, possessed a curious interest for him. It was as if he got from them a sort of runic handwriting, the "little language" of Chance itself, commenting upon what was, and is, and was to come. As he stood there, he could hear Gerda moving about upstairs, and he hesitated as to whether to run up and speak to her, or to go out, as he generally did, without further farewell.

He decided finally upon the latter course; something at the bottom of his mind, just then, making anything else seem strained and unnatural. Snatching up his oak-stick, therefore, he let himself out of the house with deliberate quietness, and walked with rapid steps down the road.

His way to the Grammar School led him past the confectioner's shop; and at the sight of the name "Pim-

pernel" over the door, he decided to run in for a moment and see for himself if the particular tea-cakes that he had in mind were available that day.

Not finding what he wanted, he was on the point of going out again, when he heard a familiar voice proceeding from the interior part of the shop. It was too late to retreat. He was already recognized; and in another second he found himself face to face with Mrs. Torp. Gerda's mother had been engaged in persuading old Ruth Pimpernel to sell her a loaf of yesterday's bread at half-price.

Shaking hands vigorously with this uncongenial apparition, whose shrewish aspect was not modified by the dirty black bonnet she wore balanced on the top of her head, Wolf found himself propitiating the woman to the extreme limit of a somewhat unctuous geniality.

He had often noticed that when his blood had been quickened by rapid walking, he had a tendency to exaggerate his natural *bonhomie* to a degree that was almost fatuous.

"You haven't come to see us for such a long while, Mrs. Torp," he cried. "Gerda and I can't get on without seeing something of you. It's too ridiculous"—so he blundered on, in complete disregard of the sly expression in Mrs. Torp's eyes, like the expression of a tethered dog leering at a hutch of tame hares—"it's too ridiculous to have you in the same place and to see so little of you!"

It was impossible even for the perspicacity of Joan Torp to put down this blustering friendliness to its true account—to the pleasant glow, namely, diffused through Wolf's veins by his rapid walk; and so, with a nearer ap-

proach to a benevolent grimace than he had ever seen on her grim features, she assured him with unhesitating emphasis that she would, "as sure as us be standing here, Mr. Solent," drop in for tea that very afternoon at Preston Lane.

The appearance of the shop-girl with the stale loaf destined for the monument-maker's table—Mr. Torp abominated stale bread—prevented the woman from detecting the cloud that descended on Wolf's brow on receipt of this prompt acceptance of his hospitality. It was, indeed, only when he was hurrying out of the confectioner's shop that he had the wit to turn round and fling back a suggestion that if Mrs. Torp went over there, now at once, her daughter would be very pleased to see her.

"I'll leave it to Gerda," he thought to himself. "She'll manage it somehow."

His mind, however, remained all that morning, as he sat at his desk in the Grammar School fourth-form room, asking questions about Edward Longshanks, teasingly preoccupied with this encounter.

"She may not go there at all," he thought. "It isn't her way to go there in the morning. They're so funny, those two, about their houses. Well, we must chance it and hope for the best!"

And then, as he enlarged to his class upon that formidable black sarcophagus in Westminster Abbey, with its grim inscription, the under-flow of his mind kept fretting against all the little incidents that had led to this annoying issue.

"If I hadn't stayed so long at that confounded privy-

window, I should have got out of Pimpernel's before she came in. And if I'd stopped to say good-bye to Gerda, she'd have gone before I got there at all. Damn! It's like the rope, the water, the fire, the dog, and the old woman getting home from market."

When his class was let out and he himself escaped into the street at half-past twelve, it occurred to him that it was curious how faint an impact upon his consciousness this business of teaching history made. He was clever enough to do the whole job with the surface of his mind. "What the devil do those boys think of me?" he wondered grimly. "I forget their existence as soon as I'm out of sight of them."

He met Darnley Otter, at that moment, issuing forth from his Latin lesson with a pile of papers in his hand.

Darnley greeted him with more than his usual cordiality; and as Wolf looked into his friend's strangely-coloured eyes, he felt that peculiar sensation of relief which men are wont to feel when they encounter each other after the confusion of sex-conflicts.

Darnley laid his free hand on his friend's arm, and they moved down the street together; but for a while Wolf heard nothing of what he was saying, so occupied was he with a sudden question, gaping like a crack in a hot stubble-field in the very floor of his mind, that had just then obtruded itself. Was he really "in love," in the proper sense of that word, with his sweet bedfellow? "But very likely I could never be 'in love' in *that* sense with anyone," he said to himself as they walked along.

And then he became aware that Darnley had been speaking to him for some while.

"I don't see why I shouldn't take you," he was saying now. "I *would*, like a shot, if she hadn't been so funny the other day when I talked about you. But I expect there's nothing in that! Perhaps you hurt her feelings in some way. She's a queer little oddity. I found that out long ago. One has to be awfully careful."

These words, and other words before them, now began to penetrate Wolf's consciousness, as they might have done with a person recovering from an anæsthetic.

"Sorry," he muttered apologetically, standing stock-still on the pavement. "I wasn't listening."

Darnley stroked his pointed beard and looked him up and down.

"You're boy-drunk, poor devil," he murmured sympathetically. "It does take time to wear off. You're repeating to yourself what you'd like to have retorted to Rintoul Minor when he made you feel a fool. I'm often like that myself."

"No, I'm not," protested the other. "But what *were* you saying?"

"Nothing very startling," said Darnley quietly, pulling him forward by the arm. "It's only I thought I'd take you with me to Christie's to lunch. Gerda won't mind, once in a way, will she?"

Wolf drew his heavy eyebrows down so low that his startled gaze gleamed out at his companion like lantern-light from a thatched shed. "I . . . don't . . . suppose so," he muttered hesitatingly.

The truth was that Darnley's suggestion had set something vibrating violently deep down within him, like the

thuds of a buried drum played by an earth-gnome. So this was what things had been tending to since he had caught sight of that laburnum-branch?

Darnley smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't say any more," he cried. "I see you don't want to come. Well! Off with you, then . . . back to your Saxon beauty. Christie's expecting me, anyway."

But Wolf held him with an appeal in his eye.

"It's only that Gerda and I have got special things to do today," he said. "Under ordinary conditions I'd have loved to come."

Darnley looked at him gravely. "No bad news, I hope?" he said.

Wolf was silent. All manner of queer fancies passed, like the shadows of rooks over a pond, across the surface of his brain. One thing particularly he found himself dwelling upon. "Didn't seem friendly to me, eh?" And he recalled the only two occasions on which he had seen Christie alone since his marriage.

On both those occasions she had avoided all allusion to the day of the horse-show. But she had been self-possessed and natural, had laughed at his jests, had talked freely with him about Mattie, had not even drawn back from a passing reference to Olwen. And though her allusions to Gerda were faint and slight, they were friendly and sympathetic. But Wolf remembered well how he had experienced a profound astonishment at the abysses of pride and reserve into which this frail being had the power of retreating.

"Gerda has been a bit surprised," he said at last,

observing that Darnley was growing impatient to be off, "that a friend like Christie hasn't been in to see us more often."

His companion freed his sleeve from the nervous clutch with which Wolf quite unconsciously had seized it.

"That's silly of Gerda," he said curtly. "She ought to understand Christie better than that. Christie never goes out to see people. People have to come and see *her*. Look here, Solent"—and as he spoke, a gleam of boyish eagerness came into his face—"why don't you run back home now, have a bit of lunch, and then both you and Gerda come round to Christie's? I'll tell her you're coming. She'll keep some hot chocolate for you. She makes splendid hot chocolate."

Wolf hesitated. "We've got my mother coming to tea," he said. "And perhaps someone else too," he added, thinking of Mrs. Torp.

"That's all right. There'll be plenty of time for that. It's not half-past two, anyway. Do go off now, there's a good chap; and be sure you bring Gerda."

Wolf remained silent, uncertain, ill at ease, tapping the ground with his stick.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll do as you say. We shan't be long over our lunch, that's certain. But make it plain to Christie that we're only coming for a very short time. Tell her we've got to get back to tea. That'll reassure her," he added sardonically, "if we get on her nerves."

"Don't be an ass, Solent," was his friend's farewell-remark as they turned to go their different ways.

It took Wolf as a rule exactly twenty minutes to walk from the Grammar School gate to his own door; but this time he lengthened the way by debouching into Monmouth Street, where there were no shops and scarcely any traffic.

The hot June sun was shining down almost perpendicularly on the warm, uneven cobblestones of this quiet alley, stones that left room for the occasional out-cropping of thin moss-soft blades of grass. Wolf walked along slowly, under the high brick wall which enclosed the pleasant garden of a certain Lawyer Gault, a remote relative of Selena's. He came to a spot where the branches of a tall lime-tree just inside the lawyer's garden threw a dreamy pattern of motionless shadows upon the stones at his feet. There he stood still, while those dark patterns upon the sunlit ground made that portion of the earth seem porous and insubstantial. And then again that drum-like beating in the depths of his heart brought up the vision of Christie Malakite, huddled and crouched, as he had seen her on the day of the Fair.

Making no attempt this time to restrain his thoughts, he discovered, as he gave himself up to his mental disloyalty, a curious emotional phenomenon. He discovered that the peculiar glamour which had always hovered for him like a diaphanous cloud round the impersonal idea of girlhood, had concentrated itself upon the image of Christie. He plunged into a very strange aspect of his feelings, as he stood on those cobblestones and stared at those dark shadows. The thought of Gerda's warmth gave him a voluptuous thrill, direct, earthy, full of honest and natural desire. But he recognized now that there

hovered over the personality of this other girl something more subtle than this—nothing less, in fact, than that evasive aura of mysterious girlishness—the platonic idea, so to speak, of the mystery of all young girls, which was to him the most magical thing in the whole world. What had drawn him from the beginning to Gerda had been her wonderful beauty, and after that her original personality, her childish character. He could see Gerda's face now, at this moment, before him—he could catch the tones of her voice. He could feel how lovely she was, as he held her and caressed her. Christie's face, on the contrary, was all vague in his memory; her voice was vague; the touch of her hand was vague. It was hard to believe that he had ever had his arms about her. And yet it was Christie who had drawn into herself all those floating intimations of the mystery of a girl's soul, gathered here and there, like cowslips in green valleys, which were above everything so precious to him.

The chatter of a couple of starlings that sank to the ground behind the wall, quarrelling and scolding, brought him at last to himself. He pulled down his straw-hat over his eyes and moved off homewards.

When he opened the door of Number Thirty-Seven, he found Gerda covered from head to foot in a print apron, her head bound up in a green scarf, brushing the floor of their parlour.

"You can't come in now," she said, "unless you want to sit in the bedroom. I'll be doing the kitchen presently. It's no good your going in there."

"Good Lord, child!" he expostulated, coughing and sneezing with exaggerated emphasis, as he propped up

his stick in its accustomed corner. "The place will be covered with dust! Why can't you let things alone? My mother would never have noticed whether the room was brushed or not. It'll take hours for all this to settle!"

She rested on her great broom and surveyed him through her cloud of sun-illumined dust-motes. Under her gaze Wolf felt his actual body stiffen into a pose of clumsy awkwardness. He experienced a sense of humiliating self-consciousness. He felt like a fool, and a treacherous fool. The gaze she fixed upon him was the kind of gaze the Olympian dawn-goddess might have fixed upon her human lover at the moment when he first betrayed the tricky and shifty mortality of his race. He never altogether forgot that experience. It made a hole in his armour which never, to the end of his life, quite closed up. Henceforth, in all his thoughts of himself, he had to allow for a weak and shaky spot in the very groundwork of his character—a weakness that nothing short of the clairvoyance of a woman could ever have laid bare!

"All right," he murmured stupidly. "I'll go wherever you want me to go, my dear." And when he found that she still watched him with a sort of pondering detachment, he made a hopeless effort to read her thoughts.

Her look seemed to express resentment, superiority, irony; and yet there was tenderness in it too, and a sort of pitiful indulgence. It was one of those looks in which everything that is most obscure in the relation between two people rises to the surface and can find no expression in human words. All he knew was that this look of hers let him off and did not let him off; though what

she could know of the vague, secret thoughts that had been his that day, he could not conceive!

"I'll go anywhere you like, Gerda," he repeated lamely; and in order to break this spell, he took up a cloth duster she had laid on the back of a chair, and made a motion to dust the chimneypiece.

She relaxed her reverie at this, and resumed her work without taking further notice of him. This enabled him to turn round again, and, with the duster still in his hand, watch furtively every one of her gestures. The apron she'd twisted so tightly about her body, the bit of green muslin she had tied so quaintly around her head, threw the whiteness of her skin and the softness of her flesh into extraordinary relief. She went on vigorously wielding the broom with her rounded arms, the movements which she made displaying the loveliness of her shoulders and the suppleness of her flanks, till Wolf began to forget everything except the voluptuous fascination of looking at her.

This had not gone on very long before he became aware that she knew perfectly well exactly in what mood he was watching her. Every now and then she would straighten her body to rest her muscles, and then, as she lifted her hands to readjust the green muslin at the back of her head, the contours of her young breasts under the tight-fitting apron assumed the nobility of Pheidian sculpture. Whenever she did this she glanced at him under dreamy, abstracted eyelids, and she seemed to know well that what of all things he wanted most at that moment was just to make rough, reckless, self-obliterating love to her. And she seemed to know, too,

that if she let him do that, just then, some indescribable advantage she had won over him would be altogether lost. Across an unfathomable gulf she shot these glances at him, the thick dust-gendered sun-motes flashing and gyrating between them like the spilled golden sands of some great overturned hour-glass.

Under the pressure of his conflicting feelings, Wolf's heart contracted within him; and the pride of his threatened life-illusion gathered about it, like broken bubbles of quicksilver gathering against the sides of a globe of crystal.

At last, throwing down the duster, he sprang towards her, driven by the blind, unconscious cunning of a predatory animal and by sheer, exasperated desire. But the girl slipped away from him, laughing like a hunted oread, and, lifting her great broom between them, escaped round the edge of the parlour-table, from which she had removed the cloth. Red in the face now, and breathing hard and fast, he pursued her obstinately; and they both ran, panting and hot, round and round that polished expanse of wood, that mocked him like a shining shield. In her flight she dropped the broom, and he in his clumsy pursuit stumbled and almost fell over it.

Then he gave up; because, in a single flash of the dark-lantern of his self-esteem, he saw this whole incident between them just as Bob Weevil would have seen it, had he been pressing his inquisitive face against their window-pane. But as they stood there, stock-still, panting like two animals and staring at each other across the polished wood, it came into his head that if there had been nothing more subtle than that table between them,

this game of theirs would have been full of a rich delight for both of them, Bob Weevil or no Bob Weevil!

Heavily he drew his breath, watching the tiny drops of perspiration on her forehead, and her panting bosom. "She's a complete stranger to me!" he said to himself, with a puzzled sigh.

"You'll never catch me like that, Wolf," gasped Gerda, with a melodious chuckle; "so you'd better give up and admit you're beaten."

But he thought to himself: "She thinks she's acting the naughty child. She thinks she's ruffled my dignity. She thinks I'm a pompous ass, who can't play naturally with a girl in that sort of way." He moved from the table, and, throwing himself into a wicker-chair, lit a cigarette. "But I could, I could," he thought, "*if only*—oh, damn all this business of loving girls! It's getting out of my control; it's getting too much for me!"

Through their open window came the clear, ringing notes of the thrush in the ash-tree, along with that curious scent of honeysuckle mixed with pigs' dung which was their familiar atmosphere. She, too, heard the thrush, and, balancing the broom against a chair, walked to the window and leaned against the side of it, her profile toward him.

"What would I feel," he said to himself, "if she started whistling her blackbird-song now?"

But Gerda displayed no desire for whistling. Her face looked pale and a little sad; and leaning there, with her forehead resting upon one of her bare arms as it lay along the woodwork of the window, she seemed to be lost in concentrated thought.

Wolf felt a sudden longing to go across to her and comfort her—comfort her about those errant feelings of his own that it was impossible to believe she had intercepted in their secret passage through his brain! He couldn't, surely, at that moment, announce to her Darnley's plan?

What he actually did was neither to go up to her nor to tell her about the projected visit. He rose to his feet, and said abruptly: "Well! What about lunch, my dear?"

At this remark she lifted up her head from her arm with a jerk, dropped her hand to her side, and, giving him one quick look of unspeakable reproach, went out without a word into the kitchen.

"Damn!" he thought to himself. "She can't be a witch! She *can't* have the power to read a person's thoughts! Besides, what *did* I think? Nothing beyond what everyone thinks sometimes; wild, crazy, outrageous nonsense! It must be her mother. That old trot must have come round, after all."

He resumed his seat in the wicker-chair; but he felt too miserable even to light a cigarette.

His obscure distress swathed every one of the thrush's notes with a thick soot-coloured wrapping, so that they flapped at him like so many black flags. On the gusts of hedge-scent and ditch-scent his discomfort rose and fell, rocking him up and down in swart desolation.

"I wish I'd gone straight up to her at the window just now," he said to himself. "I can't bear to have her looking like that. Christ saw a man under a fig-tree, or whatever it was; and I suppose a girl can see a man under a lime-tree and read his thoughts like a map!"

He threw off his gloom as well as he could, and walked slowly into the kitchen. There he found her absent-mindedly laying the table for a meal of bread and cheese. He mechanically started helping her, getting out the knives and forks from the dresser-drawer and uncorking a bottle of beer.

When the meal was ready she untied her apron, removed the muslin from her head, washed her hands at the sink, and then, instead of taking her place opposite him, stood wavering and helpless in the middle of the room.

"I think I'll go out for a breath of air," she announced. "I must have swallowed too much dust. I'm not hungry."

Wolf had already taken his seat; and, as she spoke, instead of moving away from him, as her remark suggested, she made a queer little helpless movement towards him. This time he *did* know what to do. He jumped up and sprang towards her, and hugged her tightly to his heart, overcoming her weak resistance, pressing her cheek, now quickly wet with tears, against his own. They remained thus for some seconds, with their arms round each other, but without a word, leaving the parlour-clock and the incorrigible thrush to deal as they pleased with the passing of time.

At length he withdrew his clasp, and, making her sit down at the table, filled her glass with foaming ale.

The mellowness of the drink, combined with the obvious sincerity of his embrace, seemed to drive away the unhappy mood that obsessed her. She turned to the meal

before them and began eating with relish. As they ate they talked quietly of what they would prepare for his mother's tea. Wolf found it wise at present to say nothing of Mrs. Torp.

When they were satisfied, however, and after he had handed her a cigarette—for it always amused him to see the childishly incompetent way Gerda smoked—he plunged boldly into the matter of their visit to the bookseller's shop. With one part of his heart he wished this project at the devil; but he said to himself it would be absurd to disappoint Darnley.

"If you're willing not to wash up and not to dress till we get back, we could easily go for just an hour. We really owe Christie a visit; and Darnley's being there makes an excuse."

"Why ought we to go to Christie's? She ought to come and see us!"

"Gerda, you know how it is! You know what she's like. Besides, we've only asked her that once, when Bob and Lobbie were here. Let's go now; there's a dear girl! We'll have plenty of time to get cleaned up before tea."

Gerda seemed to struggle with herself for a moment; and then she yielded with the most charming grace. "All right," she said, getting up; "only we must run in to Pimpernel's on the way."

Wolf's spirits rose high as they left the house. He chuckled sardonically in his heart at his own elation. "The truth must be," he said to himself, "that I'm simply infatuated with both of them—that I want to snatch at Christie and yet not lose my hold on my sweet Gerda."

The sight of the shop-girl in Pimpernel's, however, brought down his happiness a great many pegs. He had completely forgotten Mrs. Torp.

But he said nothing till they were well out of the shop, and well on their way down High Street. Then he began: "Oh, I met your mother this morning, Gerda. We talked a bit, and I can't remember how it came about, but she went off finally with the idea that I'd asked her to tea this afternoon. And I'm afraid I didn't mention to her that my mother's coming; so we'd better be prepared for her turning up."

The effect of this information was startling. Gerda drew her arm away from him and stopped dead-still where they were, which was in front of a butcher's shop; and they let the afternoon marketers jostle past them unheeded.

"You . . . have asked . . . Mother . . . to tea!" she gasped; and he was staggered at the dismay upon her face.

"Well?" he said, pulling her into the butcher's porch to avoid the crowd. "It won't be so very awful, will it? My mother can be adaptable and decent enough at a pinch."

Gerda looked at him with such flashing eyes that he drew back as if she had hit him.

"Are you mad, Wolf?" she whispered hoarsely. "I can't understand you today! What's the matter with you? You rush off without a word this morning. You come back looking as if you'd met a ghost. You drag me out here to see your friend, who wants me no more than a cat! And now *this*, on the top of everything! It's too

much! I tell you it's too much! I'm going home." And suiting her action to her words, she broke away from him and began rapidly retracing her steps.

Wolf ran after her and caught her by the arm.

"Gerda! Gerda darling!" he cried, regardless of the people who were passing them. "I can't bear this. Let me come back with you. I don't care a damn about seeing Christie!"

"I won't have you come with me, Wolf. I won't! I won't! Do you want me to make a scene in the street? Go to Christie's, I tell you! That's where you belong. I've known you wanted to go to her ever since she came that day with the boys. Go! Go! Go! I *won't* have you with me!" And she started off almost at a run, her face white and her eyes dazed and staring.

Wolf remained motionless and stood watching her while long minutes passed over his head. It seemed impossible that that should be his Gerda, going off in a rage! But even as he stood hesitating, her figure disappeared among the people.

He turned wearily round then and resumed his walk down the street in absent-minded gloom. He hardly knew what he was doing; but he had a vague idea of wandering about the streets for a time, and then returning to Preston Lane. His feet carried him, however, steadily on till he found himself opposite the bookseller's shop.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," he said to himself. And then the thoughts which he believed at that moment were what dominated his action formed themselves in his brain into some such words as these: "I've absolutely no heart for seeing Christie now, or Darnley either! But I

suppose it would be an absurd piling up of misunderstandings if I disappointed them."

Grasping the handle of his stick tightly in his hand, and seeing Gerda's stricken face and wild, tearless stare in the very midst of the doorway, he entered the shop.

He found the old man amidst a pile of books, murmuring with bent head over a volume bound in vellum, which he was showing to a customer, evidently a stranger to the place. Mr. Malakite did not hear him enter, and Wolf found himself looking with a queer interest at that bowed back and grizzled head. What did it feel like, as the days went on, to know that one possessed, only five miles away, a child like Olwen, the daughter of a daughter? Did the old man ever see Olwen? Did he know anything of the child's thoughts? Did he want to know anything? A chance movement made by the customer brought Wolf now into the bookseller's vision. A startled look passed for a second over the old man's face, but he betrayed no other sign of embarrassment.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Solent," he said quietly. "Have you come to see me or to see Miss Malakite?" And then, without waiting for an answer: "You'll find her in the room upstairs. Mr. Otter has just gone."

Wolf passed through the shop, and, hurriedly running up the little staircase, knocked at Christie's door. The effect upon him of this unexpected news of Darnley's departure was something beyond what he could possibly have foreseen. The stricken face of Gerda vanished completely, and Gerda herself became what his mother was, or what Miss Gault was, or what his father's grave was —one of the fixed landmarks in his life's landscape, but

no longer the centre of his life. That hidden drum, which was neither exactly in his heart nor exactly in the pit of his stomach, beat so loudly as he waited at Christie's door, that it seemed as if that oblong shape of discoloured wood, the very markings of which were voluble, were ready to open now upon something completely new to his experience. That word of the old man, "Mr. Otter has gone," kept repeating itself in his mind as he waited. "Mr. Otter has gone. Mr. Otter has gone." The phrase became a floating cloud of tremulous expectation.

When Christie did open the door, and they had taken each other's hand, Wolf felt as if he had been doing nothing all his life but wait for this moment. He had the feeling that the man and girl who now proceeded to utter broken and fragmentary commonplaces to each other were acting as automatic figures behind whose gestures two long-separated spirits were rushing together.

Several seconds passed before Christie had the power to make a move to find a chair for herself or to give a sign for him to be seated; but when he did sink down at last, still talking of anything that came into his head, a sense of such relief swept into his soul that it was as if some spear-head, that had been in his flesh without his knowing it, for days and weeks, had suddenly been pulled out.

And then, without the least disturbance of the atmosphere of that small room, he suddenly found that those two nodding masks had vanished into thin air, and that there was no barrier of any sort left between the real Wolf and the real Christie. Naturally and easily he

found himself taking for granted this strange new discovery of what was between them. He thought within himself: "She knows everything. I'll leave everything to her." And he suddenly discovered that he was talking freely and openly about all the people of his life, and about Gerda, too. He discovered that to talk to Christie was like talking to himself or thinking aloud. And he recalled how he had been struck, the very first time they met, by this ease and naturalness with which the lightest thought flowed back and forth between them.

And all the while, even as he was whimsically telling her about the unlucky tea-party arranged for that afternoon, the contour of her half-averted face bending over a piece of needlework she had blindly taken up, and the way her instep looked with the thin leather strap of her shoe across it, gave him a sensation completely different from anything he had ever known before. What he really felt was that this was the first feminine creature with whom he had ever been left alone. In comparison with this diffused and thrilling feeling, permeating everything around them, his amorousness for Gerda seemed like playful lust, directed toward some beautiful statue. The slender little figure before him, with those thin hands and those touchingly thin legs, drew into her personality, at that moment, every secret of girlhood that had ever troubled him. Coming to him like the fragrance of wood-mosses to a city-dweller, the consciousness that this dreamlike figure was really alive and tangible seemed to melt his bones within him. Those mystic syllables, "a girl," "a young girl," had always remained at the back of his mind like a precious well-watered

flower-bed, but a bed empty of any living growth. Nothing, he now knew, in his life with Gerda had stirred the earth of that mystic bed. But here, in the centre of that bed, was a living, breathing plant, making everything around it enchanted and transparent by the diffused loveliness of its presence. This passive entity in front of him, with her honey-pale oval face, her long eyelashes, her thin legs, her faintly outlined childish figure, was the only true, real, actual living girl in all the earth.

The minutes slipped by, and Wolf found himself, to his surprise, even talking to her about Olwen. So far from this extraordinary topic agitating her, she seemed to find a deep relief in speaking of it.

"Were you old enough to realize what was going on between them?" Wolf asked her at last.

Christie nodded her head and smiled a little. "The odd thing is," she said gently, "that there never seemed to me anything strangely unnatural in it. I don't think Mother ever was the right person for Father. I think from her earliest childhood there was a peculiar link between him and my sister."

"But it killed your mother, didn't it?" murmured Wolf.

Christie was silent for a moment, a queer, pondering frown on her face.

"I don't think so," she said in a low voice. "Everyone said so; but I don't believe it. I think it had begun long before that. It wasn't *she* who did it."

These last words were hardly audible.

Wolf pressed her.

"Who did it, then?"

Christie looked at him gravely.

"Do you believe in spirits?" she asked.

He laughed a little.

"Oh, no more than in anything else!" he said.

"My mother was Welsh," she went on. "She used to tell us the wildest stories about her ancestors. Once she actually told us she was descended from Merlin. Merlin's mother was a nun. Did you know that, Wolf?"

"No wonder you're a bit inhuman," he said. And then, after a pause: "Did you and your sister write to each other after they sent her away? Was she unhappy about Olwen?"

Christie's brown eyes became for a minute fixed upon vacancy, as if she were scrutinizing some far-away mental image. When she turned them upon him, however, they had an angry and yet humorous gleam.

"I sent her money to come back," she said. "I would have had her here in spite of them. Her last letter—I'll show it to you one day—was full of excitement. If I'd been as old as I am now, they should never have sent her away."

"Did Selena Gault do it?" asked Wolf.

The girl nodded. "She and Mr. Smith. They had the law on their side." She paused and drew a long breath. "Law or no law," she cried, passionately, with flushed cheeks, "if I'd been older I'd have stopped them! I was too young," she added.

Wolf got up from his seat and stood regarding her. Every aspect of her figure, every flicker upon her face, gave him the feeling that he was regarding a young

aspen-tree, porous to wind-blown alternations of light and shadow.

"It's wonderful to be able to talk freely to anyone as I can with you . . . now we're alone."

"I sent Darnley away," was all she said.

These words of hers hung suspended in the air between them. They were so sweet to Wolf that he felt unwilling to make the least response. He just allowed them to evaporate, syllable by syllable, into the mid-summer warmth of that pleasant room. Christie's eyelids drooped over the piece of sewing she held in her hands, and he noticed that she was turning this strip of muslin over and over between her fingers, smoothing it out upon her lap, first one side and then the other. The poignancy of her shyness increased his awareness of the suspense between them; and to loosen the spell he turned his head a little and glanced at the mantelpiece, on which was a china bowl, full of bluebells, late, long-stalked primroses, and pink campions and meadow-orchids. His own mind kept beating itself against the unknown—against that fatal *next moment* which drew to itself the dust-motes of the air, the scent of the wild-flowers, the warm wind blowing in through the open window.

"Will she let me make love to her? Will she let me?" was the burden of his thought; and as he stared at that bunch of flowers, especially at one solitary bluebell that hung down over the brim of the white bowl and had gathered a tinge of faint rose-carmine upon its hyacinthine bloom, he felt as though the "to be or not to be" of that tense moment depended upon chance as inscrutable, as fluctuating, as the light, falling this way, falling

that way—light and shadow wavering together—upon that purple-blue at the bowl's edge.

Never had he been more aware of the miracle of flower-petals, of the absolute wonder of this filmy vegetable fabric, so much older, just as it is so much more lovely, in the history of our planet than the flesh of beasts or the feathers of birds or the scales of fishes!

The girl's words, "I sent Darnley away," seemed to melt into that wild-flower bunch she had picked and placed there; and the pallor of the primroses, the perilous, arrowy faintness of their smell, became his desire for her; and the rough earth-mould freedom of the campion-stalks, with their wood-sturdy pink buds, became the lucky solitude she had made for him!

"Will she let me make love to her?" The longing to risk the first movement toward his purpose struggled now in his mind with that mysterious restraint, so tenuous and yet so strong, of the girl's obscure embarrassment.

"Did you pick those flowers yesterday?" he broke out suddenly; and he was secretly surprised at the loudness of his own voice.

"The day before," she murmured; and then, without closing her mouth, which, with the droop of her underlip, took on an almost vacant look, she frowned a little, as she fixed her steady gaze full upon him.

His own eyes plunged once more into the green-shadowed depths of that midsummer nosegay. Its pale primroses seemed to sway, in the wind, over their crumpled leaves, as they would have done where she had actually picked them among the wood-rubble and the

fungus-growths of their birthplace. The moist bluebell-stalks, so full of liquid greenness beneath their heavy blooms, seemed to carry his mind straight into the hazel-darkened spaces where she had found them. These also belonged to the embarrassment of that figure beside him. These also, with the cool greenery of the sturdy campions, were the very secret of that "next moment," which floated now, with the mocking sun-motes, untouched and virginal in the air about them.

Wolf knew well enough the peculiar limitations of his own nature. He knew well enough that any great surge of what is called "passion" was as impossible to him as was any real remorse about making love. What he felt was an excitement that trembled on the margin —on the fluctuating fine edge—between amorous desire for the slim frame of this mysterious girl and the thrilling attraction of unexplored regions in her soul.

His feeling was like a brimming stream between reedy banks, where a wooden moss-covered dam prevents any spring-flood, but where the water, making its way round the edge of the obstacle, bends the long, submerged grasses before it, as it sweeps forward.

Two images troubled him just a little—Gerda's white, tense face as it had looked when she left him on the street, and, with this, a vague uncomfortable memory of the figure on the Waterloo steps. But, in his intensely heightened consciousness of this "suspended" moment, he deliberately steered the skiff of his thought away from both those reefs.

Suddenly he found himself risen from his seat and standing against the mantelpiece! He lifted the flowers

to his face; and then, putting down the bowl, he inserted his fingers in it, pressing them down between the stalks into the water. He noticed that the water felt warm to his touch, like the water of a sun-warmed pool; and the fantastic idea came into his head that by making this gesture he was in some occult way invading the very soul of the girl who had arranged them there. Christie may or may not have read his thoughts. At any rate, he now became aware that she was standing beside him, and with deft, swift touches was correcting the rough confusion he had made in her nosegay.

"The bluebell-scent is the one that dominates," he murmured. "You smell them, and see if I'm not right!"

As she leaned forward, he allowed his hand to slide caressingly down her side, drawing her slender body, with a scarcely perceptible pressure, against his own.

His heart was beating fast now, and a delicious predatory thrill was shivering through his nerves. Christie made not the least attempt to extricate herself from his caresses. She permitted him to bend her slim body this way and that way in his wanton excitement. But when he kissed her, she bent her neck so far round that it was her cheek and not her lips he kissed; and soon after that she slipped away from him and sank down exhausted in her former seat.

The look she gave him now, as they stared at each other, confused and out of breath, was completely inscrutable to him.

"You're not annoyed with me, Christie?" he panted.

There was a flicker of anger in her eyes at this.

"Of course not," she answered. "What do you take

me for? I'm not as mean as that. I'm not a puritanical fool."

"Well, then . . . well, then?" he muttered, approaching her chair and standing over her.

"I'm not one least bit annoyed with you," she repeated.

The faint flush that had now appeared in her cheeks, and the complicated wistfulness of her expression, disarmed and enchanted him. He stooped down to her and stroked with the tips of his fingers the white blue-veined skin under her lace wristbands; but as he looked at her now, there was a certain virginal detachment about her thin ankles and about those lace-ruffled hands which irritated and provoked him by its inhuman remoteness.

"You puzzle me completely," he remarked, returning rather awkwardly to his former seat and surveying her with a humorous frown.

She lifted up her head from her work. "Well? Why not? We haven't known each other very long."

Her words released his pent-up irritation.

"You make me feel funny, Christie," he said. "As if we'd lost each other in a wood."

She held her head very high at this and her eyes grew defiant.

"I know I'm no good at these things, Wolf. I never have been. Girls are supposed to carry off moments like this. I don't know how they do it. I seem to be completely lacking in that sort of tact."

His irritation increased as he found it impossible to follow her thought.

"Tact?" he re-echoed sarcastically. "Good Lord! Tact is the last thing I want from *you*."

She spoke gravely now, but with evident vexation.

"What's the use of talking like this, Wolf? It's growing only too clear that we don't understand each other."

His only retort to this was once more to murmur the word "tact" with a grim iteration.

Her brown eyes looked really angry now.

"Why are men so stupid?" she cried. "When I said *that*, I meant pretending something that wasn't my real self. It's because I've been absolutely natural with you that you've got angry with me."

They were both silent after this, and Wolf stared at the half-open window, through which the summer wind was blowing into the room in little, eddying gusts. Christie took up her sewing; and the stir of her thin fingers and the waving of the light curtains were the only movements in that flower-scented air.

By slow degrees, as he surreptitiously watched her, the harmony of his mind began to come back; and with this harmony there came in upon him from all that green West Country landscape stretching away toward the Severn on one side and toward the Channel on the other, a sort of dumb, inarticulate reproach. What were they doing, he and this girl, who were, as he well divined, so exquisitely adapted to understand each other, letting themselves be divided by such straws, such puffballs of difference?

From fading cuckoo-flowers by the banks of the Lunt, from brittle mother-of-pearl shells, wet and glittering,

on the Weymouth sands, from the orange-speckled bellies of great newts in Lenty Pond, there came to him, between those waving curtains, a speechless protest. Brief was his life . . . brief was Christie Malakite's life. . . . Times like this at best would be rare. He could see himself returning to his tea-party and letting it all go! He could see Christie pouring out tea for her father and letting it all go! Perhaps—such was his pride and such was hers—this June afternoon, which might have been, but for this trivial discord, as perfect as a green bough, would stand out in his memory peeled and jagged, its sap all running out, its leaves drooping.

"Forgive me, Christie," he said gravely. "Please forgive me and don't think any more about it."

The girl looked up from her work, her hands folded in her lap.

"You don't mean," she said slowly, "because of *that?*"

Her nod of the head in the direction of the mantelpiece, where he had first caressed her, made clear to him what her words implied.

He got up from his chair and stood in front of her, looking down at her lifted face.

"No," he said. "I didn't mean because of 'that.' I meant because we misunderstood each other; which was all my fault."

Christie began to smile. "I'm not prudish or unfeeling in things like that," she said. "But I've a queer nature, Wolf. I love the romance of being in love, and I like you, Wolf, better than anyone I've ever met; and I like you to make love to me. It's only . . . it's only that—with the life I've had and the mother I had—I seem to

have none of an ordinary girl's feelings in these things."

Wolf began pacing up and down the room.

"I'm queer myself, Christie," he said after a pause, stopping once more in front of her. "So there we are! It appears that we're a fair pair! And if you want to know what I feel at this moment, I'll tell you. I feel deliciously happy. You are a witch, Christie, and I don't wonder your mother maintained she was descended from Merlin. I feel I could tell you every secret thought I have in the world. And so, by God, I will! It's an incredible chance that I should have found you."

He threw his cigarette into the fire and walked to the window.

"What a view you've got here!" he said. "That's the corner of Babylon Hill, isn't it?"

The window was already open at the top; but he pulled it down as far as it would go, and leaned out of it, looking across the entanglement of slate roofs to the green incline beyond.

"The wind's northeast, isn't it?" he remarked.

She got up and came over to him and stood beside him, and presently he felt her fingers slip into his own.

"North-northeast," she said; and these words, when he thought of them afterwards, brought back every flicker of his feelings, as he stood stiffly there clutching her hand.

"Where does that lane go?" he asked. "Do you see what I mean? That narrow little one below those Scotch firs."

"Over there?" the girl questioned. "To the left of Poll's Camp, do you mean?"

"Yes . . . there . . . just there . . . where that clump of bushes is!"

"That's Gwent Lane," she answered. "And it leads to a whole maze of lanes further on. I'm fond of going to the Gwent Lanes. You hardly ever meet anyone there. It's as if they had been designed to keep traffic away and strangers away. Sometimes on Summer days when Father doesn't want me, I take my lunch and a book and stay in the Gwent Lanes all day. I often never meet a soul."

She was silent for a second or two; and he realized that a crowded mass of personal memories was flowing through her mind.

"Some lovely afternoons I've had," she went on, "sitting with my back to a gate and looking at the hedge-parsley. When the corn's-yellow and the poppies are out, I always sit inside the field, with my parasol over my book. I can smell the peculiar bitter smell now of the elder-leaves behind me."

She drew her fingers away from him and made of her two hands a support for her chin upon the woodwork of the open window. Wolf thought this chin of hers was the smallest he had ever seen. He, too, remained silent, thinking of similar memories of his own, secret and solitary and personal; and he was astonished to note how natural it seemed to both of them, this deliberate indulgence in egoistic recollections.

"North-northeast, did you say?" His voice sounded irrelevant even to his own ears. In some queer way he felt as if he had been sharing these furtive physical memories with the girl at his side. He even felt as if their

having shared them had been a kind of love-making more subtle and delicate than any erotic dalliance.

He felt as if he could share with this elfin creature a thousand feelings that no other person could possibly understand—share with her all those profoundly physical sensations—and yet mystical, too—that made up the real undercurrent of his whole life.

"She would understand my 'mythology,'" he said to himself. "No one but she would; no one!" And then he thought: "I believe my life is going to open out now, as if I really had some invisible tutelary Power directing me!"

They turned away simultaneously from the window, and once more sat down.

"Do you ever feel," he said, "as if one part of your soul belonged to a world altogether different from this world—as if it were completely disillusioned about all the things that people make such a fuss over and yet were involved in something that was very important?"

She looked straight into his face. "I wouldn't put it like that," she said. "But I've always known what it was to accept an enormous emptiness round me, echoing and echoing, and I sitting there in the middle, like a paper-doll reflected in hundreds of mirrors."

Wolf screwed up his eyes and bit his under-lip.

"You haven't been as happy in your mind as I've been in *my* mind," he said with a kind of wistfulness; "but I often feel as if I were unfairly privileged . . . as if some invisible god were unjustly favouring me . . . quite beyond my deserts."

"I don't think you're as favoured as you fancy you

are," said Christie, with the ghost of a smile. But Wolf went on:

"Do you know, Chris, I think I'm especially favoured in my scepticism. I'm sceptical about the reality of everything; even about the reality of Nature. Sometimes I think that there are several 'Natures' . . . several 'Universes,' in fact . . . one inside the other . . . like Chinese boxes. . . ."

"I know what you mean," said the young girl hurriedly; and her eyes, as she looked at him, grew luminous with that indescribable excitement of mental sympathy that can bring tears from something deeper than passion.

Wolf, as he received this intimation, said to himself: "I can think aloud with her. Perhaps one day I'll tell her about my 'mythology'!" And there came over him, like a warm enveloping under-tide in which great crimson seaweeds were swaying, an unutterable sense of happiness. "Oh, I hope Gerda is all right!" he thought. And then, with a concentrated effort of his will, as if he were addressing a host of servile genii: "I *command* that Gerda shall be all right!"

It occurred to him at that moment, with a humorous force, that his father wouldn't have been a man to allow such scruples as these to impinge upon his mind at such a juncture.

"Had you any idea," he said suddenly, "that Mattie wasn't Albert Smith's child?"

"I soon saw the likeness to you, anyway," Christie replied evasively, "the first day Father brought you to see me."

"I like Mattie so much," he went on; "but her resemblance to me can't be said to improve her looks. Has anyone ever made love to her, do you think?"

Christie laughed. "Well, *you* must be nice to her, anyway, Wolf dear, to make up in case they haven't."

"I should be afraid of Miss Gault's sending her off to Australia!" he said with a chuckle, and then felt curiously relieved to find that the grossness of this rather clumsy jest did not shock his companion. "Nothing shocks her," he said to himself; and his mind took a long flight to his years in London, where, except for his mother, there was no one to whom he could have talked as he had done this afternoon.

"Well, I must be off," he said, rather wearily, when these thoughts had finished their circle and had sunk down in the manner of birds on a bough. "I've got an uncomfortable home-coming before me, what with one thing and another."

"Don't make too much of it," she said, opening the door for him and holding both handles of it with her hands, so as to avoid any definite farewell. "Gerda will be so thankful to have got through it, that when your two mothers leave she'll be radiant again."

"I hope she won't be too radiant *before* they leave," retorted Wolf grimly. "I don't want many repetitions of this particular tea-party."

She kept the door open till he was half-way downstairs, and they nodded rather dolorously at each other across the banisters. He heard the door shut as he entered the shop below, and a pang passed through him.

As he walked rapidly home, he found himself engaged in an imaginary dialogue with his father.

The skeleton under those obstinate plantains kept grinning mockingly in reply to every argument. "Life is short," said the skeleton, "and the love of girls is the only escape from its miseries."

"It's not so short as all that," retorted the son, "and in every Paradise there is a snake!"

He found on his arrival that his mother had already appeared. To his great surprise he discovered her standing by their kitchen-stove, with Gerda's apron over her dress, helping to make the toast. He was still more surprised at the way Gerda received him. She was flushed and happy—laughing and jesting as if they had parted the very best of friends.

"How's Christie?" she asked casually. "What do you think, Mrs. Solent, of his going off to see Miss Malakite when I've got company? I'm sure that's not what you'd approve of."

"I don't approve of his saying nothing about that pretty frock you've got on! What do you think of it, Wolf? Do you know, when I got here, she was upstairs, crying her lovely eyes out? And all because she thought she hadn't a proper dress to welcome her grand mother-in-law in! We soon settled *that* little job, didn't we, my dear?" And Wolf beheld, to his amazement, his mother putting one of her strong arms caressingly about Gerda's waist, and Gerda responding to this with a lingering, provocative glance, such as he himself was wont to receive when the girl was in her most docile mood.

"I heard her crying up there in her room," went on the elder woman, "and I ran straight up, and there she was, pretty as a picture in her white shift, and all the bed covered with frocks! She says she's had this one

since she was sixteen; but it suits her perfectly, doesn't it, Wolf?"

Wolf surveyed the girl gravely. She wore a long, straight muslin dress, with short sleeves, creamy-white and covered with pale little roses. Never had she looked so enchanting.

"You're certainly a good lady's-maid, Mother," he said solemnly.

"She's told me you're expecting another mother this afternoon," continued Mrs. Solent, releasing Gerda and proceeding to arrange the slices of toast upon a plate. "Now then, where's that loaf? I'll cut the bread-and-butter."

It became Wolf's destiny to stand for the next quarter of an hour, figuratively speaking, "upon one leg," while he watched what seemed to resemble the most piquant of flirtations going on between these two.

The tea-tray was "laid" at last, in the most approved manner, on that very parlour-table round which he had pursued the girl in such troubled agitation so short a time before; and Mrs. Solent, Gerda's apron removed, showed herself in the most fashionable of all her garden-party gowns. Gerda seemed unable to keep her eyes off her, and kept touching with the tips of her fingers first one elegant frill and then another, hovering about her like a slim white butterfly round a purple orchid.

"There's Mother!" she cried at length. "Fetch the kettle, Wolf!"

The countenance of Mrs. Torp was as a book in which one could "read strange matters," as she contemplated the scene before her. Wolf, with the teapot in

one hand and the kettle in the other, vociferated a boisterous welcome, drowning the politer words of his mother.

Gerda, having removed Mrs. Torp's tasselled cloak, sat her plumb-down at the table, straightening with a familiarly affectionate jerk the ribboned bonnet which adorned her head.

"Don't 'ee fidget wi' me old hat, Gerdie," murmured the visitor. " 'Tis a very good hat, though maybe 'tain't as aleet as some folks can afford. So thee be Mr. Solent's mummy, be 'ee? Well, and 'a favour'n about the cheeks, 'sknow! A body could reason there was some blood twixt ye; though in these which-way times 'tis hard to speak for sure."

"Well, we must do our best not to quarrel, Mrs. Torp, as they say all mothers do," threw out Mrs. Solent briskly, watching with some anxiety the unusual amount of sugar that Gerda was placing at the bottom of all the teacups.

"How much milk, Mrs. Solent?" enquired the girl lightly. "I don't expect our Blacksod milk is as good as yours at King's Barton."

This society-tone was so obviously put on to impress the young lady's mother, that Mrs. Solent hadn't the heart to explain, till the time for her second cup, that she couldn't bear sugar. She swallowed the sweet mixture in hurried gulps; and Wolf chuckled to see her trying to take away the taste by rapid mouthfuls of bread-and-butter.

"How be thee's schoolmasterin' getting along, Mr. Solent? My old man—that be our Gerdie's Dad, ma'am—

do always say them Grammar boys be above theyselves, what with one thing and t'other. He cotchit two on 'em, the last buryin' 'ee had, stealing of they bones. Not that they were proper human-like bones . . . if 'ee understand . . . for 'ee do always bury *them* religious-deep. They were hosses' bones, seems so, from what 'ee do calculate. But they were more impident, them Grammar boys, when 'ee were arter they, than if they'd been the bones of King Balaam."

"What's Lobbie been doing lately, Mother?" enquired Gerda, feeling vaguely conscious that the subject of bones, whether human or otherwise, was inappropriate at that moment.

"Lob, do 'ee say? Thee may well ask what Lob be doing, the young pert-mouthed limb! He be bringing his Dad's hoar hairs down to bedlam, and mine wi 'em, *that's* what the owl's pellet be doing!"

Gerda hurriedly enquired in a ringing voice whether Mrs. Solent wanted any cake. "Pimpernel hadn't any fresh kinds except this. I expect you are so used to London confectionery, Mrs. Solent——"

But the visitor seemed more interested in her fellow parent's conversation than in anything else just then.

"Sons are troublesome beings, Mrs. Torp," she said, "but it's nice to have them."

"What *has* Lobbie been doing?" enquired Wolf, heedless of Gerda's frowns.

"He's been going over with that imp of Satan, Bob Weevil, to Parson Valley's. His Dad told 'en he'd lift the skin from's backside if he did it; but he was see'd, only last night, out there again."

"It sounds very innocent, Mrs. Torp, visiting a clergyman," remarked the lady.

"Innocent!" cried Gerda's mother indignantly. "Innocent thee own self, though I do say it! 'Tis pagan deviltries, worse nor Paul on Corinthians. I tell 'ee, they do play blasphemous play-actings out there, same as Lot's wife were salted for."

"Miracle-plays, is it?" asked Wolf.

"How do I know what they call 'en? 'Tis small matter for the name. Wold Dimity, up to Otters', told I that one girt gummuk of a lad dressed 'isself up as Virgin Mary. If that bain't a blasphemous cantrip, I'd like to know what be!"

"I expect Mrs. Solent knows better than any of us, Mother, what's going on out at King's Barton," put in Gerda diplomatically.

"I did hear something about a miracle-play," said the visitor lightly; "but if the subject's a teasing one, for heaven's sake let's drop it! I think it was Mr. Urquhart who mentioned it to me; and if I remember right he took rather the same view of it as Mrs. Torp."

"Squire Urquhart ain't got so much standing his own self wi' decent folk for *him* to be top-lofty," remarked the other. "They do tell down our way 'twas that man's wicked tempers and sech-like, what drove poor young Redfern into's grave; but maybe, as darter says, you know more'n we, ma'am, about King's Barton ways. I be glad for my part that I lives in a God-fearing daily-bread town like Blacksod."

"By the way, Wolf," said Mrs. Solent, speaking in her most high-pitched voice, "I met your friend Jason

the other day in Lenty Lane, and we had quite a walk together. We went as far as the ridge-road to Ramsgard . . . you know? . . . by one of those little field-paths."

"Mr. Jason, ma'am?" commented Mrs. Torp. "*I* do know he. I'd a-seen he, many a fine evenin', a-traipsin' home from Three Peewits."

"I hope you enjoyed your walk," said Gerda, gravely and politely, frowning at her mother.

"How did you and Jason get on?" asked Wolf. "I somehow can't imagine you two together."

"Well," said Mrs. Solent, "I can't quite tell whether my company pleased him or not. He talked most of the time about my neighbour, Roger Monk. He seems to have got into his head that the poor man spies upon him. I tried at first to disabuse him of that idea; but he got so agitated that I just let him go on. In the end he became quite charming. He recited to me a poem about a woodpecker, which I thought very pretty. He has such a nice voice when he recites, and the evening was so lovely after the rain that I really enjoyed it all very much."

"No doubt Mr. Otter were sober as a jackdaw when 'a walked with 'ee, ma'am. I'm not saying he isn't a nice-spoken gentleman, for he is. It's not so much the drink they talk of, along of he, down where I do live, it's——"

"Oh, Mother, please!" interrupted Gerda. "Do look, Mother, how nicely Mrs. Solent tied my sash!"

The girl got up from her chair and turned herself round. This gesture was evidently adored by Mrs. Solent, for she stretched out her arms and caught her by the waist and pulled her down upon her knee.

"I shall spoil your lovely dress," Gerda cried nervously.

"You're light as a feather, you sweet thing! You're soft as swan's-down."

"She weren't that light, ma'am, when she made herself stiff as pikestaff, on the day us bundled she down church-aisle for christening," said Mrs. Torp. "But she were light enough, God-sakes, when she did play carry-me-over wi' the lads!"

All this while, Wolf was pondering in his soul how it was that Nature had placed in the minds of all mothers, refined or unrefined, so large a measure of the heart of a procuress.

"And she were light enough——" Mrs. Torp was beginning again, when Gerda, jumping up in haste, ran round the table and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Hush, Mummy, I won't have it!" she cried.

At that moment there was a loud knocking at the front-door, and Wolf went across the passage and opened it.

Bob Weevil and Lobbie hurried into the room together, their caps in their hands. The young grocer looked a little embarrassed at the scene before him, and made a stiff bow to Mrs. Solent.

"Afternoon, marm," he muttered.

But Lobbie was quite unperturbed.

"Dad's comed home afore his time," he cried, "and 'a be mumbling about his supper."

"Shake hands with Mrs. Solent, Lob," said Gerda severely.

But the boy had turned to his own parent.

"Mr. Valley said I was to ask you proper and right for promission," he said eagerly, "promission for——"

"For *what*, ye staring toad?"

"Promission," the boy went on, "for thik girt play next Thursday. The day arter tomorrow 'tis; and all the gentry be coming. And I be John the Baptist, what lived upon honey and the honeycomb!"

"Ye'll live upon cabbage and the cabbage-stalk, ye impident sprout! I've a-heerd too much of your Mr. Valley and his goings-on."

"Mother . . . Mother!" protested the unabashed Lob. But Mrs. Solent interrupted them.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Torp. I'm going to that entertainment myself, and I'll see that this young man comes to no harm. I understand just what you feel. These clerical junketings are sometimes incredibly silly. But you can trust me. We'll keep each other in sight, won't we, Lobbie?" And she put her hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Well, of course, if you answer for him, ma'am, I reckon I must be satisfied," grumbled the monument-maker's wife.

"Oh, I'll look after him. Won't I, Lobbie? And if Mr. Valley keeps us all up till midnight, you shall sleep at Lenty Cottage."

Lob looked a little nervous at this prospect, but he expressed his thanks politely, and the incident appeared closed.

Meanwhile Wolf overheard the following conversation going on between Mr. Weevil and Gerda.

"Why, if that isn't the very frock you wore, Gerdie, when we went to Weymouth, that grand excursion-day, years ago!"

"Yes, it is, Bob. Fancy your remembering! Mrs. Solent made me put it on."

"And to think of that! And to think how we climbed down those slippery steps at the ferry, and how frightened you were of the green seaweed getting on you, and how we saw sea-anemones in the pools by Sandsfoot Castle, and you couldn't abide the gun-firing out Portland-way. Think of that, Gerdie, the very same dress!"

"Do you think I'm too old to wear it now, Bob?"

"Ask me another, Gerdie! But it do make anyone feel sort of queer to see you like this. You know? It's all the things it brings up, what a person's clean forgotten."

"You got no more memory than a pig, Bob Weevil."

"Depends who and what and when," was the grocer's retort.

"Well, don't you worry any more about it, Mrs. Torp," repeated the lady in purple. "I promise to keep Mr. Valley in order. Or if I can't, I'll get someone who can. Lob shan't make a fool of himself, or disgrace either John the Baptist or you. I quite look forward to it. We'll have a fine bit of sport together, Lobbie, you and I, flirting across the footlights!"

"How did you get over today, Mrs. Solent?" enquired Gerda, cutting short Mr. Weevil's memories with a furtive little movement of her hand—a movement that came as rather a surprise to Wolf, as he noted it in passing.

"Oh, Roger Monk drove me," exclaimed Wolf's mother. "And that reminds me . . . what's the time, my

son? . . . Good Lord! I've kept the man waiting already! I must go at once. I'm to meet him at the Three Peewits."

"I'll walk down with you, Mother," said Wolf, glad enough to get a chance of escape. "Good-bye, Mrs. Torp. I know you'll excuse me. Don't hurry off, Bob. Why don't you keep him for supper, Gerda? And Lobbie, too, if Mrs. Torp will let him stay?"

Mother and son walked leisurely down the clattering High Street.

"She's certainly beautiful, your Gerda!" exclaimed the lady, after prolonged silence.

"She is," admitted Wolf.

"But oh, dear! What an awful woman! Does she worry you much, my dabchick?"

"Worry me, Mother? Not one little bit! I very rarely see her, you know."

There was another long pause between them.

"What's going to happen when the History's done, Wolf?"

"It may never be done, Mother! He's got really interested in it at last, thank the Lord!"

"Wolf, dear——"

"Well, Mother?"

"I wouldn't let Gerda have a child for quite a long while yet."

"No, Mother."

"I didn't know that she and this Weevil boy were such old friends."

Wolf swung his stick. Something about the inflexible determination of his mother's profile, especially of her

clear-cut chin, at that moment, roused an obscure feeling of rebellion in him.

"Why the devil not?" he cried. "Bob's a mere kid. Gerda treats him exactly as she treats her brother."

His voice had become high-pitched. That curious, furtive little movement of the hand, full of old familiarities, returned to him most teasingly.

"Don't talk too loud," murmured his mother. "We're not in Lenty Lane."

"Why did you say that?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she said lightly. "Don't take it too seriously. I only know from old experience that men never can be made to realize how susceptible women are except where they themselves are concerned."

"Even when they love a person?" he enquired.

"What *is* love?" said Mrs. Solent.

He was silent; and the conversation between them took a less personal tone, till he saw her safely mounted in Mr. Urquhart's dog-cart, beside the tall man-servant.

Instead of going straight home, he walked meditatively and slowly past the Malakite book-shop, and then at a more rapid pace followed the road that led up Babylon Hill. He did not turn, till, in the slanting rays of the sinking sun, he reached that corner of the ascent which he had noted from Christie's window.

Could he distinguish her house among the rest? He was not sure. The rays of the great June sun were almost horizontal, as it sank down towards Glastonbury; and it was all he could do, even with his eyes shaded by his hand, to identify the portion of the town where the book-

shop was. As to seeing Christie's window, it was impossible.

Annoyed by this refusal of Nature to humour his mood, he advanced obstinately still further up the road, and finally reached the stile into the field-path that led to the turfy ramparts of Poll's Camp.

There he sat down among the tall, uncut grasses of the wayside, and allowed the double stream of memories—those connected with Poll's Camp and those connected with that invisible window below him—to contend for the mastery in his thoughts. The extraordinary thing was that all that poetry of his first encounter with Gerda seemed like something that had happened to some external portion of his nature, whereas this strange new understanding with Christie sank so deep into his being that it invaded regions of which he himself had hardly been aware.

He soon found out, as he sat there, with his back against that stile and the pungent smell of herb-Robert in his nostrils, how far this new feeling had gone.

His life had become so agitated since his arrival at Ramsgard, that now, at this moment, he felt he had more on his mind than he could disentangle. The spirit of the evening fell upon him with a burden that was mysteriously sad—sad with a multitude of gathering omens and indistinct threats. With all the evening noises around him—noises, some of them faint as the sighing of invisible reeds—he became once more conscious that between the iron-ribbed gaiety of his mother and the fixed grin of that paternal skull in the churchyard there was

an ambiguous struggle going on, the issues of which remained dubious as life itself.

He found himself crying out to that irresponsible skull under the plantains; but the skull answered him with nothing but cynical mockery. He found himself turning restlessly towards his mother; but he felt that just at the point where he needed her sympathy most the very basic rock of her nature flung him contemptuously back.

On and on he sat, with that sinking sun growing redder and redder before him, and the evening murmurs gathering in his ears; and as he sat, an immense solitude descended upon him, and he began to realize, as he had never realized before, how profoundly alone upon this planet each individual soul really is.

And with this feeling there came over him a deep, disturbing craving for Christie—a craving so intense that the vision of all the length of all the days of his life without her seemed more than he could bear. "Only one life," he thought to himself. "Only one life, between two eternities of non-existence . . . and I am proposing deliberately to sacrifice in it the one thing that I really want!" He hugged his knees with tightly clasped fingers, and stared at the red orb before him, sinking now over Christie's very roof.

For the first time in his mortal days this great diurnal spectacle seemed to his mind half-fantastic; as if this were not the real sun, the sun he had known all his life, that was descending; nor the earth he had known all his life that was thus hiding it from his eyes. "If I do give up Christie for Gerda," he thought, "it will simply mean

that the one unique experience destined for me out of all others by the eternal gods, has been deliberately thrown away."

He bowed his head over his knees and watched the climbing of a tiny beetle up a bending stalk of grass. "To the universe," he thought, "it matters no more whether I leave Gerda for Christie than whether that beetle reaches the top of that stalk! Gerda? . . . Christie? . . . What are they? Two skeletons covered with flesh; one richly and flexibly covered . . . one sparsely and meagrely covered! Two of them . . . that is all . . . just two of them!" And then, bowing his head still lower, so that the beetle and its grass-stalk almost filled up his whole vision, he began to imagine what it would be like if he *did* make some wild, desperate move. What would happen, for instance, if he were to carry Christie to London and get some job to support them both there, hidden from all the world? Gerda would return to her parents' house. Old Malakite would get on somehow or other. His mother would . . . Well! What would his mother do? She had scarcely anything in the bank. Mr. Urquhart could hardly be expected to support her. No, it was unthinkable, impossible! The existence of his mother, her complete dependence on him, tied his hands fast and tight!

And then, with an overpowering surrender, there came upon him all his old childish clinging to that woman whose heart the licentiousness of his father had been unable to quell. He knew his own nature to be tough enough, but compared with his mother he was like an oak-sapling growing in the cleft of a rock. The woman

was adamant, where he was merely obstinate. Rock-smooth she was, where he was merely gnarled and knotted and earth-rooted.

"Damn!" he muttered to himself, as he watched the beetle turn back resignedly within an inch of the stalk's point, and begin a patient descent. "Damn! It's just pure weakness and habit!"

But, oh, dear! How could he desert Gerda . . . how could he do it . . . after three lovely happy months; and without cause or reason save his own fickle madness?

Why had he married her at all? That was the whole blunder! He had married her because he had seduced her. But girls were always being seduced! *That* was no reason. No! He couldn't get out of it. He had married her because he had mistaken a mixture of lust and romance for love; and if he hadn't found Christie, he might, to the end of his days, never have discovered his mistake! Affection would have superseded lust; tenderness would have superseded romance. All would have been well. It was Christie's appearance that had changed everything; and there it was! Christie and he were bound together now, come good, come ill. But as things were, so they must remain! If his soul was Christie's, his life must go on being his mother's and Gerda's. There was no other issue.

Abruptly he lifted up his head. The sun was so low now that he could look straight into its great red circle suspended above the roofs of the town. It resembled, as he looked at it, a vast fiery tunnel, the mouth of some colossal piece of artillery, directed full against him.

With screwed-up eyelids he returned the stare of this blood-red cannon-mouth; and as he fronted it, it seemed to him that a dusky figure took shape within it, a figure resembling Jason Otter's abominable idol.

There was something so atrocious in the idea of this dusky demon being there at all—being, so to say, the great orb's final *expression* as it went down—that he leaped to his feet in indignant protest. His movement brought the blood from his head, and the phantasm vanished. Slowly and inevitably, with a visible sliding descent, the red globe sank out of sight; and Wolf picked up his hat and stick. "It must be long after eight," he thought. "I must get home to Gerda."

THE NEXT TWO MONTHS BROUGHT NO OUTWARD CHANGE in the existence of Wolf and the various people of his life; but when August arrived, all manner of strange developments, long prepared for under the surface, began to manifest themselves.

The trend of these developments began for the first time to grow clear to Wolf himself on the occasion of a small garden-party given by Mrs. Otter in her little front-garden. He had exhausted a great deal of energy in an attempt to entangle his mother in a more or less harmonious conversation with Selena Gault; and it was with a queer feeling of triumph that he left these old antagonists drinking tea side by side, in their low chairs, on Mrs. Otter's lawn, to cross the grass so that he might speak to Jason.

He came upon him in the back-garden, in converse with old Dimity Stone, who fled precipitately into her kitchen at his approach.

Wolf was as careful not to disturb the poet's equilibrium as if he had been a leopard cajoling a nervous eland. He shuffled by his side into a narrow passage between two cucumber-frames, where they both sat down. A solitary wood-pigeon kept repeating its diapason of languid rapture from somewhere high up in the neighbouring trees. In the gravel-path, quite close to where they sat, a thrush, unruffled by their presence, cracked a snail upon a broken piece of brick; and as Wolf made

one desultory remark after another, to set his companion at ease, he found himself complacently squeezing with the tips of his fingers certain sticky little bubbles of tar that the heat of the afternoon sun drew forth from the warm wooden planks of the frame.

"I composed a poem last night," said Jason Otter. "And since you're the only person who takes the least interest in what I do, I'll repeat it to you, if no one comes round the corner."

"I'd love to hear it," said Wolf.

"It begins like this." And in a voice almost as modulated as the wood-pigeon's own, the drooping head by Wolf's side swayed slowly to the rhythm of the following stanza:

> The Slow-Worm of Lenty curses God;
> He lifts his head from the heavy sod;
> He lifts his head where the Lenty willow
> Weeps green tears o'er the rain-elf's pillow;
> For the rain-elf's lover is fled and gone,
> And none curseth God but the Slow-Worm alone.

"It's about the pond," said Jason gravely. "I go there sometimes in the evening. When it's misty you can easily imagine an elf or a nymph floating on its surface."

"Is that all?" enquired Wolf.

"Not quite," replied the other; "but you probably won't like the way it ends. It'll seem funny to you; too remote from your way of thinking; and it *is* rather funny; but Lenty Pond is a funny place."

"Do go on," said Wolf.

And once more in his delicately modulated voice the poet began intoning:

For the newts and the tadpoles at their play
Laugh at the rain-elf's tear-wet pillow;
Laugh that her lover has fled away.
Little care they for elf or willow.
They flash their tails to a mocking cry—
"Slow-Worm of Lenty, prophesy!"

"That's not the end, is it?" said Wolf.

The man's head turned slightly towards him; and the one grey eye which was visible from where Wolf sat, passed through some extraordinary change, as if a glassy film separating the outward world from an inward abyss of desolation had suddenly melted away.

"Do you want to hear the end?" said Jason Otter.

Wolf nodded, and the voice went on:

But never again can God look down
As He did of old upon country and town!
In His huge heart, hidden all Space beyond,
There bides the curse of Lenty Pond;
The curse of the Slow-Worm, by Lenty willow,
Who pitied the elf on her tear-wet pillow,
Her pillow woven of pond-weeds green
Where the willow's twigs made a leafy screen;
And the purple loosestrife and watercress
Whisper above her sorrowfulness.

Once more the voice paused and Wolf listened to those two persistent summer sounds, the tapping of the thrush's beak and the indescribable contentment of the wood-pigeon.

"Is there any more?" he asked. "I like this style of writing better than what you used to read to me a month ago."

"A person can't do more than he can," remarked Jason Otter, while the flickering ghost of a smile came and went at the corners of his mouth. It seemed that even this indication of normal feeling was distasteful to him; for

he hurriedly raised his hand in order to conceal it.

This movement of his arm made Wolf aware of the scent of incense.

"The chap's clothes must be saturated with the stuff," he thought. "Oh, damn!" he thought again. "I *must* get that idol away from him."

"By the way, Otter," he began, "while I think of it, don't forget what you promised on the fair-ground!"

Jason turned his head away.

"She'll be out again presently," he remarked.

Whether this referred to the thrush that had just then flown away, or to Dimity Stone, Wolf could not tell.

"I can give you two pounds of that five pounds straight off," he said, "if you'll let me come in with you now and put the thing in my pocket."

"And the other three?" cried the man, rising to his feet between the cucumber-frames and rubbing the back of his trousers with his hand.

"The other three next week," said Wolf, thinking to himself, "I don't care what happens, as long as I dispose of Mukalog."

"Come on then, quick, before anyone sees!"

They hurried into the house together; and no sooner were they in the poet's room than Wolf boldly snatched at the little demon on the jade pedestal, and shoved it unceremoniously into his side-pocket. Jason made a queer, stiff, formal movement of his hand towards this pocket; but when Wolf had thrown his arm roughly off, an expression of something like relief rippled down over his agitated countenance. His lips seemed to be muttering; and Wolf fancied that they were explaining to the

object in the stranger's pocket that its devotee had only yielded to sheer force.

Hurriedly Wolf put down two golden sovereigns on the table. He refrained from placing them upon the empty jade pedestal. He placed them side by side, close to an edition of the works of Vaughan the Silurist.

"And now," he cried, "let's hear the end of that Slow-Worm poem!"

"Not here, not here," murmured the other, glancing, so Wolf imagined, with lamentable anxiety at the empty pedestal, as if at any moment seven other devils, worse than Mukalog, might take possession of it.

No sooner were they safe back at the cucumber-frame than Wolf resumed his request for the end of the Slow-Worm. Leaning back with his hands clasped meekly in front of him, like a child reciting a hymn, the astonishing man obeyed him with docility.

> And the Lenty Slow-Worm curses God
> For the sake of the rain-elf's pitifulness.
> He lifts his head from the watercress,
> He lifts his head from the quaker-grass,
> From the hoof-marks where the cattle pass,
> He lifts his head from the heavy sod,
> And under the loosestrife he curses God!
> And the newts and the tadpoles who where she lay
> Mocked her from bellies white, orange, and grey,
> Cry now to willow and water and weed,
> "Lenty Pond has a prophet indeed!"
> For the rain-elf weeps no more to her pillow
> Woven of twigs of the weeping-willow;
> But her lover, come back to the laughing rain-elf,
> Cries, "The Slow-Worm of Lenty is God Himself!"

"Bravo!" cried Wolf. "Thank the Lord you managed to comfort that poor girl!"

"She wasn't a girl," said Jason, colouring a little.

"Eh? What's that?" ejaculated the other. "How could she have a lover then?"

The poet was protected, however, from having to answer this objection by a sudden, happily-timed interruption.

Mr. Urquhart, escorting Selena Gault, came shuffling amiably towards them.

"Our two young friends in the kitchen-garden, ha?" was the Squire's greeting. "I've just been telling Miss Gault, haven't I, lady, how well you and I, Solent, get on together as fellow authors. I never got on so well with our poor dear Redfern, did I, Mr. Otter?"

Wolf was aghast at the complicated significance of the look that his employer fixed upon the agitated Jason.

"Your boots have got something nasty on them," the poet hurriedly rapped out to Miss Gault; and before the lady could stop him, he was down on his knees on the gravel, wiping one of her shoes with a handful of grass.

"It's only manure," he said presently, rising with a flushed face.

"Thank you, Mr. Otter, thank you very much," said Selena Gault. "I must have trodden on something."

"I hope you found my mother in her best mood," said Wolf.

Miss Gault frowned a little and then smiled on him graciously.

"Thank you for helping us to renew our old acquaintance, boy," she said. "But it's really Mr. Urquhart who ought to be thanked by everybody for bringing you down to us at all."

"Thank Redfern, not me," said the Squire, in his silkiest tone. "It's quite an art, isn't it, Otter, this business of leaving the world conveniently?"

But Jason was occupied in picking up the bits of empty snail-shell left by the thrush.

"What do they do where there aren't any stones to break 'em on?" commented the Squire as he watched him.

Miss Gault swept them both with her formidable gaze.

"Throw those things away, Mr. Otter, please. When the life's gone that's the end."

"Not always," murmured the Squire. "Not always, ha? What?"

Miss Gault lifted her eyebrows, and her distorted upper-lip twitched. "For the dead, it's the end," she repeated sternly; "but it's better to be dead in death than dead in life."

"I think I'd better go and see if my mother wants me," murmured Jason uneasily.

"I'll come with you, Otter," said Mr. Urquhart, making a deprecating little gesture with his hand, as if brushing away Miss Gault's indiscretion.

Then he turned to Wolf. "Be in good time tomorrow, Solent. I've got a book for you that's more racy than anything we've found yet. Malakite sent it over. The old rogue knows exactly what suits us."

Wolf felt it hard to believe the word "Malakite" was something that he had heard many times before quite calmly and casually. It teased his mind now that it should even be uttered by this man, whose pendulous

cheek-folds seemed to him, as he looked at them, to resemble the crumpled rattles of a rattlesnake.

Conversing sympathetically with Miss Gault, now, on the harmless topic of Emma and the three cats, he led the lady back into the front-garden.

Here he was presently much amused by observing Miss Gault, with the graciousness of a ducal personage, offer to drive Mrs. Solent as far as Lenty Cottage—an offer that was promptly accepted. When both women were gone, and Wolf himself had bidden his hostess good-night, he was surprised to hear Jason offering to walk a little way with him towards Blacksod.

Wolf instinctively kept his hand in his side-pocket as they walked, with an obstinate determination that nothing should induce him to return Mukalog to his idolater. But the poet's thoughts seemed running in a quite different direction.

"It's very difficult not to curse anyone," Jason began, hesitating, and reddening a little, "when a person expects you to do it. But I've got the power of joining in, so as not to annoy; while really I'm thinking just the opposite!"

To himself Wolf explained this ambiguous remark by assuming that Mr. Urquhart had been secretly propitiating "the drunken individual at Pond Cottage" by disparaging to him his new secretary.

But the poet began again. "I don't like the way some people egg on that young fool Weevil to boast so grandly of what lecherous things he's done. When people encourage an idiot like that, it's bad for everybody. It puts

it into his head to play tricks he'd never dare to think out for himself."

"Ho! Ho!" thought Wolf. "What's up now? Now we're beginning to learn something really curious!"

And the poet continued, in an excited voice: "You married people think you know everything. But no man ever knows what these girls are after; and I doubt if they know it themselves! It's like a gadfly, that first tickles them and then stings them."

"What's like a gadfly?" enquired Wolf.

"The lust of your excellent young men, such as this worthy Bob Weevil."

"Ah!" thought Wolf in his heart. "Now it's coming!"

"I never myself talk of lechery to anyone," went on the poet; "but this Squire of yours enjoys his little jest, whether it's with a young man or a boy. I expect he's a bit afraid of you, Solent."

"I should have supposed," said Wolf, "that Mr. Urquhart was too snobbish to treat a Blacksod tradesman like an equal, whatever his age was!"

"There is only one class," said the poet, with an air of benign authority, "where these matters are concerned."

"So you think Mr. Urquhart has been at work encouraging our friend Weevil in some pretty little bit of mischief, eh?" said Wolf.

A look of sheer pain came into Mr. Otter's face. "What put that into your head?" he cried. "I've not been talking about anyone *you* know, or anyone *I* know. I've been talking about the general mass of people. A person is allowed to talk about *them*."

"You're afraid that Roger Monk might be hiding behind that wall?"

The poet turned toward him his sorrowful grey eyes. "I don't like to be upbraided," he said gravely.

"I'm not upbraiding you," protested Wolf. "Look! There are none but very harmless people in there!"

The wall by which they were now walking was indeed the wall of the churchyard; and the idea of Death, like a flying, sharded beetle, struck them simultaneously in the face.

"I think I'll cancel our bargain, Solent," said Jason suddenly, "and give you back that money, and take back my piece of jade!"

It was a transformed countenance that the poet turned now to his companion. Abysmal desolation had descended upon him, and he almost whimpered as he implored Wolf to return his idol.

"It's no use, man. I tell you it's no use. If you went straight down on your knees to me I wouldn't give it up!"

Jason Otter pushed his hat back from his forehead and stood for a moment with his eyes tight shut. Wolf, who had no idea what thoughts were passing through that heavy head, clutched tightly the handle of his stick, thinking within himself: "He's capable of anything. He's like a drug-addict, and I've got his drug in my pocket!"

For a perceptible passage of time, though it may have been no more than a few seconds, they remained thus facing each other, while a group of King's Barton chil-

dren, running with noisy shouts down the road, stopped and stared at them open-mouthed.

Then Wolf was aware that the man's lips, out of the middle of that eyeless mask of misery, were muttering something—something that sounded like an incantation.

"I'd better sheer off!" he thought; and as he tightened his fingers round the handle of his stick, he overheard one of the children who were looking on say to another in a whisper: "It be only thik poor Mr. Otter, took wi' one o' they fits, look-see! T'other gent be a-going to hit he, present, long-side the ear-hole!"

"Well, good-night, Otter!" he called out to him. "If you don't mind I'll shog on! I've got to walk fast now, or Gerda will be worrying."

The figure in front of him made a blind step forward like a somnambulist; and in a rapid mental vision as definite as if it were a reality, Wolf saw him fallen prone in the white dust, crying aloud for the return of the image.

"Well, good-night!" he repeated brusquely; and turning on his heel, he strode off at a pace which it was not easy to keep from becoming a run.

For some distance he had an uncomfortable sensation in the back of his spine; but nothing happened. With his left hand fiercely clutching the thing in his pocket, and his right hand swinging his stick, he achieved an inglorious but effective retreat.

It was not, however, till he was nearly a mile from King's Barton that he dared to reduce his speed and take his mental bearings. Even then his disturbed fancy mistook the faint thudding of some tethered animal's

hooves on the floor of a shed for the patter of Jason's steps in pursuit.

It must have been half-past six before he began to recover himself and to look about him. There was hardly a breath of wind stirring. There had fallen upon that portion of the West Country one of those luminous late-summer evenings, such as must have soothed the nerves of Romans and Cymri, of Saxons and Northmen, after wild pell-mells of advances and retreats, of alarums and excursions, now as completely forgotten as the death-struggles of mediæval hernshaws in the talons of goshawks.

The fields of wheat and barley, pearl-like and opalescent in the swimming haze, sloped upwards to the high treeless ridge along which ran the main road from Ramsgard to Blacksod. On his left, lying dim and misty, yet in some strange way lustrous with an inner light of their own, as if all the earth had become one vast phosphorescent glow-worm, rolled away from beneath that narrow lane the dew-soaked pastures of the Blackmore Vale, rising again in the distance to the uplands of High Stoy.

Wolf was tempted to rest for a while, so as to gather into some kind of focus the confused impressions of that crowded afternoon; but he found, when he paused for a moment, leaning over a gate, that the dew-wet herbage brought to his mind nothing but one persistent image, an image calm and peaceful enough, but full of a most perilous relaxation of heart and will and spirit—the image, in fact, of a young man lying dead in a bedroom at Pond Cottage, a young man with a shrouded face, and

long, thin legs. Who was it who had told him that young Redfern was tall and thin?

He moved on, with a wave of his stick, as if to dispel this phantom; and it was not long before the first houses of Blacksod began to appear, some of them with windows already displaying lamplight, which mingled queerly enough with the strange luminosity such as still emanated from earth and sky. Wolf noted how different such spots of artificial light appeared, when they thus remained mere specks of yellow colour surrounded by pale greyness, from what they would be in a brief while, when they broke up the complete darkness.

And as he began to encounter the evening stir of the town's precincts, and the heavy breath of the Blackmore pastures ceased to drug his senses, he found that what he had gone through that day was now slowly sifting itself out in the various layers of his consciousness. "Either Urquhart *is* up to something," he thought, "or Jason has just invented the whole thing to satisfy his own strange mind! God help us! What a crazy set they all are! I'm thankful I'm out of it down here. Blacksod doesn't lend itself to such whimsies."

Thus did the outer surface of his mind report on the situation, making use of the artificially acquired genial optimism of many a forgotten mental *tour de force.*

But another—a deeper—layer in his mind made quite a different report.

"There's something up, over there, that's hostile to me and to my life. They seem to have nothing else to do, these King's Barton people, but plot with one another against someone. Good Lord! No wonder they

finished off Redfern among them all! I can see I'm going to have to defend myself. And easily could I do it, too, if it weren't for mother. Damn! It's mother being up there that's the rub; so dependent on Urquhart. If it weren't for her, I'd laugh at the whole lot of them. I've got my job at the school, thanks to Darnley. What a man Darnley is, compared with these madmen! They've worried *him* a lot though. Anyone can see that."

This second layer of his consciousness seemed so crowded with thoughts and surmises that he found himself standing stock-still outside a little greengrocer's shop, the better to get things clear.

A small ornament, perched in the lighted window, among the oranges and lettuces, made him recall the idol in his pocket; and from Mukalog his mind rushed back to Jason.

"I can't understand him," he said to himself. "Valley, I know, is a good man. Urquhart is a demon. But Jason baffles me. The Slow-Worm of Lenty! That's about what he is. I had a feeling just now, when he stood with his eyes shut and his mouth gibbering, that he belonged to some primeval order of things, existing before good and evil appeared at all. But it's clear that Urquhart's cajoled him somehow. And yet I don't know! I'm tempted to think he'd be a match even for him—very much in the way some cold wet rain from the aboriginal chaos would discomfort the Devil!"

He turned from the shop-window and moved on. Soon he came to where two crossroads branched off from the one he followed, the road to the right leading up Babylon Hill, the road to the left leading to that portion of

the town where Christie's house was. Should he turn to the left and return home that way? Or should he go straight on, past his father-in-law's yard?

The hesitation into which he now fell left an empty space in his mind; and at once there rose to fill it, from the invisible depths of his being, quite a new report upon the events of that day. Was there something more than those old sea-beach afternoons, those Lovers' Lane naughtinesses, between Gerda and Bob Weevil? He could not help remembering the exciting photograph of the girl astride of the tombstone which he had seen the two lads enjoying so much, that day he bought the sausages for Roger Monk.

The more rational layers of Wolf's consciousness now began a derisive criticism of this new mood. Had he the instincts of the lord of a seraglio? Did he demand that both Gerda and Christie should be faithful to him . . . while he himself was . . . as he was? No, it was different from that! After his fashion he *was* being faithful to Gerda. It was the nature of this particular case. It was, in fact, Mr. Weevil! To be cuckolded by Bob, the scamp of Blacksod, was not any way a very soothing destiny; but to be cuckolded by Bob as a sort of schoolboy-lark, a lark set in motion by the sardonic Mr. Urquhart, was a fantastic outrage.

Still he hesitated at these crossroads, teased beyond his wont by the difficulty of deciding which way to go. He was so pulled at in both directions, that as he wavered he seemed actually to see before him the objects he would meet under either choice, and to feel the sensations he would experience under either.

In the end a motive simpler than love or jealousy decided the point. He took the shorter way, the way by Mr. Torp's yard, because of a secret craving for food in the recesses of his stomach. But though this was his real motive, what he *thought* was his motive was jealousy over Bob Weevil. And the idea of this, that he should have such a feeling at all, in connection with the romance of passing close to Christie's room, at once puzzled and shamed him.

He walked on with rapid strides now; and as he passed the familiar Torp yard, which lay in a hushed and rather ghastly pool of twilight, he thought how little he had foreseen, that March day when he turned into this enclosure, what occurrences would be the result of it! Bound by intimate habit to the one he had married—in love, for good and all, with the one he had *not* married —his situation just then was sufficiently complicated, without all this bewildering turmoil of personalities in King's Barton!

It was with an accumulated measure of sheer animal relief that he found himself entering his own house at last. This was increased by a delicious abandonment to unhindered amorousness when he discovered that Gerda was waiting for him at the kitchen-stove in her night-dress and dressing-gown. The girl had certain very quaint and pretty ways of expressing her desire to be made love to; and she had seldom been more excitable or more whimsically provocative than she was that night.

Though hunger had brought him so quickly home, it was more than an hour after his return that they sat

down to their supper; and during the lingered-out and shameless caresses which he enjoyed before he would let her approach the stove, Wolf was compelled to come to the conclusion that erotic delight has in itself the power of becoming a kind of *absolute.* He felt as if it became a sort of ultimate essence into which the merely relative emotions of the two preoccupied ones sank—indeed were so utterly lost that a new identity dominated the field of their united consciousness, the admirable identity of *amorousness in itself,* the actual spiritual form, or "psychic being," of the god Eros!

What Wolf found to his no small content was that when this spiritual emanation of sweet delight had vanished away he was entirely free from any feeling of having committed sacrilege against his love for Christie. Whether this would have been the case had Christie been different from what she was, he found it difficult to decide; though in the intervals of pleasant discourse with Gerda, as they sat over their supper, he pondered deeply upon that nice point.

Another side-issue that had a curious interest for him was the question whether the accident of his having remembered that wicked tombstone-picture on his way home had had anything to do with the completeness of his pleasure! He had noted before in himself the peculiar rôle played by queer out-of-the-way imaginations in all these things! And finally—but *this* thought did not come to him till their meal was over—he caught himself at least once that night in a grim wondering as to how far the sweet desirability of his companion had been enhanced for him by those sinister rumours of a rival

in the field, even though that rival was this water-rat-featured seller of sausages!

Gerda was the first to go to sleep that night as they lay side by side, with the familiar odours of summer grass and pigsty drainage floating in upon them. Wolf had arrived, not without many mental adjustments, during the last two months, at a more or less satisfactory compromise between what he felt for this girl, thus lying with his arm stretched out beneath her, and what he felt for the other one. Christie's inflexible pride and the faint, hardly-stirred pulse of her subnormal senses, made it much easier for him. An instinctive unwillingness, too, in his own nature, to introduce any strain of harsh idealism, led him to get all the contentment he could out of his life with his lovely bedfellow. As he listened to her evenly-drawn breathing, and felt, through all his nerves, the delicious relaxation of her love-exhausted limbs, he was conscious now more than ever that it was completely unthinkable that he should be guilty of making her unhappy by any drastic change. In a sense what he had said to Selena Gault was true. He *was* happy. But he knew in his heart perfectly well that he was only happy because the deepest emotion he was capable of was satisfied by his nearness to Christie. Profoundly self-conscious as he was, Wolf was never oblivious of his lack of what people have agreed to call by the name of "passion." Luckily enough Christie, too, seemed, as far as he was able to tell, devoid of this exigency; so that by their resemblance in this peculiarity the strange intensity of their love was not disturbed by his easy dalliance with Gerda.

What Wolf at this moment felt, as he listened to the girl's soft breathing and held her in his arms, was a delicious, diffused tenderness—a tenderness which, like the earth itself, with the cool night-airs blowing over it, was touched by rumours and intimations belonging to another region. His sensual nature tranquillized, satisfied, appeased, permitted his spirit to wander off freely towards that other girlish form, more elusive, less tangible, hardly realizable to any concrete imagination, which now lay—sleeping or waking, he knew not which —in the room that looked out upon Poll's Camp! There, above the books of that incestuous old man's shop, that other one was lying alone. Was *she* satisfied in this ambiguous love of his? He preferred not to let himself dwell upon that aspect of the matter just then; and holding Gerda fast, and inhaling the mingled night-airs, he let his mind sink into the plenary absolution of a deep, dreamless sleep.

THE NEXT DAY PROVED TO BE, AS FAR AS THE WEATHER was concerned, even more pleasant than its predecessor.

Event followed event in harmonious and easy sequence. Gerda's morning crossness was tempered by an enchanting aftermath of petulant willingness to be caressed. His boys at the Grammar School, whom he had laboriously anchored in the reign of the first Tudor, were too occupied with thoughts of examinations and the approaching summer holidays to be as troublesome as usual. His afternoon at King's Barton was devoted to a concentrated perusal of the history of the unfortunate Lady Wyke of Abbotsbury; and Mr. Urquhart, crouching at his elbow like a great silky Angora tom-cat, was too absorbed in their researches to indulge in more than a very few of his sidelong malignities.

So well-pleased with their progress was the Squire, that while he and his secretary drank their tea at the library-window he asked Wolf if it would be any help to his mother if Roger Monk were to drive her to Ramsgard and back before dinner.

"Roger declares he wants to go over there," he said. "What he's up to I don't know. He never tells me anything. But if your mother or you care for the drive, you can tell him to call for you."

Wolf knew that Mrs. Solent had in her mind the notion of paying a formal call upon Miss Gault as a

sign of their reconciliation; so he hurriedly accepted this offer and went off at once.

"I think I'll go too," he announced to the big dark-browed servant; "so, if it won't weigh down your gig, you might put in the back-seat for me."

He found his mother lingering over her tea in the parlour of the trim cottage. He caught a glimpse of her unobserved as he approached the window, and it was rather a shock to him to observe a look in her face which he had never seen before. She was sitting motionless, with her outstretched hands pressed against the edge of the table and her gaze fixed upon emptiness. Her brown eyes, from the angle at which he caught her, had a defeated, weary, helpless expression, and even the contours of her formidable chin were relaxed, crumpled, desolate.

He had a queer feeling of shame for having caught her thus, as though in the indecent exposure of some secret deformity; and he hurriedly and noisily entered the little house.

At his appearance her whole manner changed. She seemed delighted to have the chance of driving to Ramsgard with him, and they chatted gaily till she went upstairs to get ready.

Roger Monk did not keep them waiting; and while he was at the garden-gate, holding the horse till the lady came down, Wolf had a word or two with him.

"Mr. Urquhart didn't seem to know what you were up to in Ramsgard," he remarked, indiscreetly enough, but with no ulterior motive.

"He knew right and fine, Mr. Solent! Don't you make

no mistake. There isn't much that goes on up at House —or out of House either, for that matter—that *he* doesn't know!"

"That must be rather uncomfortable sometimes, eh? What?"

This rather ungentlemanly imitation of the Squire's favourite phrase tickled the swarthy giant's fancy, and he smiled broadly. But a minute later his face grew grave and worried.

" 'Tis a good place with Squire," he whispered, bending down towards Wolf. "But I tell 'ee straight, Mr. Solent, Sir, if I knew for sure he wouldn't play some dog's trick on me I'd do a bunk tomorrow!"

Wolf stared at him blankly.

"I would," he repeated. And then, with the scowl of a righteous executioner, "I'll tap the top of his black head for him one of these days if God Almighty doesn't do it first!"

In spite of this somewhat ominous beginning, their drive into Ramsgard was a great success. Roger Monk quickly recovered his good-humour under Mrs. Solent's blandishments; and by the time they reached the schoolgate they were all three in the best of spirits.

Here they separated, the servant driving Mrs. Solent towards Miss Gault's house, while Wolf turned up the street with the intention of paying a visit to the Smiths.

The door was opened for him by Mattie herself; and the brother and sister embraced affectionately, as soon as they were alone in the cool, dark, musty hall.

"Dad is out," she whispered, "and we've only one servant now."

"One servant?" he echoed, as she led him, with her finger on her lip, into the empty dining-room.

"Olwen's upstairs playing," she said in a low voice.

It was clear to him that she was anxious that the child should not hear his voice; so he shut the door very quietly and they sat down together on two red leather chairs.

"What's the trouble, Mattie dear?" he murmured, holding her hand tightly.

"It's Dad," she said. "He's been queer the last few days."

It was difficult for Wolf to repress a smile; for the idea of Mr. Albert Smith, the great Hatter of Ramsgard School, the sedate Churchwarden of the Abbey, being in any kind of way "queer" struck him as grotesque.

"What's up with him? Business bad?"

Mattie sighed, and, releasing her hand from his clasp, folded her fingers tightly together.

"It's worse than bad," she said slowly. "Do you know, Wolf, I believe Dad's ruined."

"Good Lord, child!" he cried. "He can't be! I can't believe it. Mr. Smith? Why, he's been at this job here for as long as I can remember. He must have made a lot! He may have got some mania, my dear, about money. You ought to make him sell out and retire!"

"I tell you, Wolf," she said emphatically, and with a certain irritation, "it's true! Can't you believe I know what I'm talking about? He's been investing in some silly way. He's never been as sensible as people think; and now he's hit, knocked over. I believe he's already

taken the first step, whatever that is, to being bankrupt."

"Bankrupt?" repeated Wolf helplessly.

"So that's the state of *our* affairs!" she cried in a lighter tone. "And now tell me about yourself and your pretty Gerda."

As she spoke she rose to her feet and flung her hands behind her head, straightening her frame to its full height.

"She's got a fine figure," thought Wolf. "What a shame that her nose is so large!"

Mattie's countenance did indeed seem, as he looked at her staring steadily down at him out of her deep-set grey eyes, even less presentable than when he had seen her a few weeks ago.

"She's been having a bad time, poor girl!" he thought. "How damnable that the gods didn't mould her face just a little more carefully!"

He looked at her as she fixed her eyes on the floor, frowning; and then he glanced away at the mahogany sideboard, where Mr. Smith's heavy pieces of polished silver met his gaze, with the peculiar detached phlegm of old, worn possessions that have seen so many family-troubles that they have grown professionally callous, after the manner of undertakers and sextons.

Something about that silver on the sideboard, combined with his sister's news, threw a grey shadow over his own life. His mind sank down into a desolate acceptance of long years of stark endurance, the sort of endurance that wind-blown trees have to acquire when their branches become at last permanently bent, from

bowing sideways, away from the north or the east.

"Well, now you know the worst!" his sister murmured at last.

"It might be worse still," he said lamely.

Her eyes unexpectedly flashed and she gave vent to a queer little laugh.

"I don't care! I don't care! I don't care!" she cried. "In fact, if it weren't for Olwen, I believe I'd be almost glad!"

Wolf screwed up his eyes and regarded her closely. He suddenly became aware that this daughter of his father had something in her nature that he understood well enough.

"Listen, Mattie," he said quietly. "I have an idea that things are going to work out all right—work out better for you, in fact, than they've been doing for a long time."

She looked straight into his face and smiled, while one of her eyebrows rose humorously and twitched a little.

"You and I are a funny pair, Wolf," she said. "I believe we actually *like* to be driven and hunted."

They exchanged a long, confused look. Then he protruded his under-lip and drew down the corners of his mouth.

"If so, we know where we get it," he said. And then, in a sudden after-thought: "Look here, we must slip off one day together and visit his grave. I don't see why Madame Selena should have a monopoly of that spot!"

She made a somewhat brusque and ungracious movement.

"I don't like graves," she said. "But come on, Wolf, we mustn't stay down here any more. Let's go up and see Olwen. She'll never forgive me even now for keeping you."

He opened the door for her and they went up softly together. As he followed her form up the dim staircase, the thought came shamelessly into his head that had she been as lovely in face as she was flexible in figure she would have had a sensual attraction for him.

"But I understand her well," he said to himself. "And I'll do what I can to make her life happier."

Mattie paused, when she reached the first landing, till he was at her side. Then she called out: "Olwen! Olwen! Here's a visitor for you!"

"Olwen! Olwen!" echoed Wolf.

There was a scream and a scramble, and a door was flung wide. The little girl ran out with her hair flying and rushed into her friend's arms.

When at last he disentangled himself from her clinging hands, he held her at a distance from him, pushing her into the stream of light that had come with her through the open door. Holding her in this way he searched her face with a stern scrutiny. "After all," he thought, "she's more nearly related to Christie than I am to Mattie. We might all be in Mr. Urquhart's book!"

But the child pulled him into her room, and, disregarding Mattie completely, began hurriedly displaying before him every one of her treasures.

The summer night was already chilly, and over the half-opened window the muslin curtains swelled and receded, receded and swelled, as if they were sails on an invisible sea. Crouching upon a low straight-backed nursery-chair—the very chair, in fact, upon which her mother had sat to suckle her in her infancy—Mattie sat with her hands clasped round her knees, watching the shadows of their three forms, thrown by the candlelight, waver and hover against the old-fashioned wall-paper.

Wolf began to detach himself, as the three of them sat there, from the pressure of the actual situation, from the awareness even of his own personality. He seemed to slip away, out of his human skin, out of that old Ramsgard house, out of the very confines of life itself. He had the sensation that he was outside life—that he was outside death too; that he was floating in some airy region, where forms and shapes and sounds had been left behind—had changed into *something else.*

Attenuated by the influence of these bodiless fancies, the palpable shapes of Mattie and Olwen seemed to thin themselves out into something more filmy than the stuff of dreams. Mechanically he responded to Olwen's intense preoccupations, mechanically he smiled at his sister across the little girl's flushed face. But he felt that his senses were no longer available, no longer to be trusted. He had slid away somehow into some level of existence where human vision and human contact meant nothing at all. It was as if these two girls had become as unreal as his own intangible thoughts—those thoughts like tiny twilight insects—which passed without leaving a trace!

"No! Didn't you hear me telling you? That's not Gipsy . . . that's Antoinette!" scolded the little girl, as she snatched a miniature pillow from under one waxen head to insert it violently beneath another.

"Dolls—dolls—dolls!" thought Wolf. "If we can slip out of reality, why can't they slip into it?" He began automatically swinging both Gipsy and Antoinette from one hand to the other, a proceeding which delighted their little mistress.

"What," he thought, as he contemplated Mattie's heavy, clouded, patient features, her corrugated brow, her thick nose, "what am I aiming at, meddling with these people's lives? I do it with the same voracity with which I eat honey or trample over grass. I'm driven to it as if I were an omophagous demon! Is this the sort of thing my father did—that scoundrel with his 'happy life'?"

He was interrupted in his thoughts by the sound of a bell downstairs, followed by the opening of a door and by unsteady steps in the hall.

Mattie jumped to her feet and stood listening, intent and anxious.

"I believe that's Father!" she cried. "But why did he ring? He never rings. Excuse me, Wolf, I must run down."

She opened the door, but remained still listening, as also did Olwen, with wide-open startled eyes, a thin arm thrown round Wolf's neck.

There was a muttering and a shuffling downstairs, followed by the clang of a heavy stick falling on a tiled floor. Then a chair creaked ominously and there was a sort of groan. Then all was silent.

Mattie, with her hand on the door, turned round to them; and in spite of the flickering of the candles he could see that her face had gone white.

"It's Father!" she whispered. "He's ill. I *must* go down."

Still hesitating, however, and evidently struck by some sort of panic, she continued to waver in the doorway. Wolf remembered afterwards every smallest incident of that occasion. Olwen's little arm had a pulse in it that beat against his cheek like a tiny clock as she held him tighter and tighter. He replaced Gipsy and Antoinette on a chair by his side, half-consciously smoothing down their ruffled dresses. Both dolls' eyes, one pair blue and one black, stared up at him. Antoinette's arm stuck out awkwardly, absurdly. He pushed it down by her side with one of his fingers and it creaked as he did so.

"Stay where you are, both of you! I must go!" cried Mattie; and she ran hastily down the stairs.

Then there was a sudden scream that echoed sharply through the whole silent house. "Wolf! Wolf!" came her voice.

"Stay here, sweetheart!" he cried, freeing himself and rushing to the door. "Stay where you are!" But the little girl followed him like a shadow and was there by his side when he reached the hall.

They had left the door of the dining-room open, and by the light thus flung into the passage he saw Mattie on her knees before one of the hall-chairs, on which sprawled the stiff, collapsed form of Mr. Smith. His eyes were open and conscious under his black felt hat, which, tilted

sideways, gave him a grotesque, drunken appearance. Mattie was chafing his hands with her own and murmuring wild endearments.

Wolf hurriedly closed the front-door, which had been left ajar, and then, with Olwen still clinging to him, proceeded to strike a match, so as to light the hall-lamp.

"What are you doing, Wolf? Go away, Olwen. He'll be better in a minute. Father! Darling Father, what's the matter? What is it, Father? You're safe at home. You're all right now. Father dearest, what is it?" Mattie kept crying out in this way all manner of contradictory commands and appeals, as she went on rubbing Mr. Smith's impassive hands.

Wolf removed the man's hat and hung it carefully on a peg. He remembered afterwards the look of this hat, hanging side by side with his own, calm and a little supercilious, as hats in that position always are.

"Mattie," he said, "do you want me to go and find a doctor?"

But at the word "doctor" the man in the chair found his voice.

"No—no—no! No doctor. I won't have one. I won't! Off! Off! Off!"

"What is it, Father dear?" cried Mattie, rising to her feet and pressing her hand against his forehead. "No, you don't want a doctor. I'm here—your Mattie. You're better now, Father, aren't you?"

Mr. Smith stared at her with a heavy confused stare.

"All thieves," he muttered.

Wolf tried to catch his sister's eye for permission to

disobey the sick man, but the girl seemed to have forgotten his existence. It was clear to him that Mr. Smith had had some kind of stroke. His face wore now an unnatural reddish tint, and his head kept drooping sideways, as if the muscles of his neck no longer responded to his will.

Suddenly he astonished them by calling out "Lorna! Lorna!" in a loud voice.

"Oh, he's dying!" sobbed Mattie. "That's Mother he wants. It's your Mattie. It's your dear Mattie," she repeated, bending over him. But Mr. Smith had begun mumbling now, incoherently, but not inarticulately.

"Home . . . home for bastards. . . ." Wolf was sure those were the words he used; and he was relieved that Mattie, fallen on her knees again now, was sobbing so violently as to make it unlikely that she could catch what he said.

"Hats . . . hats for bastards. . . ." Mr. Smith went on. "No, no, Lorna! It was to Longburton he took you. But never mind. . . . Albert Smith, home for bastards. Albert Smith, Ramsgard, Dorset, Draper and Hat-Dealer. To the school, I tell 'ee! No—no—no! She'll never, never, never confess. . . . Longburton barn . . . hay and straw . . . hay and straw in your hair, my dear . . . and long past eleven. . . . What? You pricked your finger? A very pretty hat! Hats for bastards. . . . Home. *My* home. Albert Smith of Ramsgard come home."

His head had sunk so low now as to be almost resting on Mattie's shoulder, as she sobbed against his knees. Suddenly he lifted it with a spasmodic jerk.

"I'll pay for the child! I've got the money. I'll pay

for them all and say nothing. Albert Smith, Draper and Hatter. . . . To the school, I tell 'ee! . . . Pay . . . pay all . . . pay. . . ."

This was really the end now. His body fell forward over the stooping girl, and Wolf was hard put to it to pull her away from between the prone forehead and the stiff, protruding knees. For the moment he feared she would collapse; but he saw the quick, protective glance she cast at Olwen, who stood motionless, staring at the dead man like a fairy in a pantomime at the chief clown, and he knew then that she was mistress of herself. She helped him, without shrinking and without any more tears, to carry the body of Mr. Smith up the staircase and into his bedroom. . . .

It was about two hours after this that Wolf entered the room again with Mattie. Here, lying on his own high pillow, the head of the dead man had already assumed an expression of exhausted indifference. Close by his side, on a little table by the bed, as Wolf cast a final glance at him, was a picture of a young woman in the chaste costume of the mid-Victorian epoch. "Madam Lorna, I suppose," he thought; and he would have looked more closely at his father's sweetheart, but the presence of Mattie restrained him.

"I'll come over tomorrow evening, my dear," he said, "after my work with the Squire. Don't commit yourself to any arrangements or any plans till we've seen how the land lies. You won't, will you, Mattie?" he repeated emphatically. "I'll be really angry if you make any move that we haven't discussed together."

They were out on the landing by this time, and the

little girl heard them speaking and called out to them from her room.

"Go to sleep, Olwen!" cried Mattie.

"I want him to see Gipsy and Antoinette! I want him to see them!" the child repeated.

"Only for a minute, Wolf, *please!*" whispered his sister. "She's so terribly excited I shall never get her to sleep."

They opened the door and went in. There was a tray, with milk and biscuits upon it, on the chest of drawers by Olwen's bed and near the tray a small night-light burning. By this faint flicker Wolf could see the little girl's dark eyes shining with awe-struck intensity, though she was immobile as an image.

"Come nearer! Come quite near! They're as awake as I am."

He went up to the bed; and there, lying on opposite sides of Olwen's pillow, were the two dolls, with black ribbons twisted tightly round them and their hair brushed smooth and straight.

"They are going to grandfather's funeral tomorrow," she whispered. "Don't they look sorry and good?"

A minute or two later he bade his sister farewell at the front-door.

"You're sure you don't want me to stay the night with you?" he asked.

Mattie shook her head.

"I shall sleep with Olwen," she replied quietly. "We shall be all right."

"Well, remember you've had no supper. You'll never get through the night if you don't eat something."

"What about you, Wolf? How stupid I am!"

"Oh, I'll get a drink at the Lovelace on my way," he said. "But remember—no plans of any kind till I've seen you again!"

He was indeed only just in time to get into the Lovelace bar before the Abbey clock struck ten. He enquired about the King's Barton coachman and found that Mrs. Solent had left a message at the hotel-office earlier in the evening, saying that they could not wait for him, but that they had heard of Mr. Smith's death and would Mr. Solent come and see her tomorrow.

"I wonder," he thought, "how the devil she heard? They must have actually come to the door and been told by the maid about it when we were all upstairs. Well, it'll give her some kind of a shock, I daresay—but not very much!"

He left the Lovelace after drinking a pint of Dorchester ale. The night was cool and fragrant. The sky was covered now by a grey film of feathery clouds, through which neither moon nor stars were visible except as a faint diffused luminosity, which lifted the weight of darkness from the earth, but turned the world into a place of phantoms and shadows.

Wolf decided to follow the shorter and easier way home. This was the highroad to Blacksod that ran along the top of the ridge dividing Dorset from Somerset; and as he strode between the phantasmal wheat-fields of that exposed upland, his thoughts took many a queer turn. So Mattie and Olwen were left penniless! That was evidently going to be the upshot of the hatter's death. And the question was, what was to become of them? If it had

not been for the child's insane hostility to Christie, the natural course would have been for Olwen to return to her father's dwelling. The chances were that the local authorities, unless Miss Gault took upon herself to meddle again, would not interfere. Then his mind reverted to his mother.

Would his mother take them in? Roger Monk's house was certainly big enough, and it seemed unlikely that the Squire would object if no one else did. But—good Lord!—he couldn't visualize his mother living with another woman, or indeed putting up with the waywardness and excitability of Olwen. Who would educate her? It was impossible to contemplate Olwen at school!

The problem seemed well-nigh insoluble, as he pondered on it. Then, all in a moment, he thought of Selena Gault. There, no doubt, was the obvious solution! Selena was passionately fond of the little girl, and Selena had a servant. He stared at a fantastic thorn-tree, whose largest branch, bare of leaves and apparently quite dead, stretched out a semi-human hand across the tangled foliage of the roadside. As was his wont when confronted by a mental dilemma, he stood stock-still and regarded this silent monitor.

Nature was always prolific of signs and omens to his mind; and it had become a custom with him to keep a region of his intelligence alert and passive for a thousand whispers, hints, obscure intimations that came to him in this way. Why was it that a deep, obstinate resistance somewhere in his consciousness opposed itself to such a solution? He tried to analyze what he felt. Selena was a good woman, a passionately protective

woman; but there it was! That interference in the case of the Malakites had lodged a deep distaste in his mind. She might love Olwen; but she probably hated Mattie as much as she did Christie.

Damn! Why had Mr. Smith fooled away his money and shuffled himself off in this awkward manner? "Home for bastards"—what gross outbursting of the literal truth that was! Well, it was *his* business now to take the hatter's place and find just such a home! That incorrigibly complacent and grinning skull in the cemetery had certainly managed to bequeath burdens to its legitimate offspring which were not easy to fulfill!

Wolf stuck out his under-lip at the oracular thorn-tree and strode on. What he asked now, of that grey luminosity above him and of those diaphanous wraith-like corn-shocks, was why there should be, between his deepest desire and his complicated activity, such an unbridged gulf?

He had only one life. That was a basic and relentless fact. An eternity of "something or other" lay behind him, and an equally obscure eternity of "something or other" lay in front of him. Meanwhile, here he was, with only one single, simple, and world-deep craving—the craving to spend his days and his nights with that other mysterious and mortal consciousness, entitled Christie Malakite! And yet, for reasons comparatively superficial, reasons comparatively external to his secret life-current, he was steadily, day by day, month by month, building up barriers between himself and Christie, struggling to build them up, moving men and women like bricks and mortar to build them up!

A villainously evil thought assailed him as he walked along. Were all his better actions only so many Pharisaic sops thrown one by one into the mouth of a Cerberus of selfishness, monstrous and insane? Was his "mythology" itself only a projection of such selfishness? He carried this sardonic thought like a demon-fox pressed against the pit of his stomach, for nearly a mile; and it was just as if the hard, opaque crystal-circle of his inmost identity were, under that fox's black saliva, turning into something shapeless and nauseating, something that resembled a mass of floating frog-spawn.

"Come, you demon," he said to himself at last, "my soul is going to remain intact, or it's going to dissolve into air!"

He had reached the summit of Babylon Hill now; and precisely where he had first crossed that stile with Gerda, he stood at this moment, rending his nature in a desperate inward struggle.

When, in the middle of the night, lying in his bed by Gerda's side, he recalled this evil experience, he found the explanation of it in a sort of dissolution-hypnosis, or corruption-sympathy, linking him with the actual dead body of Albert Smith!

What he experienced was strange enough. He found himself very soon clutching with his fingers one of the posts of that stile, while with his other hand he dug his stick savagely into the sun-baked earth. And it seemed to him that every revolting or secretive instinct he had ever had took on a material shape and became as an actual portion of his physical body.

He became, in fact, a living human head, emerging

from a monstrous agglomeration of all repulsiveness. And this gross mass was not only foul and excremental; it was in some mysterious way *comic.* He, the head of this unspeakable body, was the joke of the abyss; the smug charlatan-prig at which the devils shrieked with laughter.

The queer thing was that his brain moved at this moment with incredible rapidity. His brain debated, for example, as it had never done before, the insoluble problem of free-will, the problem of the very existence of the mystery called "will." And then, all in a moment, with a crouching-wild-animal movement of his consciousness, he flung a savage defiance to all these doubts. He laid hold of his will as if it had been a lightning-conductor, and, shaking it clear of his body, thrust it forth into space, into a space that was below and yet above, within and yet beyond Poll's Camp and Babylon Hill. And then, in a second, in less than a second, so it seemed, as he recalled it afterwards, there came flowing in upon him, out of those secret depths of which he was always more or less conscious, a greater flood of liberating peace than he had ever known before!

He had the sensation, as he came down the slope, of having left behind, on the top of Babylon Hill, some actual physical body—a body that had been troubling him, like a great repulsive protuberance, both by its appearance and by its weight. He felt lighter, freer, liberated from the malice of matter. Above all he felt once more that his inmost identity was a hard, round, opaque crystal, which had the power of forcing itself through any substance, organic, inorganic, magnetic, or psychic, that might obstruct its way.

There were a few lights twinkling still among the Blacksod roofs. But he had no notion whether Christie's was among them; and at this moment it seemed unimportant. A new fragrance filled the air as he descended; which he defined to himself as the actual smell of Somersetshire, as distinct from the smell of Dorsetshire—the far-off fragrance, in fact, full of the exhalations of brackish mosses, amber-coloured peat-tussocks, and arrow-pointed water-plants, of the salt-marshes of Sedgemoor.

Once in the town, he took without any hesitation—though he did not forget that long vigil of the night in June—the particular way that led past the Torp monument-yard. As he approached Preston Lane through the deserted streets, he found himself thinking shamelessly and contentedly of the pleasure of making love to Gerda before he went to sleep.

His mind, after the experience he had gone through, seemed to float lightly and carelessly over every aspect of his existence. The personality of Christie remained the same through everything. It was as if to everything he did, even to making love to Gerda, Christie set her proud and careless seal. This indeed—so he said to himself—was the solution of that dilemma on which he had been impaled. Christie did remain the great aim and purpose of his life; but these innumerable other people were part of the body of that life itself. They were what *he was,* his ways, his habits, his customs, his manias, his impulses, his instincts; and *with all that he was* he had now been drawn to Christie as if by a magnet strong enough to move a great slave-galleon of manias and superstitions, *en masse* across the deep!

Airy and light as it now was, his soul seemed to have been liberated in some secret way from all that clogged and burdened it. The slave-galleon of his manias rocked and tossed on a smooth tide; but his soul, like a careless albatross, rode on the masthead. There was a strange humming and singing from the galleon itself, as if the immense peace of that summer night had turned it into a trireme of deliverance, carrying liberated pilgrims to the harbour where they would be. Something unutterable, some clue, some signal, had touched the dark bulkheads of this night-voyager; so that hereafter all might be different. What was this clue? All he knew about it now was that it meant the *acceptance* of something monstrously comic in his inmost being, something comic and stupid, together with something as grotesquely non-human as the sensations of an ichthyosaurus! But once having accepted all this, everything was magically well. "Christie! Christie!" he cried in his heart, longing to tell her about it.

He stopped when he was opposite the familiar pigsty, and lifted his head, breathing deeply. At that moment Fate seemed so kind to him that its kindness was almost too great. His love for Christie seemed to touch with a kind of transparency everything that he looked at. Rapidly he crossed the road, entered his house, and ran upstairs.

He found the room dark; but when he had lit a candle he saw that the girl was lying wide-awake, her head propped high on the two pillows. He was in such an exalted mood that he was hardly surprised at her first words.

"Oh, Wolf, Wolf," she said, "I'm almost sorry you've come so soon. I've been looking through that window for hours and hours. What's happened to me I don't know; but I've not felt like this since that evening when you first loved me in the river-fields."

He stooped and kissed her without attempting an answer; and when he held her presently in his arms, and the room was again dark, it was as if they each found an opportunity in their embraces wherein to express an accumulated tide of feelings that spread out wide and far —spread out beyond all that he could feel for her, and beyond—so it seemed to him, as he tasted tears on her cheek—all that she could feel for him.

And now, as their dalliance sank into quiescence, one of Wolf's final thoughts before he slept was of the vast tracts of unknown country that every human consciousness includes in its scope. Here, to the superficial eye, were two skulls, lying side by side; but, in reality, here were two far-extending continents, each with its own sky, its own land and water, its own strange-blowing winds. And it was only because his own soul had been, so to speak, washed clean of its body that day, that he was able to feel as he felt at this moment. But—even so—what those thoughts of hers had been, that he had interrupted by his return, he knew no better now, than when first he had entered her room and had blown out her candle.

IT WAS WITH A FAIRLY UNTROUBLED MIND THAT WOLF set off the following afternoon for King's Barton. And it was with a peculiar sense of recovery that he found himself seated side by side with Mr. Urquhart at the littered table in the great library-window.

Incredibly fragrant were the garden-scents that flowed in upon him, past the Squire's pendulous eye-folds, Napoleonic paunch, and withered pantaloon-legs. The old rogue had discovered a completely new stratum of obscene Dorset legends. He had got on the track now of accounting for certain local cases of misbehaviour, on the grounds of libidinous customs reverting to very remote times. He was, in fact, at this moment gathering all the material he could find about the famous "Cerne Giant," whose phallic shamelessness seemed by no means confined to its harmless representation upon a chalk-hill.

As he looked down, past Mr. Urquhart's profile, upon the lawn below, and contemplated the rich mingling of asters, lobelias, and salpiglossis in Roger Monk's favourite flower-bed, it seemed to Wolf that certain prematurely fallen leaves which he caught sight of down there upon the grass had struck his consciousness long ago with a tremendous significance. Those sultry glowing purples . . . those dead leaves . . . what *was* that significance? "This day is going to be a queer day for me," he thought. For he had become aware that some screen,

some casement, at the back of his mind, behind which his most secret impressions lived and moved in their twilight, had swung open a little. . . .

He kept staring down out of that library-window past his employer's profile. That purple glow from the flower-bed . . . those dead leaves . . . why was there no dew down there? It was autumn dew he was thinking about that August day . . . silvery mist upon purple flowers. . . . "The most important things in my life," he said to himself, "are what come back to me from forgotten walks, when I've been alone. . . . Dark grass with purplish flowers . . . dead leaves with dew on them. . . . I wonder," he thought, "how much room those undertakers left between old Smith's face and his coffin-lid?"

And then he thought, "I wonder if old Smith ever noticed the look of dew upon dead leaves?" and he shifted his position a little, as a cold shiver went through him.

But Mr. Urquhart now broke silence. Some telepathic wave must have passed from his secretary's wandering mind into his own.

"What's this news I hear," he said, "about Albert Smith? The old chap's kicked the bucket, eh? Lovelace was over here this morning, and he tells me the fellow died last night and left nothing but debts. A bad lookout for those two girls, what? Lovelace even hints at suicide."

The Squire paused, and a very curious expression came into his face.

"They talked of suicide when Redfern died," he went on. "I'd like to know what *you* think, Solent, about this business of shuffling off without a word to anyone? D'ye

think it's easy for 'em? D'ye think they do it with their brains cool and clear? D'ye think they have some pretty awful moments or not, ha? Come, tell me, tell me! I hate not to know these things. Do they go through the devil of a time before they bring themselves to it, eh? Or do they sneak off like constipated beagles, to eat the long ditch-grass and ha' done with it?"

Wolf tried in vain to catch his employer's equivocal eye as he listened to all this. Never in his acquaintance with Mr. Urquhart had he felt so baffled by the drift of the man's mind. Something in himself, rising up from very hidden depths, gave him a hurried danger-signal; but what possible danger there could be to him from the man's words he was unable to see.

"Do they mind it or don't they?" repeated the Squire. "People pity 'em; but what does anyone know? Perhaps the only completely happy moments of a man's life are when he's decided on it. Things must look different then—different and much nicer, eh, Solent? But different, anyway; very different. Don't 'ee think so, Solent? Quite different. . . . Little things, I mean. Things like the handles of doors, and bits of soap in soap-dishes, and sponges on washing-stands! Wouldn't you want to squeeze out your sponge, Solent, and pick up the matches off the floor, when you'd decided on it?"

Wolf was spared the necessity of any retort to this by the appearance of Roger Monk. The man came in without knocking and walked straight up to their table.

Wolf peered at him with quizzical screwed-up eyes. He couldn't help recalling that explosion of homicidal hatred which he had listened to outside Lenty Cottage.

But the gardener's countenance was impassive now as a human-faced rock.

"Eh? What's that, Monk? Speak up. Mr. Solent will not mind."

"Weevil and young Torp, Sir, round at the back, Sir; asking for leave to fish in Lenty Pond, Sir."

Monk uttered the words in a low, discreet, colourless voice.

Mr. Urquhart at once assumed a blustering great man's tone of genial condescension, as if he were addressing himself to the youths in question.

"Sporting young men, ha? Gay young truants, ha? Well, we mustn't be too strict. Do 'em good, I daresay, on a fine afternoon. Probably catch nothing but a perch or two! Certainly, Roger. I've no objection, Roger."

But the man still remained where he was.

"They *did* say, Sir, that you said something the other night to them, Sir, about——"

But Mr. Urquhart interrupted him.

"I've no time now. I'm busy with Mr. Solent. Tell 'em to clear off and fish all they like. There's nothing more, Roger, thank you. Tell 'em to fish the pond from end to end, but not to trample down the rushes. Tell 'em to be careful of the rushes, Roger. That's all, Roger."

His last words were uttered in such a final and dismissing tone, that the man, having given him one quick interrogative look, swung round on his heels and left the room.

The Squire turned to Wolf.

"A little sport for the populace, eh, Solent? Do 'em good, what? Doesn't pay to be too strict these days.

Seignorial rights and that sort o' thing grown a bit old-fashioned, ha?"

The conversation lapsed after this, and they returned to their investigations concerning the Cerne Giant.

It was Mr. Urquhart's part to select, from the mass of their material, the particular aspects of Dorset history which lent themselves to their work. It was Wolf's business to purge and winnow and heighten these to the general level of the style which they had adopted.

"Every bibliophile in England'll have this book on his shelves one day, Solent," remarked the Squire, after about half-an-hour's work.

Wolf did not reply. For some reason he lacked the faintest flicker of an author's pride in what they were doing.

They worked on for nearly a whole hour after this. Then Mr. Urquhart suddenly uttered these strange words.

"It would be wonderful to see one's sponge and one's hair-brush as they'd look just then."

Wolf hurriedly gathered his wits together.

"You mean after you'd decided upon it?" he said.

Mr. Urquhart nodded.

"You'd see 'em in a sort of fairy-story light, I fancy," he went on, "much as infants see 'em, when they're so damned well-pleased with themselves that they chirp like grass-hoppers. It would be nice to see things like that, Solent, don't you think so? Stripped clear of the mischief of custom? It . . . would . . . be . . . very . . . nice . . . to see . . . anything . . . like that!"

His voice assumed a languid and dreamy tone, full of an infinite weariness.

Wolf found it difficult to make any intelligent comment. His own mind was worrying about many teasing details just then, such as what he was to say to his mother with regard to Mattie and Olwen, and whether he should go to Ramsgard between tea and dinner or wait till later in the evening.

Mr. Urquhart suddenly rose to his feet.

"Let's stroll round to Lenty Pond, Solent, and tell those lads they can bathe if they want to. It's bathing they really like," he added emphatically, "much more than fishing. Good for the rabble, too, don't you think so, Solent, to learn to swim?"

Wolf could only patiently acquiesce. He did, however, snatch a brief glance at his watch.

"It's nearly four, Sir," he said. "You won't mind if I leave you, after we've been over there, and run round to my mother's?"

The man waved his hand with a negligent, indifferent gesture. It was a mere nothing, this gesture; but in some queer way it rather chilled Wolf's blood. "It must have been," he thought to himself, "exactly in that way that the high-priest waved his hand when he uttered the memorable expression, 'What is that to *us?* See *thou* to that!' "

They went out together, and Wolf was almost irritated by the unnecessary speed with which Mr. Urquhart walked.

They did not, for all this hurry, reach Lenty Pond uninterrupted. Just as they were entering the field above the Otters' house, they came unexpectedly upon Jason.

The poet had—as far as Wolf could make out—been sitting in the ditch, both for coolness and for seclusion; but he emerged from his retreat in comparative self-possession, and accepted Mr. Urquhart's rather curt invitation to join them with quiet acquiescence.

They all proceeded therefore across the field, Wolf forgetting his personal anxieties in his interest in the way his two companions treated each other.

"Your peaches are very fine this year," said Jason to the Squire. "And it was a very good idea of yours to put netting over them. Thieves are afraid of touching netting. It's like the Latin words at the beginning of a psalm. It makes fruit seem more than fruit—something sacred, I mean."

"You must make my gardener pick you some of the sacred fruit when you next explore my garden," said Mr. Urquhart.

"You've put your garden-seats in such a very well-chosen place," went on the poet, in an eager, propitiatory manner. "None of these country fools understand why your garden-seats are between the yew-hedges and the privet-hedges. They've no more idea of how garden-seats should be arranged—I mean, with regard to shadows—than a Sturminster goose has of the taste of Tangerine oranges."

"I hope," said Mr. Urquhart drily, "that you will not fail to take advantage of *all* the shadows in my garden when you happen to be there."

Wolf glanced at the Squire's face as he spoke, and was startled by its look of agitated annoyance. But Jason

went on rapidly, his cheeks growing more and more flushed, and a queer dark glow showing itself in his eyes.

"There are idiots who can't enjoy that shrubbery of yours, Mr. Urquhart, just because the bushes aren't trimmed. Untrimmed shrubberies are by far the best. Children and fairies are safe there. Silly old women can't walk about in them and God can't get into them."

"I hope you'll never hurt *yourself*, Otter, when you happen to be walking about in my shrubberies."

The tone in which his employer uttered these words did not altogether surprise Wolf. In his earlier conclusions about these two men he had taken for granted that Jason was helpless in Mr. Urquhart's hands. He had already begun to waver a little in this view.

They now arrived at the edge of Lenty Pond, and Wolf was amused by the sight of two naked figures, splashing, gesticulating, and clinging to the branches of a submerged willow. It was clear that Mr. Urquhart's "populace" had not waited for any formal permission to substitute bathing for fishing.

"Hullo, lads! You've done very wisely, I see," said the lord of the manor, approaching the edge of the water and leaning on his cane.

"Take care of the leeches, you two!" cried Jason with benevolent unction.

If Wolf had been previously struck by the unrestrained manner in which the poet had rallied the great man, he was still more arrested by the change that now came over Mr. Otter's expressive face. It had been stonily self-centred when he came out of the ditch. It had

been twitching with mischief as he talked. It now became suddenly suffused with a kind of abandoned sentimentality. Every trace of nervousness passed out of it and every shadow of misery. It seemed to be illuminated by some soft inner light, not a radiant light, but a pallid, phosphorescent nebulosity, such as might have accompanied the religious ecstasy of a worshipper of will-o'-the-wisps.

Lobbie Torp, his thin white figure streaked with green pond-weed, staggered out of the water and sat down by the side of Jason on the bank, beating the flies away from his legs with a muddy willow-branch.

Wolf noticed that the poet's expression assumed a look of almost beatific contentment as he proceeded to enter upon a whispered conversation with the small boy, who himself, as far as Wolf could see, was too occupied in casting awe-struck glances at the Squire to give the least attention to what was being said to him.

"It's not too warm, gentlemen," called out Bob Weevil, with a forced shiver, pulling himself up, rather foolishly and self-consciously, by the tree-trunk in front of him.

"Why don't you take a swim, Weevil?" enquired Mr. Urquhart blandly.

"He dursn't, Sir. He's afeard of they girt water-snakes," cried Lobbie Torp.

Bob Weevil's reply to this taunt was to drop his hold upon the tree, swing himself round, and strike out boldly for the centre of the pond.

"Well done, Weevil! Well done!" cried out the Squire in high delight, watching the flexible muscles and slim

back of the swimmer, as the muddy ripples eddied round him.

"Float now, Weevil!" he went on. "Let's see you float!"

The youthful dealer in sausages turned upon his back and beat the surface of the pond with arms and heels, causing a solitary moor-hen, that hitherto had remained in terrified concealment, to rise and flap away through the thick reeds.

There passed rapidly through Wolf's mind, while all this went on, a hurried mental estimate of his own feelings. He felt—and he frankly confessed it to himself—in some queer way definitely uncomfortable and embarrassed. The air of excited well-being around him jarred upon his nerves as if there were actually present, hovering with the gnats and midges above that pond, some species of electricity to which he was completely insensitive. He felt awkward, ill at ease, and even something of a fool.

What puzzled him, too, profoundly and annoyingly, was the fact that the psychic "aura" of the situation seemed entirely natural and harmless. The presence of those two lads seemed to have drawn out of both his equivocal companions every ounce of black bile or complicated evil.

The Squire had the air of an innocent, energetic schoolmaster, superintending some species of athletic sports. Jason had the look of an enraptured saint, liberated from earthly persecution and awakening to the pure ecstasies of Paradise.

He himself began vaguely wondering, as Bob Weevil reversed his position and with vigorous strokes ap-

proached the willow-tree, whether the numerous intimations of peril he had been receiving lately had any reality in them.

He had been, he knew well, taking for granted for many months, that between himself and Mr. Urquhart there existed some sort of subterranean struggle that ultimately would articulate itself in some volcanic explosion. But at this moment, half-hypnotized by the heavy sunshine, by the disturbed waters of Lenty Pond, by the classic nakedness of the two youths, he found himself beginning to wonder if the whole idea of this psychic struggle were not a fancy of his brain.

The sense that this might be the case had an extremely disconcerting effect upon him, and seemed to menace with doubt and confusion one of the dominant motive-powers of his identity.

He knew very well why it had this effect. His whole philosophy had been for years and years a deliberately subjective thing. It was one of the fatalities of his temperament that he completely distrusted what is called "objective truth." He had come more and more to regard "reality" as a mere name given to the most lasting and most vivid among all the various impressions of life which each individual experiences. It might seem an insubstantial view of so solid a thing as what is called "truth"; but such was the way he felt, and he thought he would never cease to feel like that. At any rate, one of his own most permanent impressions had always been of the nature of an extreme dualism, a dualism descending to the profoundest gulfs of being, a dualism in which every living thing was compelled to take part.

The essence of this invisible struggle he was content to leave vague and obscure. He was not rigid in his definitions. But it was profoundly necessary to his life-illusion to feel the impact of this mysterious struggle and to feel that he was taking part in it. What had come over him now as he watched the shining body of Mr. Weevil, surmounted by his impudent water-rat face, as the self-conscious youth once more began his gymnastics with the willow-tree, was a sort of moral atrophy. Sitting on the bank, hugging his knees, at a little distance from Jason and Lobbie, he had time to watch the Squire, and he was struck by the purged and almost hieratic look which the man now wore, as he stood leaning upon his cane, encouraging the silly manœuvres of the sausage-seller. "He looks like a mediæval bishop watching a tournament," Wolf said to himself. And the placid sun-burnt sympathy he felt for the man's amiable passivity seemed seeping in upon him like a warm salt-tide—a tide that was outside any "dualism"—a tide that was threatening the banked-up discriminations of his whole life.

Then all in a moment he asked himself a very searching question.

"What would I feel at this moment," he said to himself, "if Weevil were a girl and Lobbie a little girl? Should I in that case be quite untroubled by this Giorgione-like *fête-champêtre?* No!"—so he answered his own question—"I should feel just as uncomfortable even then at my complicity. It isn't a question of the sex . . . it's a question of something else . . . it's a

question of——" A noisy splash made by Lob as he darted into the water, and a still louder splash made by Mr. Weevil as he plunged to meet him, interrupted Wolf's train of ideas.

He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to five. He scrambled to his feet and picked up his stick. "I must rush off," he cried. "You'll excuse me, Sir? We'll meet again soon, Otter. Good-bye, Weevil! Good-bye, Lobbie! Don't stay in too long or you'll catch a chill, and I shall get into trouble with the family."

Mr. Urquhart and Jason seemed as indifferent to his departure as if he had been an inquisitive Guernsey cow who had approached them and then gone off with a flick of her tail. As he walked across the field he had an uneasy sense that he was retreating from some occult arena where he had suffered an irreversible defeat. The stirring of the waters of Lenty was evidently perilous to him!

He found his mother sitting over the tea-table in Roger Monk's trim house, sewing artificial poppies round her hat.

During their tea together he related all he chose to relate of the hatter's death. His mother, however, with her accustomed airy directness, like the swoop of a kestrel, pounced at once on the main issue.

"That's what I wanted to discuss with you," she said. "What's going to happen to those Smith girls?"

She gave him one of her sharp, quick looks, full of worldly sagacity and yet full of a kind of humorous recklessness.

"No one has the least idea," he responded. "I wish I could do something for them. But I don't see how I can."

His mother looked mischievously and affectionately at him.

Suddenly, coming round the table, she kissed him with a series of little bird-like pecks. "There's no one like my Lambkin," she said lightly, "for being too good to live!"

Having thus given him the feeling—how well he knew it!—that the very deepest stretch of his spirit only appeared as a pretty little pet-dog trick to her cynical maternal eroticism, she went back again, round the table, to her seat.

She drank more tea after that and ate more bread-and-butter, and Wolf received the impression that his obvious concern over Mattie and Olwen had for some reason given her a deep sense of satisfaction.

It was certainly a relief to him that this was so; and yet, as he met her warm, ironical, half-mischievous glance, a glance full of a sort of gloating tenderness that laughed at both itself and its object, he felt obscurely uneasy.

"I hope," he said at last, "that I shan't inflict my philanthropies on Gerda. Fortunately she's got a very sweet nature."

A somewhat grim look passed over Mrs. Solent's face. Her adamantine chin was pushed forward; and her under-lip, like the under-lip of a carnivore, protruded itself in an extremely formidable manner.

"I don't see your pretty Gerda putting herself out for anybody," she said.

Wolf began instantaneously to grow angry—far more angry than he could himself account for.

"She's as anxious about them as I am," he retorted hotly.

"She knows you too well, Wolf, to dare to thwart you," remarked Mrs. Solent.

"It's her generous nature!" he cried, with a trembling lip. "It's pure-and-simple magnanimity, such as not another girl in the world would show!"

His mother's massive face, under her weight of silver hair, darkened to a dull red.

"I'm afraid you spoil us all, Lambkin," she said, with a wicked, airy little laugh. "But your Gerda knows how to play her cards."

She had never spoken to him in this tone before. The magnetic current of his anger had touched an evil chord in her own nature, and her laugh was sardonic.

"Play her cards!" he cried in high indignation. "She's utterly incapable of such a thing! I wish you'd learn the same sweet generosity, Mother! It's you who 'play your cards,' as you call it."

Mrs. Solent rose to her feet, her face pale now and hard-set as flint.

"You'd have done better to have gone back to Blacksod this afternoon, Wolf," she said, "if that's how you feel about me!"

"Mother, you are absolutely unfair!" he cried. "And you've always been unfair about Gerda. You hate her for some unknown absurd reason. Pure snobbishness most likely! And you'd like to hurt her, to make her suffer, to spoil her life. That's why—oh, I see it now!

—you're so glad I'm fussed up about Mattie. You think that will spoil everything for Gerda; and you are glad that it should!"

She came again round the table now, but with a very different purpose from her previous gesture; and yet, as Wolf knew well, it was the same savage eroticism that dominated both these movements.

"I care nothing, not one crow's-feather, for your pretty, brainless Gerda!" she cried, standing quite close to him, her left hand on the handle of the silver cake-basket which formed the centre of the tea-table, and her right hand opening and shutting as if it were galvanized. "I've been good to her, to please you; and I've been made a fool of for my trouble. Don't you think I don't know how little I count any more in your life, Wolf? Nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing! You just come and see me. You flatter me and cajole me. But you never stay! Do you realize you haven't stayed one night under the same roof with me, since you married? Oh, it's all right! I don't complain. I'm growing an old woman; and old women aren't such pleasant companions as brainless little girls! Oh, it's all right! But it's a funny experience, this being shelved and superannuated while your feelings are just as young as anyone's!"

Her voice, as she let herself be overwhelmed by a blind rush of accumulated self-pity, began to break and choke; and then, all in a moment, it rose to a terrible, ringing intensity, like the sound of a great sea-bell in a violent storm. . . .

"It's all right! I can stand it!" she cried. "I had plenty of practice with your father, and now I'm going

to have the same thing with you. . . . Oh, it's a cruel thing to be a woman!"

She pushed back her grey hair from her forehead with one hand, while the other twitched frantically at her waist-band. Never had her handsome features looked more noble; never had her whole personality projected such magnificent, such primeval passion.

Wolf, as he watched her, felt weak, despicable, faltering. He felt like a finical attendant watching the splendid fury of some Sophoclean heroine. He became aware that her anger leaped up from some incalculable crevasse in the rock-crust of the universe, such as he himself had never approached. The nature of her feeling, its directness, its primordial simplicity, reduced his own emotion to something ridiculous. She towered above him there with that grand convulsed face and those expanded breasts; while her fine hands, clutching at her belt, seemed to display a wild desire to strip herself naked before him, to overwhelm him with the wrath of her naked maternal body, bare to the outrage of his impiety.

In the storm of her abandonment, the light irony that was her personal armour against life seemed to drop from her, piece by glittering piece, and fall tinkling upon the floor. Something impersonal rose up in its place, an image of all the stricken maternal nerves that had vibrated and endured through long centuries; so that it became no longer just a struggle between Wolf Solent and Ann Solent—it became a struggle between the body of Maternity itself and the bone of its bone!

She broke now into desperate sobs and flung herself

face-down upon the sofa. But the demon that tore at her vitals was not yet content. Turning half-round towards Wolf, and lifting herself up by her arms, she raised a long, pitiful howl like a trapped leopard in the jungle. "Women . . . women . . . women!" she cried aloud; and then, to Wolf's consternation, propping herself upon one of her arms, she held out the other with her first-finger extended, menacing, prophetic, straight towards him.

"It's he who's doing all this to me! You needn't think that you could do it alone! It's both of you. It's both! But, oh, you great, heavy, stupid, clumsy lumps of self-ishness. . . . Something, some day, will make you . . . I don't know what. . . . Something, one day . . . will make you. . . . Something will do it . . . one day . . . and I shall be glad. . . . Don't expect anything else. I shall be glad!"

She drew in her arm and buried her face in the sofa, her body heaving with long, dry, husky sobs.

Wolf surveyed her form as she lay there, one strong leg exposed as high as the knee, and one disarranged tress of wavy grey hair hanging across her cheek. And it came over him with a wave of remorseful shame that this formidable being, so grotesquely reduced, was the actual human animal out of whose entrails he had been dragged into light and air.

His remorse, however, was not a pure or simple emotion. It was complicated by a kind of sulky indignation and by a bitter sense of injustice. The physical shamelessness, too, of her abandonment shocked something in him, some vein of fastidious reverence. But his mother's

cynicism had always shocked this element in his nature; and what he felt now he had felt a thousand times before —felt in the earliest dawn of consciousness. What he would have liked to do at that moment was just to slip out of the room and out of the house. Her paroxysm roused something in him which, had she known it, she would have recognized as more dangerous than any responsive anger. But this feeling did not destroy his pity; so that, as he now sombrely contemplated those grey hairs, and that exposed knee, he felt a more poignant consciousness of what she was, than he had ever felt at the times when he admired her most and loved her most.

He let himself sink down in his chair and covered his mouth with his hand as if to hide a yawn. But he was not yawning. This was an old automatic gesture of his: perhaps originally induced by his consciousness that his mouth was his weakest and most sensitive feature and the one by which the sufferings of his mind were most quickly betrayed.

Then he suddenly became aware that the sobs had ceased; and a second later he received a most queer impression, the impression, namely, that one warm, glowing, ironical brown eye was fixed upon him and was steadily regarding him—regarding him through the disordered tress of ruffled hair that lay across it.

He drew his hand from his mouth, rose to his feet quickly, and, bending down above his mother, pulled her up from a recumbent into a sitting posture.

"Mother, don't!" he cried. "You're laughing at me; you're pretending! And I might have done I don't know

what, because you scared me so. You've just been teasing your poor son, and frightening him out of his wits; and now you're laughing at me!"

He fell on his knees in front of her and she let her touzled forehead sink down till it rested against his; and there they remained for a while, their two skulls in a happy trance of relaxed contact, full of unspoken reciprocities, like the skulls of two animals out at pasture, or the branches of two trees exhausted by a storm.

Wolf was conscious of abandoning himself to a vast undisturbed peace—a peace without thought, aim, or desire—a peace that flowed over him from the dim reservoirs of prenatal life, lulling him, soothing him, hypnotizing him—obliterating everything from his consciousness except a faint delicious feeling that everything *had* been obliterated.

It was his mother herself who broke the spell. She raised her hands to his head and held it back by his stubbly straw-coloured hair, pressing, as she did so, her own glowing tear-stained cheeks against his chin, and finally kissing him with a hot, intense, tyrannous kiss.

He rose to his feet after that and so did she; and, moved by a simultaneous impulse, they both sat down again at the deserted tea-table, emptied the teapot into their cups, and began spreading for themselves large mouthfuls of bread-and-butter with overflowing spoonfuls of red-currant jam.

Wolf felt as if this were in some way a kind of sacramental feast; and he even received a queer sensation, as though their mutual enjoyment of the sweet morsels they

swallowed so greedily were an obscure reversion to those forgotten diurnal nourishments which he must have shared with her long before his flesh was separated from hers.

Half-an-hour later he was walking leisurely towards Ramsgard along that now so familiar road. He recalled his first acquaintance with this road, that day he drove over by the side of Darnley Otter; and as he began to approach the town, he found himself glancing across the fields to his right, toward the lane that led to the cemetery, and then across the fields to the left, toward the broader highway which he had followed on the preceding night, his head full of Mr. Smith's death.

Roads and lanes! Lanes and roads! What a part these tracks for the feet of men and beasts, dusty in Summer, muddy in Winter, had played in his mental consciousness! The thrill that this idea of roadways gave him was a proof to him that his mind was returning to its independent orbit, after its plunge into that maternal hypnosis. His spirit felt indeed deliciously free just then, and expanded its wings to its heart's content, like a great flapping rook. Every object of the way took on an especial glamour; and never had he enjoyed so deeply one peculiar trick of his mind. This was a certain queer, sensuous sympathy he could feel sometimes for completely unknown people's lives, as he passed by their dwellings. He enjoyed it now with especial satisfaction, thinking of the people in each cottage he came to, and gathering their experiences together as one might gather a bunch of ragwort or hemp-agrimony out of the dusty hedges.

Well enough did he know how many of these experiences were bitter and grotesque; but what he enjoyed now, along with all these unknown people, was their moments of simple, sensuous well-being.

Such a moment he himself felt presently, as he leaned over a gate to rest, just before the road he traversed entered the outskirts of Ramsgard. Through the warm, misty evening, full of what seemed to him a veritable diffused essence of gold-dust, there came some quick wandering breaths of cooler air; and these breaths of air, brushing against his face and passing swiftly upon their way, carried a peculiar fragrance with them, a fragrance that made him think of a certain little garden of old-fashioned pinks that he used to pass, on his way to the place where he gave his lectures, down a narrow West London alley. If in Mr. Urquhart's library he had been stirred by Roger Monk's flower-beds, he was more stirred now by this far-off impression. The pinks were meagre enough in themselves. But the thought of them in their sun-baked little garden, so close to the hot pavement, touched some chord of seminal memory that gave him just then a transporting thrill.

Where did it come from, this emotion? Was it an inherited feeling, reverting to days when some remote ancestor of his, in cloister or market-place, used to inhale day by day that particular sweetness? Or was it something larger and more general than this? Certainly what he felt just now, as these cool-wafted airs came over the yellow stubble, was not confined to the pinks in that hot little garden behind iron railings. It was much more

as if he were enabled to enter, by a lucky psychic sensitiveness, into some continuous stream of human awareness—awareness of a beauty in the world that travelled lightly from place to place, stopping here and stopping there, like a bird of passage, but never valued at its true worth until it had vanished away.

"There *must* be," he thought, "some deep race-memory in which these things are stored up, to be drawn upon by those who seek for them through the world—a memory that has the power of obliterating infinite débris, while it retains all these frail essences, these emanations from plants and trees, roadsides and gardens, as if such things actually possessed immortal souls!" He turned from the gate and pursued his road, swinging his stick from side to side like a madman, and repeating aloud, as he strode along, the words "immortal souls."

Certain human expressions, meaning one thing to the philosopher and quite another thing to the populace, were always fascinating to Wolf. His mind began to dwell now upon the actual syllables of this phrase, "immortal souls," until by a familiar transformation those formidable sounds took on a shadowy personality of their own—took on the shape, in fact, of Christie Malakite—and in that shape went wavering away over the fields like a thin spiral cloud! "These quaint words, used by the men of old time," he said to himself, "to describe what we all feel, have more in them than people have any idea of. I must tell Christie that!" And then it occurred to him how impossible it would be to explain to any living intelligence the faltering thoughts that had

ended by his invocation of the "soul" of a tiny London garden and his embodying it in the wraith of the daughter of Mr. Malakite!

It still kept hovering in front of his mind, however —this phrase, "immortal souls"—even after it had slipped like a boat from its moorings. There seemed a noble and defiant challenge in it to all that petered out, to all that flagged, that wilted, that scattered, that became nothing, in the melancholy drift of the world!

With the cool airs of that summer evening wafted about him, he felt, as he passed now under the vast shadow of the Abbey church, that there were immense resources of renewal, of restoration, spread abroad over the face of the earth, such as had hardly been drawn upon at all by the sons and daughters of men. "Why is it," he thought, "that this particular expression, 'immortal souls,' should act upon my mind in this way?" And as he moved slowly along now between the sculptured entrance to the School-House and the little low-roofed shop where the straw-hatted boys of the School bought their confectionery, it occurred to him as curiously significant that the syllable "God," so talismanic to most people, had never, from his childhood, possessed the faintest magic for him! "It must be," he thought, as, passing under a carved archway, he came bolt upon the old monastic conduit, "that anything suggestive of metaphysical unity is distasteful to me. It must be that my world is essentially a manifold world, and my religion, if I have any, essentially polytheistic! And yet, in matters of good and evil"—and he recalled his sensations at Lenty Pond—"I'm what they'd call a dualist, I suppose.

Ay! It's funny. Directly one comes to putting feelings into words, one is compelled to accept hopeless contradictions in the very depths of one's being!"

He moved right in, under the carved roof of the old conduit, between the Late Gothic pillars, and laid his hand on the edge of the water-trough. The traffic of the high-street passed him by, and groups of tall straw-hatted schoolboys brushed past him, cold, remote, haughty, discreet, like young Romans in some Ionian market-place.

A barrel-organ was being played where the pavement widened, under the out-jutting gables of a mediæval hostelry; and Wolf couldn't help noticing how the abstracted, impassive expression of the old man who played it contrasted with a couple of ragged little children, glowing-cheeked and intent, who danced to its jigging tune.

"Polytheism . . . dualism," he repeated, trying to retain the philosophical distinctions which he felt crumbling to bits and drifting away. But as he fumbled with his fingers at that conduit-trough and turned automatically a leaden faucet so that water gushed out over his hand, his mind seemed to reject every single one of those traditional human catchwords.

"I just told him it was all bloody rot!" The words fell upon his ears from the lips of a pale-faced, quiet lad, who, with an arm round the neck of another, swung past Wolf's retreat; and they served to give his thoughts an edge.

"All bloody rot!" he mumbled, turning off the water and throwing a nervous glance round him, lest his pro-

ceedings should have attracted attention. "But there's more in all this, all the same, than any of these words implies. That's the whole thing. Not less, but more! More; though more of *what*, I don't suppose I shall ever discover! But more of something."

And as he left the conduit and made his way up the street, he had the feeling that his real self was engaged in an exciting maze of transactions, completely different from those which just now occupied his senses and his will.

He found the Smith ménage, when Mattie's little maid, smiling and radiant at the presence of so much drama, admitted him after a long wait upon the doorstep, burdened by the presence of two portly and extremely loquacious undertakers. Contrary to custom, but due to the nature of his illness and the heat of the weather, it had become advisable to place the Hatter of Ramsgard in his elm-wood coffin without further delay.

Mattie had brought Olwen down into the dining-room, so as to remove her from the sound of the hammering; but the child was nervous and preoccupied, and it was with but a languid interest that she busied herself with the black ribbons of Gipsy and Antoinette, laid side by side on the great mahogany table, with the cushion from Mr. Smith's chair under their waxen heads. Even Wolf's arrival did not really distract her; and he would have given much to know what the thoughts actually were that gave to her little oval face that sombre pallor and frowning intensity.

Mattie herself seemed strangely lethargic as she drew

up one of the straight-backed leather-covered chairs and sat down by his side; and Wolf found it difficult, as they both stared at the unsympathetic silver on the sideboard, to broach the subject of her future, with which his mind was so full.

"Knock . . . knock . . . knock," went the hammer in the room above, accompanied by the low-toned rumble of conversation from the two intruders.

"Death is a queer thing," thought Wolf, while the weary indifference of Mr. Smith's white face dominated the slow passing of the minutes. "Would anyone know by that sound," he thought, "that those were coffin-nails? There'll be another sound when they put him into the hole," so his mind ran on; "there'll be that peculiar sound of loose, dry mould flung on the top of a wooden lid. All the world over, those same two sounds. Well, not quite *all* the world over. But how many times had Mr. Smith heard that hammering and that rattle of earth-mould? Did he sit in this very place when they were nailing Lorna in? I must break this uncomfortable silence," he thought. "There! *That* must have been the last! But what the devil are they doing now? This silence is worse than the hammering. Are they having a drink?"

There was a sharp ring at the doorbell; and the three strained faces in that dusky dining-room glanced anxiously at one another, while the patter of the maid's feet on the tiled floor responded to this new sound.

A minute later and they all rose hurriedly, while to their complete surprise Mrs. Otter and Darnley were

ushered into the room. The little lady seemed perturbed and embarrassed at the presence of Wolf, but Darnley gave him a quick reassuring nod.

"I heard by chance," began Mrs. Otter rapidly. "We were so sorry for you. I wanted to come. My son was very good. He got me a carriage. I hope you don't mind my coming."

"I am sure it's very nice of you, Mrs. Otter," murmured Mattie. "Sit down, won't you? Sit down, please, Mr. Otter. Thank you, Wolf. No, that's been broken for years." Wolf made a fumbling attempt to replace the piece of carved mahogany that had come off in his hand. This mechanical preoccupation enabled him to notice in silence the manner in which Darnley and Mattie had begun to stare at each other.

"What I had in my mind, in coming to you, my poor child," he heard Mrs. Otter say, "was to ask a great and really rather a difficult favour. What I came to say was this . . . oh, I don't know whether I ought to worry you now about it! . . . but my son . . . I mean Jason . . . told me I might do just as I liked. . . . My house is my own, you know!" This last rather unexpected phrase was uttered with such a winning and whimsical smile that Wolf looked hastily at Mattie, very anxious that she should say nothing to hurt this visitor's feelings. He was surprised to observe that Mattie had only in the vaguest manner caught the drift of this speech.

"Yes, Mrs. Otter, you've always been most kind to me," was all she said in reply.

"My son left everything completely in my hands.

Didn't he, Darnley?" Mrs. Otter went on. There was a perplexed frown on her face now; and she made a feeble little movement of one of her hands towards Darnley, as if appealing to him for help.

"Didn't he, Darnley?" she repeated.

But Darnley also seemed to have lost the drift of her remarks.

"You were quite right, Mother," he replied at random. "You're awfully wise when things are getting serious. . . . She's wonderful in a crisis." He addressed this last remark to no one in particular, and it did little to help forward the general air of cloudiness into which the conversation had fallen.

"She really is . . . wonderful in a crisis," he repeated absent-mindedly; and Wolf, as he looked at the lethargic silver on the sideboard, seemed to hear the voice of the cake-basket addressing the biscuit-bowl, "She's wonderful in a crisis," in the tone of an ancient play-goer commenting on an oft-repeated play.

"Mattie doesn't know what ever we shall do." The words came from Olwen, who now stood close to Wolf's chair; and the words served to bring matters to a head.

"That's just what I'm talking about," said Mrs. Otter, in such an eager tone that everyone turned towards her with full attention.

"What I came to ask you was this," she said firmly, addressing herself to Mattie. "Our Dimity is getting feeble and old, and I'm not as strong as I was. My son —Jason, I mean—is very particular. You know what he is, my dear? What a poet he is. Mr. Solent thinks he's a *great* poet, don't you, Mr. Solent? . . . Well, what I

came to say is this. It would be such a pleasure to us all, my dear"—here she laid her grey-gloved hand lightly on Mattie's wrist—"if you'd come and live with us and help me—you know?—help me with everything. Now don't shake your head like that! I know what you mean. Of course, this little one must come, too, and of course we've got to think of her lessons." The little lady drew a long breath, but hurried on before Mattie could utter a word. "It's her lessons I was thinking about. I'm very fond of teaching children, children that I *like*, I mean; and I've got *all* the fairy-stories. I've got the one they wouldn't let me even see the pictures of, when *I* was little."

Wolf had already screwed his head round so as to snatch a glimpse of Olwen's face, and he was surprised at the grave glow of unrestrained delight that was now slowly beginning to spread over it. But Mattie still shook her head.

"I couldn't," she murmured in a faint voice. "Though it's very, very kind of you, Mrs. Otter. But I could never think of such a thing. Olwen and I have been talking about it and we've made up our minds that I must go to work. Olwen says she'll be good when I leave her and not fret or be lonely."

At this moment there was a sound of heavy footsteps descending the stairs, accompanied by a few muffled remarks of a facetious kind. Mrs. Otter glanced at Wolf, who gave her a slight inclination of the head. She turned to Mattie hurriedly.

"Well, my dear," she said. "I don't want to rush you against your will into anything. Though I did set my

heart upon it and I've thought about it from every possible side."

Mattie's answer to this was to stretch forth her hand and press tightly the gloved fingers of the little old lady. But the look which she gave her showed no sign of yielding. It was very tender; but it was firm and resolute.

There was another pause then among them all; and once more Wolf was aware of a most vivid sense of Mr. Smith's white, set face, exhausted, detached, commenting with a kind of desolating equanimity upon the events that were taking place. Those ponderous silver pieces seemed to Wolf now, as he frowned upon them, to be gathering themselves together in that darkening room, to be shaping themselves with shadowy persistence into funereal ornaments heaped up beside the dead hatter.

One of the windows behind Wolf's head was open, and with the noises of the street there entered and circled round him a deliciously cool air, an air like that which he had been conscious of on his approach to Ramsgard, as he leaned over that gate. Once more the scent of pinks came quivering through his brain and he felt a shameless thrill of pleasure. This time, instead of the wraith of Christie Malakite, it was the body of the hatter that associated itself with that remembered scent—not any repulsive odour of mortality emerging from those nailed-up boards, but rather some spiritual essence from the presence of Death itself. And as he breathed this air, the voices of his companions became a vague humming in his ears, and all manner of queer detached memories floated in upon him. He felt himself to be walking alone

along some high white road bordered by waving grasses and patches of yellow rock-rose. There was a town far below him, at the bottom of a green valley—a mass of huddled grey roofs among meadows and streams—round which the twilight was darkening. Along with all this he was conscious of the taste of a peculiar kind of baker's bread, such as used to be sold at a shop in Dorchester, where, as a child, they would take him for tea during summer jaunts from Weymouth. The presence of Death seemed to re-create these things and to touch them with a peculiar intensity.

He was roused from his trance by the clear, shrill voice of Olwen arguing desperately with Mattie.

"I *want* to do what she says! Why *can't* we do what she says? I'll be bad if you don't let us! I won't go to sleep. I'll be far worse than Gipsy or Antoinette. I'll tear my hair out! I'll bite my hand!"

"Hush, Olwen!" he heard Mattie reply. "Mrs. Otter will be only too pleased I can't accept her offer if you talk like that."

The little girl gazed at her for a moment with a quaint, solemn scrutiny. Then she laughed, a merry reassured laugh, and, rushing to where Darnley was sitting, slid coaxingly upon his knee.

"You'll tell her what she must do when everyone's gone," she murmured softly; and then, with her eyes fixed upon his face, she stroked his beard with her small, nervous hand.

Mrs. Otter and Wolf smiled at each other; and there came into Wolf's mind those scenes in Homer where girlish suppliants, mortal as well as immortal, lay their

hands upon the chins of those they are cajoling!

"Would you tear *my* hair out as well as your own," enquired Darnley, "if she goes on refusing to let you live with us?" Wolf thought he had never seen Darnley's eyes look so deeply luminous as they did while he uttered those words.

Mattie still shook her head; but although there were tears on her cheek, the whole expression of her face was relaxed and at peace. Indeed, as Wolf kept surreptitiously glancing at her, he got the impression that the girl longed to rush away and burst into a flood of crying, but not into unhappy crying. The kindred blood in his veins made him clairvoyant; and he felt convinced that if the Otters refused to accept her rejection of their scheme, she would eventually be persuaded.

"Well, my dear child," he heard Mrs. Otter saying, "you must not answer us in a hurry like this. You see what friends Darnley and your little one have already become; and if only——"

She stopped suddenly; for there came a second ring at the street-door, followed by the same impetuous rush of the little maid across the hall. This time Wolf looked with dismay into his sister's face when he heard a well-known voice asking in a loud, firm tone for Miss Smith. They all got up when Miss Gault was shown into the room. Olwen hastily snatched her dolls from the table and carried them off to Mr. Smith's big leather chair by the fireplace; and Mrs. Otter, after a hurried bow to the new visitor, followed the child to that retreat and entered into a whispered conversation with her.

The presence of Wolf did not seem to be any surprise

to the formidable lady. She nodded at him familiarly, as she embraced Mattie; but her greeting to Darnley was stiff and formal. Darnley himself seemed quite unperturbed by this coldness. His strangely-coloured blue eyes remained fixed upon Mattie; and he stood with his back propped against a bookcase, toying with his watch-chain.

In the darkening twilight of the room—for no one had thought of asking for a lamp—the man's slim figure, as Wolf glanced sideways at him, had the appearance of some old Van Dyck portrait come to life in a Victorian house. Behind his back the great heavily-bound editions of those "Sundays at Home" and "Leisure Hours," whose illustrations must have solaced many a long evening in the far-off childhood of Albert Smith, gathered the summer darkness about them with that peculiar mystical solemnity which old books, like old trees and old hedges, display at the coming on of night. And Wolf, as he listened with amusement to the discourse of Selena Gault, became aware that, with one of her chance-flung felicities, Nature was arranging a singularly appropriate stage for what at any rate was an exciting encounter between Darnley Otter and Mattie Smith.

"Darnley *must* have often met Mattie before," thought Wolf. "But very likely never in her own house and probably never when they could really take in each other's personality. Besides . . . what do I know about them? All this may have begun years ago . . . before I came upon the scene at all. If so, what secretive demons they both have been!"

He turned once more to his sister. Oh, he couldn't be

mistaken! Why, the girl's heavy countenance, even in that gloom, had a look that he could only describe to himself as transfigured. "There's certainly something up, there," he thought. "Well! She'll be a little fool if she doesn't take the old lady's offer. I'd like to know, though, what Jason *did* say when this scheme was suggested!"

And then, seated a little back from Mattie and Miss Gault, and accepting a cigarette from Darnley, who now took a chair by his side, Wolf began to be conscious of the drift of the amazing discourse which the visitor was directing, like a cannonade of lumbering artillery, across the table into the ears of his sister. Selena's attire was in good taste enough—indeed, it was superlatively ladylike; but it was the "rich, not gaudy" attire of a person quite oblivious of contemporary fashion, and in some queer way it lent itself so well to the quality of that room, that it seemed to bring the furniture itself to life in support of everything she said.

The gathering darkness assisted at this strange play. It was as if all the ponderous objects in that room—including the silver, the chairs, the dark-green curtains, the grotesque portrait of Mr. Smith's father, the leather backs of the "Sundays at Home" and the "Leisure Hours," the leather back of a draught-board, with the words "History of the World" printed on it, the bronze horses on either side of the mantelpiece, the enormous empty coal-scuttle—combined together to give weight to the opinions of this aggressive woman, whose own childhood, like that of the silent person upstairs, they had ramparted with their massive solemnities!

And Wolf was astounded at the impertinence of what

Miss Gault did say. It was an impertinence covered up with bronze and brocade. But it was an indecent impertinence. It resembled the absurd drapery covering the symbolic figure of Mercy, or Truth, or Righteousness, which dominated the great dining-room clock that stood in the middle of the marble chimneypiece. "I confess I first thought," Miss Gault was now saying, "of having Olwen to live with Emma and me . . . but I couldn't have her teasing the cats . . . or pining for you . . . so this Home is better. I have made a lot of enquiries about this Home. I made them last year, for another purpose; and it's lucky I did, because people don't hear of these things when they really want them. The beautiful thing about it is that they accept mother *and* child . . . and of course Olwen *is* like your child now. Another great advantage about this plan is that Taunton is so near us all . . . only a couple of hours by train." She made a little nod in Wolf's direction. "Wolf would be able to run over and see you on Sundays," she added.

Her voice sank; but the darkened room was full of the echoes of it—the whispering of Mrs. Otter, who was evidently telling Olwen a story, being the only force that resisted it. And the dark-green curtains were delighted. "See you on Sundays . . . see you on Sundays," they repeated, while the draught-board "History of the World" echoed the word "Sundays," making it seem like the very voice of that charitable institution which accepted both mother *and* child.

"And the little sum required by the authorities," Miss Gault continued, "I shall be delighted to provide. I do, of course, recognize that it was against my advice that

you adopted Olwen. But the child's naturally fond of you now; and I think it would be wrong to separate her from you, as would have to be done if you got employment here . . . for the child couldn't be left alone all day . . . and no doubt everything here will be sold. Don't answer me just yet," the lady went on. "I want you, Wolf, too, to hear all I've got to say . . . for, of course . . . well! there's no need for me to enter into *that* . . . but what I thought I would ask you now, Mattie dear, is to tell me what particular things in this house you're especially fond of; and then . . . well! I hope I should be able to be present at the auction . . . so that whenever you *do* have a house of your own they'll be . . . well! they'll be, so to speak, still in the family." She turned more boldly towards Wolf at this point, as if to ensure his recognition of her old-fashioned tact. But Wolf's impulse at that moment resembled the impulse of King Claudius in the play. He felt a desire to cry out in thundering tones, "Lights! lights! lights!" So that it was still left to the draught-board and the bronze clock to appreciate such delicacy and to have the last word.

It was not Wolf, but Darnley, however, who broke the spell thrown upon them by Miss Gault. He walked rapidly over to his mother, whispered something in her ear, took her hand, and brought her to Mattie's side.

"You'll be a dear girl and do what *we* want you to do?" said the old lady clearly and firmly, taking no notice of Miss Gault.

Wolf thought he caught an appealing glance in his direction, though it was so dark now that his sister's face

was a mere blur of whiteness. But he rose hurriedly and came up to where they were all grouped. There was just a half-second's pause, which enabled him to catch an impress of the whole queer scene before he spoke, to catch the bewildered anger on Miss Gault's face, to observe that Olwen had possessed herself of Darnley's hand, to remark how Mrs. Otter was so nervous that the chair upon which she had laid her fingers tapped on the floor; and then he himself spoke out with all the weight he could muster.

"I'm sorry, Miss Gault, and I know Mattie's most grateful for your suggestion; but it had all been settled before you came in. They're going to stay for the present with our good friends here. They're going to do what *I* did when I first came to King's Barton. There'll be time enough later for other arrangements; but for the moment Mattie's going to accept Mrs. Otter's invitation, and Olwen too. As to the furniture here, we needn't decide about *that* in any hurry. It may be that Mattie would be happier to get completely rid of it. I know I should, in her case. But it's sweet of you to suggest buying back some of it. I'm sure Mattie appreciates that very much. But the chief point just now is what she and Olwen are going to do; and that has been quite decided—hasn't it, Mattie? They're going to that hospitable Pond Cottage, where I went for my first night in Dorset!"

Wolf's voice became more and more decisive as he brought his declaration to a close; but with an instinct for preventing any further protests from Mattie, he hurriedly rushed out into the hall and began calling for the little maid.

"Constantia!" he shouted. "Constantia! Please bring us the lamp!"

What occurred after his departure from that darkened dining-room he never knew. His words seemed to have had the effect of the letting off of a gun in a soundless wood. For from where he waited at the kitchen-door there came to him an incoherent murmur of many confused voices. When at last he returned with the lamp in his hand and placed it in the centre of the table, Olwen was crying in the leather armchair, where Mattie and Mrs. Otter were bending over her; while Miss Gault, standing erect in the centre of the room, was asking Darnley in a strained, husky voice whether it was true that they had recently discovered in the Abbey-church the actual bones of King Æthelwolf, the brother of Alfred.

"Good-bye, then. Good-bye, all of you! I mustn't be in the way any longer." With this, Miss Gault bowed to Darnley, nodded in the direction of the weeping child, and walked straight into the hall.

From Wolf she kept her eyes averted as she passed; but the expression of her face shocked him, and he followed her to the street-door. As he bent forward to turn the handle before she set her own hand upon it, he caught sight of that deformed lip of hers; and the look of it appalled him. To see such a thing as that was bad enough; but it became worse when the extraordinary visage, that now was face to face with him, contorted itself, there in the doorway before him, into a puckered mask of outrage. He felt a little ashamed of himself for the brutality of his observation at that mo-

ment; but he couldn't help noticing that Miss Gault made a much more childish contortion of her face when *she* collapsed than his adamantine mother had done that same afternoon! His mother had "lifted up her voice," as the Scripture says, "and wept"; but Wolf remembered well how, even when she was howling like a lioness with a spear in her side, her fine clear-cut features had retained their dignity. Big tears had fallen, but they had fallen like rain upon a tragic torso. Very different was it with Miss Gault at this moment! Three times she made an attempt to speak to him, and three times her face grew convulsed.

"Wait a minute!" he blurted out at last, and ran back into the dining-room. There he shouted a loud good-bye to them all. "See you tomorrow, Mattie dear!" he cried. "I leave you in good hands, Olwen. Good-night, Mrs. Otter!"

"I'll come back and have dinner with you, if I may," he said, as he caught up Miss Gault on the street-pavement. "Listen! What's that striking now?" He laid his hand on her arm and held her motionless. "Seven o'clock, ay? Well, you don't dine till eight; so do let's have a bit of a walk before going to your house."

"Let's go to the grave, boy," she whispered hoarsely. "We can talk there. My Emma won't mind, even if we *are* late. But how will you get back to Blacksod?" she added with concern.

"Oh, I'll take the ten-o'clock train," he said. "That'll mean that I shan't have any more walking and shan't keep Gerda up. It runs still at that time, doesn't it? Or have they changed it?"

But Miss Gault had already given to practical concerns all the energy she could spare just then.

"How lovely this place is at night!" she said, as they passed under the Abbey-wall. "I wonder if Mr. Otter is right and it is really the coffin of King Æthelwolf that they've found."

They reached the main entrance to the building, and to their surprise they found it open.

"Let's go in for a minute," said Wolf. His companion assented in silence and they entered together.

"I would have liked to have that child to live with me," murmured Miss Gault; "but it would have been cruel to the cats . . . she's grown so rough to them lately . . . and she's not always polite to Emma."

Wolf made no reply to this remark; and as they moved slowly up the central aisle, which was feebly illuminated from somewhere between the choir-stalls, he allowed his mind to wander away from Miss Gault and her thwarted philanthropies. The few lights that were burning hardly reached—and then only with a dim, diffused lustre, like the interior of a sand-blurred mother-of-pearl shell—the high fan-tracery of the roof. Wolf felt strongly upon him once again that feeling of mystic exultation which had been hovering over him all day; and when the presence of the light behind the choir was explained by a sudden burst of organ-notes, he felt such a thrill of happiness that it brought with it a reaction of sheer shame.

"Accident!" he muttered to himself. "Pure accident!" he repeated, as they crossed in front of the altar and made their way to the lady-chapel behind it. And he

even felt, as he fumbled about in the dim light, looking for some sign of the Saxon king's coffin, a sense of having feloniously stolen his ecstasy from some treasure-house of the human race! "Why should I," he thought, "be singled out by pure chance for this? That Waterloo-steps face—no King Æthelwolf for him, no fan-tracery, no scent of pinks—— Is my gratitude to the gods, then, a base and scurvy feeling?"

Even as this thought crossed his mind he stumbled against some sort of glass framework upon the southern floor of that lady-chapel.

"Here we are, Miss Gault!" he whispered excitedly. "Only, I suppose we shall get into trouble if that organist hears us. Look here, though, for God's sake! This is the king's coffin!"

He went down on his knees and pulled aside in the dim light a piece of carpet that had been carefully spread over the glass frame. The unwieldy form of his companion was promptly now at his side, kneeling too.

"Dare I strike a match, d'ye think?" he whispered.

"No, no, boy! You mustn't do that. Wolf, you mustn't, you really mustn't!" murmured the daughter of the Headmaster of Ramsgard School.

But he disregarded her protest, and, fumbling in his pocket, produced a match-box and struck a wax vesta.

The little yellow flame illuminated the glass-covered aperture in the floor and threw into such weird relief the lineaments of Miss Gault as to almost divest them of their humanity. Only a dim consciousness of this astounding countenance, so near his own, reached Wolf's mind just then. He was too excited. But afterwards, when

he recalled the whole incident, it came back distinctly upon him as one of those glimpses into something abominable, ghastly, in Nature's pranks, such as a person were wise to make note of, with the rest, as he went through the world! Here, in the mere possibility of such a vision—for, to say the truth, Miss Gault's face by that match-flare was rendered nothing less than *bestial*—was an experience to be set against those chance-heard organ-notes that had mounted up so triumphantly among the torn battle-flags.

Holding the match aloft with his hand, he bent down until his face actually touched the glass. *Nothing.* Certain interesting chromatic effects . . . certain flickers and blotches of colour that was no colour, of sparkles that were opaque, of outlines that were no outlines . . . and then the match burnt his hand and went out. Hurriedly he lit another and held it up, his burnt hand smarting. Down went his face till his hooked nose was pressed against the glass. Sparkles, black, wavering spots, fluctuating blotches of reddish-yellow, little orbs of blackness, rimmed with lunar rings; and then again darkness! *Nothing!* Angrily he scrambled to his feet, and with childish petulance thrust his smarting fingers into his mouth.

"The bones are there!" he whispered huskily. "The bones are there! Æthelwolf himself! But it's no use. We must come again by daylight. It's one of those things that are so damnably annoying. Quick! . . . while the organ's still playing! I know what these people are . . . so touchy about their treasures. Let's get out of here!"

He hurried his companion down the great silent nave

and out of the open doorway. He felt much more vexed and perturbed than the occasion warranted. The meaningless sparkles from that tricky coffin-lid danced like imps across the back of his eye-sockets.

"I suppose it's too late to go over there now?" he said, turning to her with his hat in one hand and his stick in the other, and a wavering helplessness emanating from his whole figure.

"Not at all, boy—not at all!" pronounced Miss Gault. "Emma must keep supper waiting for us for once. You'll have time for a bite anyway before you catch that train. Come along! You don't know how fast I can walk."

Wolf put on his hat and strode by her side in silence. The air began to smell of rain by the time they reached the slaughter-house. There was a figure with a lantern moving about in the yard of the shed; and Miss Gault dragged heavily on his arm as they went past, struggling with the rising wind.

"You'll get no meat with me, boy," she whispered. "No meat—no meat. It's the only way to help them. But I'd go and be hanged to help 'em . . . hanged by the neck"—the wind caught her voice and rendered it scarcely audible—"by the neck, boy!"

Wolf pondered to himself upon the contradictory nature of this woman. She would go to the death to put an end to slaughter-houses; and yet she would pack off Mattie and Olwen to God knows what kind of an institution for paupers!

He felt a secret desire to punish her for this inconsistency, and he suddenly said: "It's really amazingly

good of the Otters to take in our friends. To find such a generous heart in a nervous old lady like that makes you think better of the whole human race!"

A portion of the impulse that led him to this speech as they passed the slaughter-house was doubtless a throb of his own conscience over this matter of eating meat. The sight of that man with a lantern, like some ghoulish wanderer in a place of execution, impressed itself by no means pleasantly on his mind; and it was the electric vibration of this discomfort that gave his voice, as he uttered these words, a certain quivering pitch of unnecessary emphasis.

The malice in his tone communicated itself like a magnetic current to his companion, and she took her hand from his arm.

"The child has wheedled herself round Darnley. That's all it is. The mother is willing enough, because she sees what a good unpaid servant Mattie will make. I won't talk about it any more, and I didn't mean to refer to it; but I think you're simply mad to let her accept such a humiliating position. But there it is! The girl can't have much pride, or nothing you said or they said could have made her accept such charity!"

His remark having brought about this outburst, he was able to exclaim in his heart, "You rude, ill-bred old woman! You rude, ill-bred old woman!" and, having done this, he felt quite friendly toward her again and quite appeased.

He pretended to be sulking, however, for the whole time they remained in the cemetery; though in reality

he was thinking to himself, "What a spirited thing it was, after all, to stick by my father like that, when he was a complete social outcast!"

They walked home in even deeper silence and at a rapid pace. It was twenty-five minutes to ten when they reached Aldhelm Street, only to find Emma in such an agitated temper that Selena had to go herself into the kitchen and bring out to him in the sitting-room a plate of curried eggs and a decanter of sherry.

He sat on her sofa and swallowed this hot dish with hungry relish, eating it in unceremonious fashion with a spoon, and tossing off so many glasses of wine that Selena glanced at him rather nervously as she herself nibbled a biscuit.

"Emma does cook well!" he said at last, as he rose to go. "It's all right, Miss Gault, dear. You needn't look so anxious. I've got a head of iron." And immediately, as if to prove he had such a head, he felt it to be incumbent upon him to say something affectionate and tender. "I believe," he burst out, "I must have just the same sort of feeling for you that *he* had!"

These were his parting words; but it was not until he was sitting in a third-class smoking-carriage of the South-Western train that he began to wonder why it was that Miss Gault's face had such a wry smile upon it as he shook hands with her at her door.

He was alone in the carriage, and, windy though it was, he kept the window open and sat facing the engine. The rush of air sobered him, and he observed with interest the scattered lights of King's Barton as the train jolted along its high embankment between that village and the

Evershott meadows. He wondered humorously to himself what Jason would say that evening when he learnt of the new invasion of his privacy.

His mood saddened before the train stopped at Blacksod.

"If I knew I were only going to live five more years," he thought, "I would give away four of them if I were allowed to spend the other one, day and night, with Christie!" And then, as the cold wind made him shiver a little and turn up his coat-collar, "I wonder," he thought, "whether I'm just weak and cowardly in not leaving them all and carrying Christie off to London, let happen what may?"

The train was now following an umbrageous embankment parallel with the river Lunt. The muddy smell of that sluggish water, which the Ramsgard boys irreverently named "the Bog-stream," assailed his nostrils, bringing with it a feeling of obscure misery. A chilliness in his bones, a weariness in his brain, gave now to all the events of the day a sombre colour, like the colour of river-mud.

As the locomotive slowly lessened its speed, he tried in vain to recall those moments of happiness . . . the vision of the bed of pinks . . . the sweet emanation from the very body of death. But in place of these things all he could think of was obdurate roots in clinging clay, sparkles and blotches that bore no human meaning, hammering of nails into coffins, men with lanterns in slaughter-house yards, and the pallid loins of Bob Weevil streaked with the green slime of Lenty Pond.

AUGUST WAS DRAWING TO ITS END, AND, WITH AUGUST, the holidays of the Blacksod Grammar School. The young aristocrats of Ramsgard had several weeks more before *their* new term began, but the humbler pupils whom it was Wolf's destiny to teach were now on the eve of their return to work.

Anxious to make the utmost of these precious mornings of leisure, now so soon to be snatched from him, Wolf had lately got into the habit of persuading Gerda to start out with him, for some sort of rural expedition, directly the breakfast-things had been washed up.

They had explored the country in this way in almost every direction; but he found that the easiest thing to do was to have some sort of picnic-lunch in the direction of King's Barton, so that when they separated he could reach his afternoon's work at the manor without arriving too tired or too late.

Three days before the Grammar School was to reopen he had cajoled Gerda into accompanying him to Poll's Camp. They had brought their provisions in a basket and had made their meal in unusual contentment under the shelter of a group of small sycamores that grew on the western slope of the camp, overlooking the great Somersetshire plain.

Gerda was now fast asleep. Stretched out upon her back, she lay as motionless as the shadows about her, one arm curved beneath her fair head and the other

flung upon a bed of moss. Wolf sat with his arms hugging his knees, and his back against a sycamore-trunk.

The weather had been good for the wheat that Summer, and not too scorching to the grass; so that what he looked at now, as he let his eyes wander over that great level expanse towards Glastonbury, was a vast chessboard of small green fields, surrounded by pollarded elms of a yet darker colour, and interspersed by squares of yellow stubble.

The earthworks of Poll's Camp were not as deeply dug or as loftily raised as many Roman-British ramparts in that portion of the West Country. They were less of a landmark than Cadbury Camp, for instance, away to the northwest. They were less imposing than Maiden Castle, away to the south. But such as they were, Wolf knew that the mysterious movements of King Arthur . . . *rex quondam rex-que futurus* . . . had more than once crossed and recrossed, in local legend, this promontory of grassy ridges.

The day was warm; but the fact that the sky was covered with a filmy veil of grey clouds gave to the vast plain before him the appearance of a landscape whose dominant characteristic consisted in a patient effacement of all emphatic or outstanding qualities. The green of the meadows was a shy, watery green. The verdure of the elm-trees was a sombre, blackish monotony. The yellow of the stubble-land was a whitish yellow, pallid and lustreless.

He glanced at the sleeping figure of his companion, and it seemed to him that the milk-white delicacy of Gerda's face, as she lay there, had never been touched

by a more tender bloom than it wore today, under this vaporous, windless sky.

Her breathing was so light as to be almost imperceptible, her lips were just parted in a confiding abandonment to a happy sleep; while the rounded whiteness of the bare arm she had flung out upon the moss had that youthful charm of unconscious trust in the kindness of man and nature, which, whenever he noted it, always struck him as one of the most touching of a young girl's qualities.

And it was borne in upon him how terrible the responsibility was when a man had once undertaken to "make," as the phrase runs, one of these fragile beings "happy." It came upon him, as he watched Gerda asleep, that a girl is much more committed to what is called "happiness" than a man is.

Or is it, he thought, that a man can create happiness by sheer obstinate force out of the machinery of his own mind, while a girl is dependent upon all manner of subtle external forces emanating from nature and returning to nature?

Certainly at this moment Gerda seemed to have most deliciously abandoned herself to the power of the grass, the grey sky, the warm, windless air.

A sad, helpless craving possessed him as he turned from the girl and once more surveyed that undemonstrative, unobtrusive distance. He felt as though he longed to fly across it in some impossible non-human shape—fly across it not with any actual living companion, but with some shadowy essence, light as that dandelion-seed, which at this moment he saw rising high

above him and floating away westward—with some shadowy essence that at the same time was and was not Christie Malakite—some essence that was what Christie was to her own inmost self, the bodiless, formless identity in that slim frame, that in confronting infinite space could only utter the mysterious words, "I am I," and utter nothing else.

If only he could do this now, by some occult manipulation of the laws of nature! Gerda's sleep was deep and sound. To her at this moment Time was nothing. How mad it was that he couldn't plunge with Christie, with the inmost soul of Christie, into some region outside these things, where a moment was like a whole year of mortal life!

The vast expanse he looked at, had about it, under this grey sky, something wistful and withdrawn. It resembled those patient, melancholy fields, neither happy nor unhappy, where Dante met the souls of the great intellects in Limbo. With his eyes fixed upon its patient-coloured horizons, it did not seem so crazy a notion that he and Christie might meet and escape, lost, merged, diffused into all this!

And then he turned his gaze upon the beautiful girl lying there outstretched beside him, happy in her timeless dream-world, trusting him, trusting nature, half-smiling in her sleep.

Looking at her lying there, he thought what an appalling risk these lovers of "happiness" take, when they burn their ships and trust their lives to the caprice of men.

As he contemplated the loveliness of her figure, it

struck him as infinitely pathetic that even beauty such as hers should be so dependent on the sexual humours of this man or that man for its adequate appreciation.

Beauty like that, he thought, as he looked at her, ought to endow its possessor with super-human happiness, as in the old legends, when the immortal gods made love to the daughters of men. There was a cruel irony in the fact that he of all men had been singled out to possess this beauty—he whose heart of hearts had been given to a different being!

And as he pondered on all this it struck him as strange that such rare loveliness should not protect her, like silver armour, against the shocks and outrages of life. Beauty as unusual as this was a high gift, like a poet's genius, and ought to have the power of protecting a girl's heart from the cruel inconstancies of love.

"I suppose it is true," he thought, "that when they have been a man's bedfellow, even for a few months, some peculiar link establishes itself which it is as difficult to break as if one tore a grafted sapling from the branch of a tree. I suppose," so his thoughts drifted on, "that my love is really more important, in this blind primordial way, to Gerda—just because we have now slept together for three months—than it could ever be to Christie, though *she* lives inside my very soul! I suppose it's the old fatality of flesh to flesh, of blind matter, proving itself, after all, the strongest thing on earth."

And then, before he had the least notion that his thoughts would drift in such a direction, he found himself engaged in a passionate dispute with his father. It was as if the dispute were actually going on down at the

bottom of that grave; and though he still found himself calling William Solent "Old Truepenny," he felt as if he had become a lean worm down there, in the darkness of that hollow skull, arguing with it, arguing with what remained still conscious and critical, although lost "in the pit."

"This world is not made of bread and honey," cried Wolf, the worm, to the skull of his father, "nor of the sweet flesh of girls. This world is made of clouds and of the shadows of clouds. It is made of mental landscapes, porous as air, where men and women are as trees walking, and as reeds shaken by the wind."

But the skull answered him in haste and spoke roughly to him. "What you have found out today, worm of my folly, I had outgrown when I was in the Sixth at Ramsgard and was seduced by Western Minor in the Headmaster's garden. To turn the world again into mist and vapour is easy and weak. To keep it alive, to keep it real, to hold it at arm's length, is the way of gods and demons."

And Wolf, hearing this, lifted up his worm's-voice within that mocker and cried out upon its lewd clay-cold cunning.

"There is no reality but what the mind fashions out of itself. There is nothing but a mirror opposite a mirror, and a round crystal opposite a round crystal, and a sky in water opposite water in a sky."

"Ho! Ho! You worm of my folly," laughed the hollow skull. "I am alive still, though I am dead; and you are dead, though you're alive. For life is beyond your mirrors and your waters. It's at the bottom of your pond; it's

in the body of your sun; it's in the dust of your star-spaces; it's in the eyes of weasels and the noses of rats and the pricks of nettles and the tongues of vipers and the spawn of frogs and the slime of snails. Life's in *me* still, you worm of my folly, and girls' flesh is sweet for ever and ever; and honey is sticky and tears are salt and yellow-hammers' eggs have mischievous crooked scrawls!"

Wolf saw himself rising erect upon his tail as he heard these words.

"You lie to yourself, Truepenny! You lie with the old, hot, shuffling, fever-smitten lie. It's the foam-bubbles of your life-mania that you think so real. They're no more real than the dreams of the plantains that grow over your grave!"

A movement of Gerda, though she still remained asleep, broke up the current of his fancies, and he pulled out his watch.

Damn! It was time for him to start now, if he was to reach Mr. Urquhart's house at the accustomed hour.

"I won't have tea with *him*," he thought. "I'll have tea at the Otters'. Then I'll find out if Mattie and Olwen are still all right there."

He rose to his feet. From the hushed indrawn beauty of the hour he gathered up new strength for the burden of human fate he seemed destined to carry.

Fragment by fragment he collected what was over from their lunch and put it back in Gerda's basket, prodding into the soft earth of a mole-hill, with the end of his stick, the bits of paper in which those things had been tied up.

Then, stretching out his arms and seizing with each hand a branch of a young sycamore, he swung these two pliant limbs backwards and forwards, while his gaze concentrated itself upon the girl at his feet.

But as he did this the transparency ebbed away from the vision of his days, and a fantastic doubt assailed him. Was Gerda's sleep so deep and happy because of some occult affinity between her nerves and this historic hill?

As if to give substance to his fancy, the girl rolled over languidly at that moment and lay prone, burying both her outstretched hands in the soft moss. A deep, shuddering sigh passed through her; and her body visibly quivered under her thin dress.

Was there some strange non-human eroticism, he wondered, in this contact between the heathen soil and that sleeping figure? He smiled to himself and then frowned uneasily. He began to feel obscurely piqued by the girl's remoteness and inaccessibility. He felt as if he were actually looking on at some legendary encounter between the body of Gerda and the crafty super-human desire of some earth-god. He began to feel an insidious jealousy of Poll's Camp, an obstinate hostility to its mossy curves and grassy hollows.

"Very well!" he thought, in his fantastic irritation, as if he actually beheld his companion in the very arms of the hill-god. "If she draws away from me, I can draw away from her!" And his eyes, wandering to the roofs of the town, settled on that quarter where he knew the roof of the book-shop to be. He tightened his hold upon the two saplings; and inhaling deeply that hushed, warm air, he mentally swept off the roof of Christie's house,

and lifting the wraith-image of her high into the clouds —he never visualized Christie's actual appearance in any of these cerebral excursions—he whirled her away with him towards that lonely cone-shaped hill, rising out of the plain, that he knew to be Glastonbury.

It was a queer dalliance of the mind that he indulged in just then; for he felt that this airy wraith, that was Christie Malakite, was in some way the child of that mystical plain down there, that "chess-board of King Arthur"; whereas the girl at his feet was in league with whatever more remote and more heathen powers had dominated this embattled hill. King Arthur's strangely involved personality, with the great Merlin at his side, was associated with both. But Christie's "Arthur" belonged to Glastonbury; Gerda's, to a far earlier time.

Wolf's mind now began analyzing in a more rational manner this difference between the hill he stood upon and the landscape stretched out before him. "It must be," he thought, "that this mass of earth is a far older portion of the planet's surface than the plain beneath it. Even if its magnetism is purely chemical and free from anything that reverts to the old religions, it may very well exercise a definite effect upon human nerves! The plain must, within measurable years, have been covered by the sea. Where those elm-trees now grow there must have been shells and sand and swaying seaweeds and great sea-sponges and voyaging shoals of fish. And this recent emerging from the ocean cannot but have given a certain chastened quality, like the quality of old mediæval pictures, to these 'chess-board fields.'"

He stared, frowning intently, at the curves and hollows of Poll's Camp.

"How many men," he wondered, "since the black cormorants and foolish guillemots screamed around these escarpments, have stood still, as I am doing now, and wrestled with the secret of this promontory?" Did any of the serfs of Arthur, or of Merlin the magician, lean here upon their spades and let their souls sink down and down, into motions of primal matter older than any gods? Did any of the Roman legionaries, stark and stoical, making of this hill "a sacred place" for some strange new cult of Mithras, forget both Mithras and Apollo under this terrestrial magnetism—this power that already was spreading abroad its influence long before Saturn was born of Uranus?

"Poll's Camp is heathen through and through," he thought; "and even if the old gods never existed, there's a power here that in some queer way . . . perhaps just chemically . . . is at once bewildering and hostile to me. But the valley . . . this unobtrusive, chastened valley . . . like some immense sad-coloured flower floating upon hidden water . . . oh, it is the thing I love best of all!"

He released the two pliable sycamore-branches and let his hands sink down; while the thick, cool leaves of the young trees, so resilient and sturdy on their smooth purplish stalks, flapped against his forehead.

"The spirit of this hill escapes me," he thought. "I have an inkling that it is even now watching me with definite malignity. But I can't understand the nature of

what it threatens. There are powers here . . . powers . . . though, by God! they may be only chemical. But what is chemical? . . ."

He turned his eyes almost petulantly to the south-western limits of the valley, to where Leo's Hill and Nevilton Hill broke the level expanse.

"Those hills are not like this one," he thought; "and as for Glastonbury, it's like the pollen-bearing pistil of the whole lotus-vale! But this place . . . on my soul, it has something about it that makes me think of Mr. Urquhart. It's watching me. And I believe at this moment it is making love to Gerda!"

He sighed and picked up his hat and oak-stick.

"I must wake Gerda and be off," he said to himself. "I shall be late as it is."