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COLLECTED
STORIES
OF
T. O. BEACHCROFT



London
JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

A YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

First published 1934

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YOU MUST BREAK OUT SOMETIMES

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T. O. BEACHCROFT

A Glass of Stout

ELSIE had plenty of time to kill, so she took her glass of stout very slowly ; then she carefully gathered up all the toys and other awkward, untidy parcels, and went out into the crowd again.

Every few minutes a motor bus went crashing by, a great burst of light and noise ; and the street lamps danced on the wet pavements as if they had all been polished.

The lights were certainly very confusing. The shops were sparkling with their Christmas decorations ; every window was packed from top to bottom with bright objects, toys, boxes, sweets, glittering silver balls, strings of tinsel, garlands of coloured paper running in every direction. Electric light bulbs sprang up in the most unexpected places, behind cut glasses, in the midst of red and green tissue. Mirrors flashed back the lights and the toys, from above, from below, from either side, till she could hardly tell which were real things, and which the dancing, shimmering reflections.

Elsie, drifting vaguely along in the thronged pavements, was pushed smiling from this side to that. She knew her hair was falling abroad and would soon be right down : the big man with the rough frieze coat who had pressed against her had pulled her hat all aside. She paused for a moment, smiling and smiling, in front of a shop window, and saw a plump, untidy, red-faced little woman covered with parcels smiling back at her. For a second she never knew it was herself : then she tried to put her hand up to

make her hat a bit straight, and push a few ends in, but she was carrying far too many things, and she giggled aloud.

The shop she was staring into was a Woolworth's : just one more toy each, she thought, and she must be getting back.

'I'll take this little omnibus,' she said to the girl at the toy counter. 'My little boy'll like that ever so much,' she explained, 'because his daddy drives a General.'

'Reelly,' said the girl with polite indifference, her precise Cockney contrasting with Elsie's slower country voice. 'It's just the thing, then.'

'Yes,' said Elsie, 'you ought to see my Charlie when he opens that : and I'll have this rattle for my baby, please—they're pretty, aren't they? She's nearly ten months now.'

As she began to make a slow progress through the packed crowds to the door, another man was pressed against her : he slipped his hand inside her arm and pressed it as if he knew her. Elsie looked round and he stared hard into her bright black eyes and smiling, untidy face. Then he quickly withdrew into the crowd and stood quite still watching her as she pushed her way along.

She never blamed herself for having that glass of stout. Yet fancy a respectable married woman with two children, going off on her own like this, and popping in and out of pubs. It really made her laugh. There was still an hour before they'd be back from their aunt's. She hadn't felt so free for years now. It was like being quite young again, a girl of eighteen or nineteen. But she didn't want to think of that ; she'd got over all that now.

It was going to be the nicest Christmas she'd ever known : no more struggling and worrying. How much better in the long run to be settled, to have chosen a fine steady man like her Reg who stuck to things, and had got himself

a good job. Young girls of eighteen are silly : they don't know what really counts in life. And yet why did God make them so that they wanted things so much ?

When she went out into the street again, the man who had caught her arm came a few yards behind and followed her, taking care to keep out of her sight when she stopped to look at a window, but watching her with great attention. His movements were quick and light.

He was a dark fellow of about thirty—not large, but with a lithe and conscious swagger in his poise, which showed off his figure. He was dressed in a smart blue serge suit, and round his neck was a bright handkerchief, tied choker-wise with a knot on one side. A very light grey cap was pulled sideways on his head.

Elsie turned into a quiet side-street and walked hesitatingly along. She paused, then retraced her steps in an uncertain way. On the other side of the road, he followed, keeping well in the shadow, pausing when she paused. He walked with his hands thrust tightly into his two jacket pockets, pulling the coat across his buttocks. In the quiet street his footfall made no sound : he was wearing rubber-soled canvas shoes, which made him soft-footed as an otter.

Elsie paused against a dirty grey doorway from which the paint had peeled. A street lamp cast on its flecked surface white light and violet shadows. She was fumbling with her parcels, to get her hand free : now, he saw, she was looking in her purse and taking out a coin. Then she crossed the road and went into the public house opposite.

He smiled and nodded to himself : then lit a Woodbine. In five minutes he flicked the glowing stub away, and with a sudden swaggering gesture as if an admiring friend was watching, he thrust his hands into his jacket pockets again, and sidled through the swing doors.

Elsie stood at the bar with her stout before her, gazing reflectively into the mirror against which the shelves of

bottles stood, watching herself sip. There was nothing wrong surely in taking a couple of glasses of stout on Christmas Eve. Besides she deserved it after all the hard work she'd had, and the babies and the way she'd buckled to and kept at it in the last few years. It was lovely to stand there and feel so tired and so happy : the last few years seemed rather unreal now—as if she were watching herself and her life from the outside. Then safety wrapped her round like a cloak inside which her body throbbed with warmth and comfort. She watched herself raise the glass to her lips. It was funny that this should be Elsie she was watching and thinking of, Elsie the child, Elsie the silly girl, Elsie the wife and mother.

She gazed at herself smiling back from the dark mirror ; then she stopped suddenly with the glass half-way to her lips. She had seen a face in the glass behind her. It had given her quite a fright. Then she looked again and it was real—the old smile, the old dark eyes and brown skin. And as she stared a voice that she could have told anywhere said very clear and quietly :

‘ So it's Elsie.’

She turned round and instantly his hands were on her shoulders, and his eyes staring into hers, then going over her face again and again. She could not speak or find a word to say, only her heart beat and beat ; there was a throbbing in her head and all round her, so that she could not remember where she was, and everything was confused.

‘ I should have known you in ten thousand,’ he said. The words filled her with indescribable gladness.

‘ Oh,’ she whispered. ‘ It's you.’

He looked at her and smiled, his hands still on her shoulders, standing just as they used to stand.

‘ So you waited for me ?’

His voice brought back a tumult of far-off unhappy things. She saw him standing in the shimmering heat of

a July day, with the dappled shade of boughs on his face and white arms, while the silent woods rang with the cries of the water fowl in the reeds. She saw his face white in the darkness of a summer night close to hers.

‘Waited,’ she said, ‘of course I waited. Didn’t I say I’d wait? Of course I waited.’

She looked at him and her eyes filled with tears.

‘Is it really you?’ she said.

‘You bet your sweet life it is,’ he said with an easy laugh.

‘Doesn’t it look like me?’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘it looks too like you. Phil, I do love you so: I’ve been so unhappy.’

‘Not too unhappy,’ he said, smiling. ‘Here, come along and sit down.’

He took her arm and they sat at a quiet table in the corner of the bar. He looked at her and all the time his old smile flickered at the corners of his mouth.

‘Elsie,’ he said, ‘you’re a good, sweet girl: you’re the right sort. Here, let me get you a drink: what’s that you’ve got, draught stout?’

‘No—I won’t have another. Oh, fancy seeing you again. I’ve thought and thought about you.’

‘Go on,’ he said, ‘you’ve thought about plenty of chaps besides me. Look, here’s your drink: don’t tell me you can’t drink two glasses of stout: you’re not so innocent now. Let’s see you drink it—cheero.’

‘I oughtn’t . . .’ she said, but soon began.

Phil stared her up and down as she drank.

‘Plump as a partridge, aren’t you?’

Elsie put down her glass with a giggle.

‘You still say the same things.’

‘Do I?’ he said, and under the table he put his hand on her knee.

‘You mustn’t,’ she said, ‘they’ll see.’

‘Go on,’ he whispered, ‘let them stop me.’

'You don't get no better, Phil. Don't. I want to talk to you.'

He looked straight into her eyes and she felt her heart beat high. It brought everything back so close.

'You feel the same about me?' he said after many seconds.

'Why ask?' she said. 'I'm no better, Phil.'

He suddenly took his hand away and laughed.

'That suits me,' he said. He rose and swaggering over to the bar hitched his trousers and sprawled across it.

'Come out of dreamland, miss,' he said to the barmaid, 'and give us another couple of these.'

He winked at Elsie, and brought back her glass filled again. She took it almost mechanically. She had had enough now to go on wanting more.

'What's been happening to you?' she said. 'Where have you been?'

'All over the map—and you?'

'Just here, in London; all the time. Eight years, isn't it? Only it seems like yesterday. What happened to you, Phil, when you left the village? I was so unhappy, Phil. I knew you'd never stolen those things—I stuck up for you right and left against them all—nasty becalling crowd, always ready to talk ill. I wouldn't let none of them say you'd been a thief.'

Phil looked at her closely and smiled.

'What made you so cocksure of it?' he said.

'Because I didn't care if you were, Phil. What's the harm in taking a few little things that no one would ever miss—and anyhow you were worth all the men there put together. You were the only one as was alive; there was more spunk and go in you, Phil, than all the lot—snivelling little prick-me-daintics. Most of 'em weren't men there at all, I believe.'

She was talking so excitedly that she never felt him put

his arm round her shoulders and was taken by surprise when he suddenly pulled her face to his and kissed her full on the mouth. He looked at her and laughed again.

‘Pretty hot stuff, aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’m a human being. But go on, tell me what’s happened to you. Have you got plenty of money? Where have you been?’

‘I’ve got on all right,’ said Phil. ‘I always do—when a lot of fools don’t get in my way. I’ve been on a boat.’

‘On a boat? Where to?’

‘America.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Oh, there’s a helluva lot to do in America, if you got any guts.’

‘What then?’

‘Oh, I got on another boat then—but I didn’t like that much—too much like being a coal miner if you ask me. I didn’t like it. So I jumped off one night in the dark and swam to a little island.’

‘Phil, you might have been drowned.’

‘Not me, Else—we were lying at anchor, only a few hundred yards. That was a good life, Else—you’d have liked it, and I thought of you: sunshine all day and no one to worry you. There were a few other white men there and I got on all right. Blasted good life.’

He paused and lit another Woodbine, stretching out his legs stiffly and blowing out the smoke in a great luxurious cloud.

‘And the girls,’ he said, looking mischievously at Elsie. ‘That’s the only place ever yours truly had more than enough of a good thing.’

‘Phil!’ said Elsie, ‘you don’t mean to say you went along with black women!’

‘What’s wrong? We all did. Besides they weren’t black, Else; coffee blancmange, I should say: all soft.’

Elsie laughed in spite of herself.

'Phil,' she said, 'you're a bad naughty boy. I wonder I talk to you.'

'You talk because we ain't alone,' he said, looking boldly at her, and she blushed.

'Phil,' she said after a pause, 'am I bad?'

'Aaow,' he said, with a sort of soft snarl, 'don't start on that old tack. What's bad? Don't you like me?'

She nodded.

'Well, then . . .' His voice trailed away.

'Here, Elsie,' he said, after a pause, 'what do you think I'm doing now, making six or seven pounds a week.'

'No, really—are you really?'

'Jonnock,' said Phil, and looked at her with an amused smile. Elsie waited for him to go, but he only looked at her and went on smiling.

'How?' she asked at length.

'Selling things: I'm in trade. That's the way to make money.'

'Do you mean you've got a shop?'

'No; but I've got a pitch.'

'A pitch?'

'Up at the Caledonian Market.'

'Oh, yes: I've heard of that. What do you sell?'

'Anything I can get so cheap people can't help buying it.'

'But what things? How do you get things so cheap?'

'Oh, the boys see to that.'

'What boys, Phil?'

He leant forward and began to explain; keeping his eyes fixed on Elsie's and talking in a low voice, in short sentences: never altering his pitch nor taking his eyes from her face. His quiet voice seemed to go on for a very long time, and Elsie found she was not following what he was saying.

As she listened the room seemed to waver and go immensely far away. It didn't look real : only Phil's face close to her own, and his teeth when he laughed and his bright yellow and red handkerchief looked clear and more real than natural.

Then suddenly he stopped talking and stood up. 'See the idea?' he said. He pulled his cap down on his head with a flick.

'When we go away from here,' he said, jerking his head as if to point out the direction, 'you coming back with me?'

'Aren't I?' said Elsie.

'That'll suit me.'

'I sometimes feel there's nothing else real in the world but you.'

He smiled and touched her cheek gently.

'Let's move. Got all your parcels? Like a Christmas tree in skirts, aren't you? What are all these things?'

'They're nothing,' said Elsie. 'Just some silly things I got for my sister. I've a good mind to leave them.'

'Don't be silly, Else. They cost something.'

'Well, I'll give this one to that girl behind the bar : it's only a toy and she might know of some kid.'

Elsie handed over one of her parcels and they went out into the darkness. Phil thrust his hands in his jacket pockets again : he made no effort to carry a thing for Elsie. He strode along beside her with his cautious animal softness, scrutinizing everything all round him.

Elsie was in a dream, her head swimming. She knew she had had too much to drink, but nothing mattered now, and Phil thought none the worse of her for that. He asked her no questions ; it was his habit to take things and people as they came. They went a long way through quiet empty streets, past hoardings, warehouses, waste ground—quite

silent and deserted so late in the evening. Elsie lost all sense of direction.

'Come on, Else,' said Phil, 'don't get behind. We're nearly there.'

'I've dropped a parcel,' said Elsie.

'Here,' said Phil, 'give it me.'

He picked it up and took off the wrapping.

'Why,' he said, 'it's a kid's motor, toy omnibus. What are all those parcels? Can't you leave 'em somewhere? What's this motor for?'

'Why,' said Elsie, 'I mustn't lose that: that's for my little Charlie—he'll be ever so pleased to see that—'

'Your Charlie?' said Phil. 'What do you—mean?'

'My little boy—I was taking all these toys home for him and the baby.'

'You got two kids?'

'Yes—three years old, and ten months.'

'What the sweet hell——' began Phil, and stopped. 'Here,' he said, 'take that glove off.' He snatched her hand.

'Oh, you're hurting.'

'Hurting—you bitch: you ought to be killed. Look at that—married woman!'

Elsie began to cry.

'You damned little fool,' said Phil with cold fury, 'what are you playing at? Stop that snivelling. So this is what you call waiting for me, is it? And I said you were the right sort!'

'I meant to wait. I waited really, Phil. I never loved him. I've never told him a word about you. I only loved you. Phil, don't be angry. I never went with any other man, Phil. I had to marry, Phil. You never wrote me even.'

'What the hell do I care if you've been with a hundred other men?' said Phil. 'You could still come with me if

you weren't married. Why did you say you'd waited? I thought you were a tart out on the loose or something.'

Elsie made a desperate effort to stop crying.

'Don't, Phil,' she said. 'When I saw you I seemed to lose everything. I don't want my other life. I want to come with you. Here, see—I mean it.'

She began throwing all her children's parcels in the road. Phil watched her, folding his arms with perfect calm and leaning with his back against a battered hoarding, his face tight-lipped and rigid.

'And throw yourself after them, now,' he said. 'I don't want you.'

She took his arm and began to pull at it, breaking out with another burst of tears.

'Phil,' she said, 'I want to come with you. Don't you want me? Phil, you said you wanted me. Oh, don't be so hurt. Don't you see, Phil, I've been waiting for you all the time?'

He jerked her off.

'A nice damn fool I should look,' he said, 'poking my nose in along with a married woman and two kids. Think I'm a damn fool? I don't mess about with married women; see that? Clear off home—I don't want you.'

'But, Phil. . . .' She seized his arm again, but this time he suddenly moved and deftly catching her by the wrists forced her hands away. Sobbing out loud she tried to reach him, to pierce through his terrible quiet coldness. He must be only acting: he loved her really.

'Here, stop it,' he said. Very coolly he raised his hand and gave her a swinging blow on the cheek, with his open hand. He held her by the wrist and struck her face three times.

Elsie felt the blood start up inside her cheeks. Another stunning blow landed and another so that she reeled and

almost fell. She put her hands up to her head—the lights and the pavement swinging round her dizzily.

‘Now will you believe me?’ Phil’s voice said in her ear. ‘Next time I shan’t even see you.’

Her head swam and her eyes were blind with tears : when she came to herself he was gone.

She ran, crying out, ‘Phil, Phil, wait for me, Phil,’ and weeping as she ran. But there was no sign of him, and the street was empty. She ran and walked, weeping and talking to herself and to Phil, imploring him to come back to her. Perhaps through here, she thought, he’s only hiding. She turned through a gap in the broken hoardings and struck across the waste refuse ground. She went across the broken, pitted ground, stumbling at every stride, falling on her knees in the dark. She toiled up heaps of ash and refuse, piled as high as cottages above her head, her hands grasping at the ashes and thin blades of scranell grass. Surely that was Phil in the darkness moving in front of her : no, there was nothing : nothing at all. Only old wheels long rusted and half buried, broken crockery shining in the darkness, discarded magazines and papers which caught at her legs—dead thoughts, forgotten hopes, things longed for and never given. Her tears gushed up again in new springs of despair ; tears she had shed so many years before. Now she sank down and put her head on her arms ; now she hurried on hoping again she would find him.

She wandered at last out of the vacant lot into the street again : then on and on through a maze of quiet deserted roads, where she had never been : tall warehouses loomed up on either side of her, casting pitch black shadows. The lamps bracketed on their sides were very far between. Between the circles of light they shed on the road all was darkness. The whole place was deserted. Only once she passed a lurking couple, motionless like statues, whose eyes followed her as she went by.

After she stopped weeping it became a dull pain inside her, and her head throbbing and burning. Her eyes felt hot, and her face stiff as a mask. She began to pass people again, and found herself among lights and traffic.

She wandered aimlessly. Where could she go? Phil was lost now. He had turned his back on her. She had given up everything for him. The thoughts repeated themselves heavily, muffled like a drugged pain. She could never go home after her wickedness. She had thrown her children's toys in the street. Thrown her home away. She saw her husband standing stock still in the kitchen at ten, at eleven, at twelve o'clock, wondering why she didn't come: but if he knew what she had done, he would turn her away. She moaned as she walked, frightened at her own wickedness, doubting what had happened.

'Oh, Phil,' she whispered, 'help me now.' She saw him with his shirt open, the dappled shade across him, the green boughs and blue July air tremulous with heat all round him. But the image of Phil changed: it stood in a dark street against a hoarding, tight-lipped, fixing her with narrowed eyes, and beat her away. 'Throw yourself after them,' it said, 'I don't want you. I don't want you.'

As the words sank in the secret centre and core of her body was frozen with horror. She stood transfixed, then ran forward as an omnibus roared towards her and flung herself on the road in front of it.

Every passenger on the omnibus, almost, saw a woman pitch forward from the kerb. There followed a moment of agonizing doubt, when only the driver's skill and steadiness could save her life. Instead of braking, he accelerated and wrenched his vehicle round: the front wheel and mud-guard brushed her face, the safety rails between the wheels caught and flung her sideways. Then with a shudder and a grind the bus stopped.

The driver leapt from his seat and was the first to reach

Elsie as she lay huddled on the road. He knelt quickly and began to raise her head and shoulders.

Then suddenly he picked her up in his arms and was pushing through the crowd.

'It's my own wife,' he said, 'this is my own wife. Let me pass.'

He carried her into a shop and laid her down on a coat which someone threw on the floor. Water was brought and dashed in her face. He could say nothing.

A stranger touched him on the shoulder.

'You saved her life,' he said. 'Not many men could have got by her like that.'

In several minutes she began to move and came to : then she recognized him and smiled.

'I'm not hurt,' she said. 'The lights dazzle my eyes ; make these people go away, Reg.'

An hour afterwards she was sitting at her own kitchen table with her husband standing beside her. She sat quite still with her head resting on her arm, staring in front of her. She still seemed dazed, he thought.

He was a quiet man with an untidy awkward body, much taller than Phil but with no fire in his movements.

'Oh, Elsie,' he kept saying, 'it's wonderful to see you there. Elsie, I love you so much. It's so wonderful to have you safe.'

'It was only your wonderful driving and steadiness saved me,' she said in a dull voice. 'Everyone said it was that.'

'I can't make out how you came to fall like that,' he said, for the sixth or seventh time. 'Can't you remember what happened ?'

She shook her head, picked at the tablecloth with her fingers.

'If I tell you—will you think I'm terribly wicked ?' she said at length.

'Wicked ? As if I should go thinking you wicked.'

'You haven't heard,' she said. 'I am wicked.'

'I fell,' Elsie said very slowly and painfully, 'because I'd been drinking—and I'd—I'd had a glass of stout—and I lost all the toys I'd bought. . . .' She broke off and fell silent.

'Elsie,' he said, 'you silly thing. I thought you were going to say something terrible. You're all upset. I should like to see anyone who thought you were wicked.'

He gently raised her from the table and put his arms round her. At first she resisted, pressing him away with her hands on his chest and turning her head right away. Gradually he felt her body relax and he drew her closer and pressed his lips gently against her forehead. Then he found she was crying, the tears running very quickly and quietly down her face.

He was much too tall to hold her comfortably, and his movements were stiff and clumsy in pressing her soft body against his. He found that by straining round and stretching out his arm carefully he could just reach the light switch and turn it out.

They stood for a very long time in the firelight. He said nothing and never moved, thinking it would be good for her nerves to hold her quietly. Gradually her tears stopped. She gave one or two sighs: her body seemed to grow limper and he realized she was almost falling asleep in his arms, her muscles becoming relaxed and easy, her forehead gleaming pale and calm as the firelight flickered on it.

The Half-Mile

SATURDAY noon. The town hall clock boomed the hour in the distance. All over the town, hooters called to each other from street to street. From the gates of twenty different potteries men, women, boys and girls streamed. Ones and twos grew to a steady flow, then died away again to ones and twos.

Andrew Williamson, a dipper at the Royal Chorley, was stopped at the gate by old Jones the doorkeeper.

'So long, Andrew,' he said, 'good luck for the half-mile.'

Andrew glanced at him, and looked away self-consciously.

'How did you know I was running?'

'Oh, I takes an interest,' said Joe, 'used to run a half-mile myself.'

'Go on?' said Andrew. 'I never knew.'

'I was good for one-fifty-eight,' said the old man.

'That was good going in those days.'

'Go on?' said Andrew again, 'but that's class running. That's a class half-mile.'

'Oh, I dunno, plenty on 'em do it now!'

'Well, I wish I could. That's my ambition: to get inside two minutes. I've never beaten two-four yet!'

'Well, this is just the day for it,' the veteran told him. 'You have a nice trot round first: get some good summer air into your lungs: you'll win.'

'But I've never run in a class race,' Andrew persisted.

'I've only done Club races. I can't hope for more'n a place; look who's running.'

'Who?' said Jones.

'Well, there's six of us in the final. Let's see: Joe Brewster, the cross-country man; he can run a four-thirty mile, and now he wants to try the half.'

'Well, he'll never do two minutes,' said Jones, 'take it from me.'

'Then there's Perry, him as ran at the 'Three Clubs' meet at Derby last week. He did two-four then.'

'Well, who else?'

'There's that Redbrooke, the Cambridge Blue. I ain't got an earthly.'

'He's a fine runner,' said Jones, 'but d'you think he's trained in May? Not likely; it'll be his first time out—trial spin like. Are you trained?'

'Pretty good,' said Andrew, 'been at it evenings all the month. Had a good race a week ago.'

'Take it from me,' Jones told him slowly, 'stick to Redbrooke. He'll come up at the end of the first quarter. You watch 'im. Don't mind what the others do. And don't run on the outside round bends.'

'Well, I know enough for that,' said Andrew.

'Ah, you know, you know,' said Jones. 'Well, good luck, lad.'

Andrew turned back again as he was going. 'If I could ever best two minutes,' he said, a little self-consciously, 'it'd mean—oh, well, a hellöva lot.'

Andrew left him and went alone into the square garden to eat his sandwiches. It was a bright early summer day, yet now he was alone he felt chilly with nerves. He had a forty minutes' bus ride to the ground, and he meant to get there early. The half-mile was timed for three.

What chance had he got? He had won his heat in two-six the evening before, but that meant nothing. Joe

Brewster was behind him, but he'd only paced it out, he knew. Perry and Redbrooke had tied the other heat in two-five. There was nothing to go by. Dreadful if he found himself outclassed and run off his legs. He had never been up against a class man before—a fellow like Redbrooke.

Once in the bus he tried his best not to think of the race. No good getting too much of a needle. Yet it was a big chance.

Why, if he did well, if he was placed in the race to-day, his name would be in the *Sentinel*. The old 'uns would like to see that, too. If he could beat two minutes—well, he would some day, before he died. That would be doing something really big. It would give him confidence. It would make him stronger altogether.

The bus jogged along with such pleasant fancies. Andrew reached the ground, bag in hand, at half-past one. It gave him a queer feeling to see 'Sixpence Entrance' on the gates, and 'This stand a shilling,' and the like. It made him feel very responsible that people should pay to come to the sport he was providing.

He was practically the firstcomer in the changing-room. He changed slowly, putting his clothes on a bench in the corner. He put on his spiked shoes with elaborate care and went out on to the track. It was three laps to the mile instead of the four he was used to. Pity: every strangeness was a little disturbing in a race. There were not four corners either, but two long straights with a long semi-circular sweep at each end.

Andrew found the half-mile start, and took his bearings. He trotted round half a lap, took one or two sprints, then some breathing exercises. He paced up the back-straight. That was where he must come up to the front. He determined to make a real sprinting start, and get an inside berth at all costs. No need for old Jones to tell him not to run

on the outside round bends. It was past two by now. One or two people were coming into the stands, the first event being at 2.30. When he got back to the changing-room he found it full of a noisy jostling crowd. He felt rather strange and out of it. If only he could get it over. Three-quarters of an hour to wait still. On a table a naked body was being massaged. Andrew waited his turn for a rub. This seemed really professional.

'Your turn, sir,' said the rubber.

Andrew stripped off his vest.

'Might as well take your bags off, too.'

He divested himself a bit shyly, and lay face downwards on the table.

'Front side first, old man,' said the rubber.

It seemed a bit indecent, but Andrew turned over.

The man pummelled his stomach, then his back, then his buttocks, his thighs and his calves, rubbing in a strong smelling oil that gingered up his skin and made his nerves tingle. Good.

He saw Brewster and Perry talking and made a remark to them about the half-mile, but they did not seem to remember who he was. He found himself a seat alone. If only he could get it over.

A red-faced man thrust the door open.

'All out for the hundred,' he shouted.

'Know who that is?' someone said. 'That's Major Cunliffe—the old international.'

The hundred-yards men trooped out. There were four or five heats in the hundred. Andrew watched out of the changing-room window, but he couldn't concentrate and took no stock of what happened. He was acutely miserable.

At last the hundred yards was finished. A minute or so dragged by. Andrew stood up and sat down again and fastened his shoes for the fifth time. Then the door burst open and Major Cunliffe looked in again.

‘All out for the half-mile!’

At the same time he heard a bell ringing outside. It sounded fateful. *It meant next event due.* All over the ground people were turning over their programmes and reading the names. As the clangour died away Andrew felt something approaching terror. He sprang to his feet and crossed towards the door.

Now a new awkwardness arose. Why did none of the other half-milers move? He waited for a moment for them to join him, but each man of them seemed to have found some last-minute adjustment to a shoe or bandage.

‘Well,’ said Brewster, ‘I suppose we’d better be moving.’

‘Wait a bit, Joe,’ said Perry, ‘I must get my ankle strap on.’

Andrew hovered miserably in the doorway of the changing-room. Why couldn’t they buck up and get it over? If only he could get it over. At last, finding it ridiculous to hold the door open any longer, he went through it and waited outside in the concrete passage. He certainly could not walk on to the track without the others, nor could he go back into the changing-room. He leant against the wall trying to think of nothing.

What could the others be doing? ‘Oh, come on,’ he murmured, ‘come on!’ Next time he would know better than to get up before the other men in his race were on the move.

The sunlight end of the passage was suddenly eclipsed and the Major brushed by him.

‘Where are those half-milers?’ he said genially to Andrew.

‘I think——’ began Andrew, but found an answer was not expected.

The Major opened the door, and Andrew caught a glimpse of the bunch of them standing and talking as if the race meant nothing.

‘Everyone out for the half-mile—come on, *please*,’ said the Major.

This time they came, and with beating heart Andrew joined them.

‘Well, Brewster,’ said the Major, ‘what are you going to show us to-day?’

‘Don’t expect you’ll notice me,’ said Brewster, ‘after the gun’s gone. I shall try and stick to young Redbrooke for the first six hundred, anyhow. I only want to see what I can do!’

It sounded splendidly casual, but Andrew had a strong feeling that what Brewster meant was: ‘I rather fancy myself as a class half-miler, so just watch me. I believe I can beat Redbrooke. I’m not troubling about the rest, anyhow.’

Andrew stepped gingerly along the track. He felt rather better at being in the open air. Then he glanced behind him at the grandstand. He received a shock. It was full—full of banks of people looking at him, waiting to see him run.

With eyes fixed on the ground, he left the track and began to walk across the grass towards the start. The half-mile, being a lap and a half, led off at the farthest point from the grandstand. The half-lap brought it round to the stand just at the stage where the race was getting into its stride, when everybody was beginning to feel the collar and those who meant business were jostling for places in front. The remaining complete lap brought the finish round to the grandstand again.

Andrew’s path took him into the middle of the ground; here the crowd was less imminent. The summer was still new enough to greet the senses with surprise. He stepped lightly on the elastic turf. The grass breathed out delicious freshness. For years afterwards that fragrance was to set Andrew’s nerves tingling with the apprehension of this moment.

The lively air fanned his head and throat. It played about his bare legs.

Andrew saw the other half-milers were trotting round the track. Occasionally one would shoot forward in a muscle-stretching burst. Andrew tried a high-stepping trot across the grass to flex his own legs, but was too self-conscious to keep it up.

He reached the starting point first. Another agonizing wait followed. The others were still capering round the path. Would he never get it over? Surely the tension of nerves must rack the strength from his limbs? At last the starter approached.

'Jolly day for a trial spin,' he told Andrew. 'Makes me feel an old fool to be out of it. I envy you boys.'

Andrew felt too miserable to answer. He nodded.

'If you want a place,' said the starter, 'take my advice and watch Redbrooke. He'll probably try to take Brewster off his legs early—he knows he can't sprint, you see.'

Andrew nodded again. Of course it was a foregone conclusion that only Redbrooke and Brewster were in the race. No one had a thought for him.

The others began to arrive. Andrew stripped off his sweater. Again he was premature. The others waited. All were silent now.

Redbrooke was strolling across the ground with one of the officials. He looked up and broke into a brisk trot.

The air still freshened Andrew's face. Across the ground he could hear the murmur of the crowd. A paper-boy was shouting.

Still none of the runners spoke. In silence, one by one, they took off blazers and sweaters. The well-known colours of Brewster's club appeared—a red and black band round the chest. Redbrooke cantered up unconcerned.

'Sorry,' he said, and emerged from his blazer in Achilles

Club colours. Andrew glanced at his plain white things, longer and tighter than Redbrooke's.

The runners eyed each other as they took their places on the track. Redbrooke was a shade taller than Andrew and perfectly formed. His corn-coloured hair was a dishevelled crop, paler in hue than the tan of his face. His limbs flashed with youth and strength. His poise was quick as flame.

No wonder he can run, thought Andrew. He must win.

'I shall say on your marks—set—and then fire.'

At last, thought Andrew. His heart was beating in his throat now.

A second toiled by.

Andrew dropped to his knee for a sprinting start.

'Set!'

His knee quivered up from the track. It was toes and knuckles now, a balance quivering with tautness.

CRASH.

Scurry. Shoulders jostling. Mind out.

Andrew shot clear, going at top speed. He swung into the inside place. So far, so good. He'd got his inside place, and the lead too. Was he to make the running? He settled down into a stride, fast but easy.

He breathed calmly through his nose. Although the race had started, he still felt very nervous—an exhilarating nervousness now. He saw each blade of grass where cut turf edge met track. A groundsman set down a whitewash pail.

Andrew realized he was cutting out too fast a pace. He swung into a slower stride. So far all had gone according to plan, and he began to take courage.

As they approached the pavilion for the first time and the second long corner of the race, he found Perry was creeping up on his outside. Andrew was surprised and a

little worried. In all the half-miles he had run before the pace he had set would have assured him the lead. He decided to make no effort, and Perry passed stride by stride and dropped into the lead. Andrew continued at his own pace, and a gap of a yard or two opened.

As they came on to the bend there was a sudden sputter of feet and Andrew found that Brewster had filled the gap. Others were coming up, and he realized that the whole field was moving faster than he was. He quickened up slightly and swung out tentatively to pass Brewster again. Before he could pass the corner was reached. He at least knew better than to run on the outside round the curve ; so he slackened again to pull back into the inside. But in the very thought of doing so, the runner behind closed smoothly and swiftly up to Brewster, and Andrew saw that Redbrooke had got his inside berth. Andrew had to take the curve on the outside. 'Blinking fool,' he told himself.

Old Jones and one or two other experienced runners in the crowd caught each other's eyes for a moment ; the rest of the audience had no notion of the little display of bad technique that Andrew had given.

So they went round the long curve. Perry in the lead and still pressing the pace ; Brewster second, with no very clear notion of what the pace ought to be, and determined not to lose Perry ; Redbrooke keeping wisely within striking distance and Andrew bunched uncomfortably on the outside of Redbrooke with two others.

By the time they came out of the long bend and completed the first half of the race, Andrew was thoroughly rattled. Never had he felt such a strain at this stage of a half-mile. Already it was difficult to get enough air ; he was no longer breathing evenly through his nose. Already a numbing weakness was creeping down the front of his thighs. Hopeless now to think of gaining ground. With relief he found he was able to drop into the inside again

behind Redbrooke. They had been running now for about one minute—it seemed an age. Could he possibly stick to it for another period, as long again? The long stretch of straight in front of him, the long sweep of curve at the end of the ground that only brought you at the beginning of the finishing straight. Then the sprint. Already he felt he could not find an ounce of sprint.

Pace by pace he stuck to it, watching Redbrooke's feet.

But even now he must quicken up if he was to hold Redbrooke. At each step Redbrooke's back was leaving him. He struggled to lengthen, but it was useless. Redbrooke was moving up to the front. Now he was equal with Brewster; now with Perry; now he was in the lead. How easy Redbrooke's move down the back-straight looked from the grandstand. 'Pretty running,' people told each other. 'Just the place to come up.' 'Nicely judged.' 'See how he worked himself through from the last corner.'

And this was the very place at which Andrew had meant to move up himself. He remembered nothing of his plans now. It was impossible to increase his effort. One of the men behind came smoothly by and dropped into the gap that Redbrooke had left in front of him. The sixth man came up on his outside. There was a kind of emptiness at his back. He was running equal last.

Now they came to the final curve before the finishing straight. His legs seemed powerless. He grunted for breath. The weakness in his thighs had grown to a cramping pain. And all the time with full despair he saw Redbrooke going up, now five yards clear, now eight. Perry had dropped back to third, and Brewster was chasing Redbrooke.

Dark waves of pain swept over Andrew. Hopeless. Hopeless.

Still he must keep running with control. He must force

his legs to a smooth long stride. This was the worst part of any race.

'Come on,' he told himself, 'another fifty yards—guts, man—guts.'

Had only Andrew known what the others were feeling, he would have taken courage. The whole pace of the first quarter, thanks to Andrew's own excitement, had been faster than anyone cared for. Redbrooke, untrained as he was, had found himself badly winded at the quarter-mile mark. He, too, doubted whether he would have any punch left at the finish. He determined, therefore, to make a surprise effort early when he still had a powerful sprint in him. As soon as they came into the curve, he stepped on the gas as hard as he could, three hundred yards from home, and steamed away. He jumped a lead of five, eight, ten yards before Perry or Brewster realized what was happening. It was a thing the crowd could follow better than the men in the race.

Now as they came into the straight, Andrew thought Redbrooke was gathering himself for a final dash. Far from it; he was hanging on for grim death. His sparkling effort had died right away. His stride was nerveless. The sprinting muscles in his thighs had lost every ounce of their power. He was struggling and asking himself at every stride: 'Can I, can I, can I—surely those steps are drawing nearer—can I last it?'

Perry was desperately run out. Brewster had already been chasing Redbrooke hard for the last thirty yards, but could not find any pace at all.

Andrew alone of the field had he known it had been nursing his remnant of strength round that gruelling bend. Only forty yards to go now and he could throw all he had into a last desperate effort. Keep it up just a moment more. Thirty yards to the straight now—twenty—suddenly his control was shattered. He was fighting in a

mindless fury of effort for every ounce of strength in him.

In ten yards he saw his whole fortune in the race change. He *had* got a sprint, then ! The man on his outside vanished. He raced round the outside of the fellow in front hand over fist as he came into the straight. In another few yards he had the faltering Perry taped.

He had already run into third place. New strength surged through his limbs. 'Come on, come on : up, you can catch Brewster. Level. Feel him struggling. He can't hold you. Got him !'

Far, far off, a distant frenzied pain, somewhere ; someone else's pain. Miles away a face on the side of the track.

Second now. Second, and he could catch Redbrooke. But could he catch him in time ? They were past the start of the hundred yards now : a bare hundred to go. Could he ? Could he ? The first brilliance of his sprint had gone. He was fighting again in an agonizing weakness that dragged his legs back. But he was doing it, foot by foot. Fists clenched, to force speed-spent muscles.

Split seconds dragged strange length out. The straight went on and on. Five yards behind, now four, now three.

Redbrooke heard him, then felt him : two yards behind, now at his shoulder. He racked himself for a new effort. Together they swept past the hundred-yards finish, ten yards from the half-mile tape, with the dull roar of the crowd in their ears. Redbrooke saw he was beaten, but stuck to it till the last foot.

Then Andrew led.

A splendour of gladness as he watched the stretch of white wool break on his own chest.

'You've done it, you've done it !' Incredible, precious moment.

Then he dropped half-unconscious on the track.

A Wet Saturday Night

MRS. PLOWMAN stepped heavily off the bus, forged up the road against the rain, and hurried in at her own gate. This, with its familiar moan, welcomed and announced her arrival.

‘Home at last,’ she repeated to herself. ‘Home at last. Now just to get me wet things off and to sit before the hot fire with a nice cup of tea.’

Her latchkey stuck for a moment in the keyhole before turning. She was trying to work it with her left hand, as her right arm was holding two bulky paper parcels ; an old pair of slippers for dad, that her lady had given her, and one or two bits of old dresses for herself or the girls. Probably the girls would have them.

As she stood in the rain struggling with the key, it came over her suddenly that she was very tired—just about used up. It was after nine now, and she’d been on the go every minute of the time since 7.15 in the morning. Yes, mother was first out in the morning, and last back at night for the most of it. It was heavy work doing two places, and popping back in the middle of the day to get her old man’s midday meal. Saturday night, and two late dinners she’d cooked and served before getting home to her own fire and supper.

‘Drat the thing,’ she said, as the key still stuck. ‘What’s come to it?’ She was beginning to feel that she was a bit wet and clammy, also that the time was drawing near when she would have to go a bit more easy. The day would

come when those extra half-crowns and five shillings, that meant such a lot, would have to go.

At last the key turned, and Mrs. Plowman plunged thankfully into the passage. In another moment she was in her hot, crowded kitchen. She began to talk at once, even as she hung her wet coat and hat on the back of the door.

'Now, you girls,' she said, 'which of you's goin' to make room for your ma? Come on now. Is Bessie in?'

'Been in ten minutes,' said Bessie.

'And not one of you great girls 'as the sense to hang up your things to dry! Well, I never saw such a family.' She made despairing clucks with her teeth, smiling at the same time, as if their shortcomings were a standing joke.

'I've brought some things in here,' she said, putting the parcels on the table. 'Not so fast now—*that's* a pair of slippers for yer dad's tootsies. No more pattering round the tiles in your socks, Dad,' she said.

Dad, grey-haired and shirt-sleeved, who had not moved up till now, stirred in his armchair and looked up from the book that he had been reading now for the last six months. He read very slowly and with some difficulty, but that enabled him to think all the more. It was a life of Wesley.

She flung the slippers at his feet. Without speaking he put them on and nodded approval. He stretched his legs towards the fire. A dustman gets a good many perquisites, but seldom anything so useful as a good pair of leather slippers just his right size.

The three girls, all in the 'teens, moved aside to let their mother draw a chair near the fire, but it was Lily, the youngest, who said: 'I'll get your tea. What'll you have?'

'Just the tea,' said Mrs. Plowman.

She sat with her knees apart, her hands folded in her lap. Her damp hair straggled down her back. She belonged to that generation which seems to have solved worse than any

other women in history the problem of doing their hair. Like others of her years she had a perfect touch for a good blowsy effect.

She looked thoughtfully around at her daughters, and had a vague feeling that someone was missing. It made the house very crowded to have three grown girls living at home. There was a bed in the front room at this moment and that was a thing that Mrs. Plowman strongly disliked. Yet she never even thought of the time when these three should go, and leave dad and her room to turn round in, with just a lodger or two. Mrs. Plowman liked a crowd. She expected the family to gather round her, and if they sat down less than sixteen or eighteen to Christmas dinner, with half of them sleeping the night on chairs and sofas, and two or three in every bed, she found the proceedings dismal.

Rose was running quickly through the parcel of women's clothes that Mrs. Plowman had brought.

'Oooo !' she exclaimed, pulling out a faded silk under-slip and draping it over her front. 'I'll 'ave this one.'

'You put that down,' said her mother. 'I'm goin' to wear that.'

The girls all giggled.

'You think too much of finery,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'Whatever does a young girl like you want with a silk shimeasy? You're getting to think yourself too classical.'

Mrs. Plowman felt a little uneasy about Rose. Bessie was a good, unselfish, steady girl—but that temper of hers ! Well, perhaps it was true, that came from her mother ; but she'd have to learn sense sooner or later. And Lily, the kid of fourteen, she'd grow up to be the best of them yet, thought Mrs. Plowman. She's the one that has the thought to look after her ma.

Then there was poor Flo, one of the married ones, at home now as well. One more or less didn't make much difference, and as long as Flo's Sid chose to behave like that

it was far better she should be at home for a few days. And where was Flo at present? She'd felt there was someone missing.

Flo's got some pluck, too, thought Mrs. Plowman. Often enough she'd see her smiling and laughing away, and then she'd catch a look, *just a look*, but she would see the girl was suffering.

But where *was* Flo? Generally she liked to be with them. Besides, where else could she be? Suddenly Mrs. Plowman felt a little uneasy.

'Where's Flo?' she said.

'Dunno, I'm sure,' said Rose.

'Don't care, either, I suppose,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'Where's Flo, Bessie?'

'Haven't seen her for hours,' said Bessie. 'I was wondering.'

'Wondering, indeed!'

'She went out,' said Lily.

'Went out! On a night like this? When? What time?'

'About six,' said Lily.

'You're a nice lot!' said Mrs. Plowman. 'Not one of you 'ad the sense to tell me she was trapesing about in the rain on a night like this. Where's she gone to?'

'I believe she's gone round to see Sid,' said Lily.

'Sid's a rotter,' said Bessie. 'I'd like to get my 'ands on 'im.'

'I 'ope it's all right,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'Why couldn't one of you take the trouble to find out? Sometimes I think you've no sense at all. I've a good mind to run round to Sid's.' Mrs. Plowman put her half-finished cup of tea down regretfully. It was a bit hard, she felt, when she'd been on the go all day, she couldn't even have a cup of tea in peace.

'You can't go out,' said Bessie. 'The rain's orful.'

'I wish I knew she was all right. You don't seem to realize what she's 'ad to go through.'

'Oh, it's all *right*,' said Bessie. 'Don't get so upset.'

Yet she had upset them all. For they knew their mother was not one to raise foolish scares. If she doubted whether it was all right, then there was reason to doubt.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Plowman again picked up her cup of tea.

'Half-past nine !' she said. 'She ought to be in by now. She ought to be in.'

They sat for a moment.

'What's that ?' said Mrs. Plowman. 'A car ? It's stopped here.'

There was a loud knock on the door.

'No ! You stay here,' Mrs. Plowman shouted, 'I'll go.'

She flung the front door open to the rain and was confronted by a couple of constables.

'What is it ?' she said. 'Come in, won't you ?'

'Are you Mrs. Plowman, ma'am ?'

'Yes, I am Mrs. Plowman.'

'Mother of Mrs. Leary ?'

'Yes, that's my Flo. Wot's wrong ? Wot——'

'It's all right. She's all right now, but she's been in the canal.'

'Where ! 'Ere, I'll come. Bring me my coat, Bess —— No, don't you come—it's Flo—I'm goin'.'

'Mary ! Mary !' called father from the top of the stairs. 'Wait 'arf a mo'. I've only got me pants on. Wait till I've got me trousers on—can't you wait ?'

But the door slammed behind Mrs. Plowman. The three girls crowded into the passage. Mr. Plowman ran down the stairs, his trousers over his arm.

'Let me get decent,' he said, 'and I'm going out to find 'em. We can't stay in like this.'

Mrs. Plowman was rattled along the streets in a taxi. To think that it should have come to this, she thought. How could Flo have done it? she asked herself. She could never have dreamed of her child doing anything so rash—so wicked.

And then she thought, poor Flo, that she should have been driven that far, and living under her mother's roof all the time, too. Why couldn't the girl have said a bit more about it? How the rain did beat on the windows of the taxi. Oh, poor Flo, why couldn't she have said more? What had she been through all these days, not telling her mother enough about it: never mind, Flo, you must tell me now. Thank God, she's got me to go to her now.

Perhaps it was all an accident, too—she'd fallen, poor child. These were nice thoughts for her mother to go having about her own daughter.

'What happened?' she said to the policeman. 'Was it an accident? It must have been. She couldn't have . . . meant . . .' But Mrs. Plowman could not say it.

'She's all right,' one said. 'Don't you worry, ma.'

'Oh, not so much of your ma,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'I don't want kiddin'.'

'She's a bit hysterical . . . wrought up like,' said the policeman. 'But there didn't seem to be any call to take her to the hospital; so we just brought her along to the police station for a while. All we want is someone as will be responsible for 'er; take her home and look after 'er.'

'Well, I'll do that.'

'Well, I'm glad of that. There's been some trouble, ain't there; her husband or something?'

'Yes. She's been living with me for the last week or so. If only I'd been home to-night this wouldn't have happened. I've had ten and there's nothing ever happened like this in our family. We ain't that class.'

Ten children, she thought to herself, and sometimes they

seemed to bring nothing but trouble. If Flo had had any sense she'd have never wanted to marry Sid. But what can they know about it at eighteen, what can they know? If only she'd 'ave listened to her mother for half a minute, I would 'ave told 'er Sid would let her down one day, for all he's an ex-Guardsman, with his fine looks and handsome ways. But what's the use? If a girl can't get a man one way, she'll have him another. Father said stop the whole thing, but that would have been worse still. What a mercy there's someone always there to help them with a little sense and steadiness. What would happen to them all sometimes, she thought, without her at the back of them?

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Albany Street Police Station.'

'How much'll this ride be? I've five bob here,' she said, taking out her purse.

'Oh, that's all right this way, Mrs. Plowman, you'll want that to be getting home with, and maybe for a hot drink or two.'

'Thanks very much, I'll keep it then,' she said.

The taxi drew up opposite the police station. Once more Mrs. Plowman gathered herself together and lunged through the driving rain.

'Straight on,' one of the constables told her, as they pushed open the police station door.

Mrs. Plowman glanced into a room on the left where an officer, unbuttoned and ungirdled, sat at a desk, with a pair of spectacles on his nose. She was piloted down a boarded passage, and found herself in a large, bare room, furnished with just a bench, a table and one or two wooden chairs. There were one or two people in the room, but Mrs. Plowman scarcely saw them.

There was Flo sitting double on the bench moaning and crying. How terribly bedraggled she looked—like some-

thing dredged up out of a pond ; her hair all down and streaming, bits of weed still clinging to her wet stockings.

Without knowing what she did, Mrs. Plowman caught her in her arms and kissed her again and again.

‘Well, Flo,’ she said, ‘you’re a nice one.’

Flo looked up, her face strange and haggard.

‘Oh, mother,’ she said, and burst out with another rush of sobs.

Mrs. Plowman quickly knelt down in front of her.

‘Come on, now, off with these wet stockings. Do you want me to unbutton your shoes for you?’ she said, pulling them off quickly. ‘Dragging your old mother out on a night like this.’

Flo stirred to a little action and began to help herself.

‘It’s not what you think,’ she managed to say. ‘I’ll tell you.’

‘Never mind about that,’ said Mrs. Plowman. ‘Here, who’s got a towel?’

‘Here’s a towel?’

Mrs. Plowman began rubbing and rubbing at Flo’s frozen feet.

‘That’s better,’ she said. ‘Now put on my stockings—they’re thicker than yours ever were. I shall go home with bare legs. They’ll think I’ve been paddling.’

‘Oh, mother,’ said Flo, struggling into them, ‘it’s not what you think. It isn’t.’

A youngish man now touched Mrs. Plowman on the shoulder.

‘How do you do?’ he said. ‘I’m a doctor. I was on the spot and came round here with her right away.’

‘Thank you very much, sir.’

‘Oh, don’t thank me. She’s all right, I think, if she doesn’t get too cold. She’s had a good hot brandy and water.’

‘Yes, we must get her home quick now.’

'That's just it—we didn't know what to do with her. Her husband's here, you know, but she won't have him near her. Thank heavens we've found someone.'

Mrs. Plowman looked round and saw Sid. All the time he just stood like a great fool, not knowing what to say or do. Mrs. Plowman stared at him but spoke no word.

'She'll be all right with me,' she said, and turning back to the others: 'Now all you men, you make yourselves scarce. I'm going to get all these wet things off her and wrap her up in my greatcoat, and get her home quick in a taxi.'

'There's a spare overcoat about,' said one of the constables. 'I'll get that.'

'Ta,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'I'll send one of my youngsters round with it in the morning.'

A few minutes later Flo was glowing from a brisk towelling, and wrapped in Mrs. Plowman's coat with a policeman's over the top of that. Mrs. Plowman led her out into the passage. The men smiled.

'I'll have to get a taxi,' said Mrs. Plowman.

'I'll get you one. Will you go in 'ere, please? The sergeant just wants to see you before you go.'

The sergeant, grey-headed and moustached, said:

'I won't keep you, ma'am. I just want to convince myself she's in responsible 'ands.'

'I'll look after her now. Look,' she said, 'I am ashamed there's been all this. My family ain't this sort. I'd give a lot to feel this was all over. It won't have to go in the papers or anything?'

'That's quite all right, ma'am,' said the sergeant. 'Now I've seen you, I'll know she's all right. Nobody will ever know anything about it except the men there.'

'I thank you. I'm sure I shall be much easier in my mind.'

'There's your taxi: got far to go?'

'Notting Hill Gate way.'

'Perhaps we could lend you the fare?'

'Thank you. I can pay my own way.'

They shook hands. And though they met for a moment only out of fifty years of life, it was a touch of true friendship. They saw and respected in each other sense and soundness that had weathered many storms in a mad and violent world.

Then once again, Mrs. Plowman, without stockings or coat, still in her working apron, dashed through the drenching rain to the taxi.

'Well, we're a couple of objects,' she said to Flo as they chugged along. 'Me without coat and stockings and you in a bobby's overcoat. Feeling better now?'

'Oh, mum,' said Flo. 'Will you forgive me? It ain't what you think.'

'Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Flo. This is a nice Saturday night for me. No sooner home from work and sitting down to enjoy my tea, than I hear Flo's in the canal. Reely, I sometimes think you children bring me nothing but trouble, trouble. If it ain't Joey and his wife it's you and Sid. Can't anyone have a little sense but me. Sometimes I wonder my hair hasn't turned jet white years ago, I do!'

'Oh, mother. It ain't so bad as you think. Let me tell you. I'll tell you how it was.'

'Now don't you start crying again, Flo. We've 'ad enough wet for one night. You tell me when you're safe in bed.'

When they got home the house was empty. Quickly Mrs. Plowman dropped the wet clothes on the kitchen floor, hustled Flo into bed, then brought her a cup of tea and some bread and butter and potted meat.

'Had no supper, I suppose—been out since six, haven't you?'

'Yes, about then.'

'You chose a nice night for yer bath, I must say.'

'Oh, mum, do stop thinking things, please. I tell you it ain't what you think. I didn't mean any harm.'

'Well, Flo, I'd like to know what you did mean. What'll all the neighbours think? How are we going to explain it to them? What are I and dad going to say to them? You didn't think of that.'

'Oh, damn the neighbours, what do they matter? I'll explain it—you go on thinking I meant to drown myself, but I never meant anything of the kind. Don't you trust me enough to know I wouldn't do that?'

'How was it, then?'

'Well, I'll tell you. I'd felt so miserable and wretched all day, and I couldn't help thinking all the time this was Saturday night, and how Sid and I ought to have been going out to the pictures or something, or to the pub, if he wanted it, and coming back together, and everything. I couldn't help thinking about it.'

'So I thought surely if I go out and go round now to our rooms it *must* be all right. I felt I *knew* I could make it all right. So I went along. I didn't seem to notice the rain. I felt it 'ad all been just a bad dream. And I was going to see him and end it. It all seemed like a bad dream.'

'So I went round, and when I got to our street, I felt so excited I was going to see him. And I opened the door quiet, and thought of the things I was going to say to make it all right, and went up to our front room and opened the door, and I saw—Oh, I can't seem to say it—I saw that little bitch in there with him—in our room.'

'Was they doing anything?'

'No, no. But she was making 'im tea or something, and that seemed to make it worse still. I could have killed her.'

'What did they say?'

'They just stood. Didn't say anything. Then I lost my temper and jolly well went for her. I wanted to spoil her face, little bitch.'

'Did you say anything?'

'I said a lot of things. I can't remember now. Then Sid got hold of me and pulled me away, and she started crying and kicking up a row—and Sid told her to go.'

'He didn't take her part?'

'No. He spoke very angry, told her to shut up, and then pushed 'er out.'

'Well, that was something.'

'Well, I should think *he ought*. Then he started talking to me and telling me to keep calm a minute—so I slapped his face as hard as I could and came away.'

'Well, you might 'ave heard what 'e had to say.'

'What! Me hear what he had to say! When I found her in *my* room with him. Not much. There's too much saying, I think.' Flo's eyes blazed. She sat up as she spoke—and seemed about to break into another fit of wild crying.

Mrs. Plowman sighed and put her hand on her shoulder.

'Well, 'ave it yer own way,' she said. 'I'd have listened to 'im.'

'Well, then I went out again,' said Flo with a shaky voice. 'I went out and I wandered about. I got so wet and I felt so terrible, and I knew it wasn't a bad dream this time. It was real and I couldn't get away from it.'

'I'm so unhappy,' she said. 'You don't know how I feel.' She gave way and clung to her mother.

In a little while she went on:

'Then,' she said, 'I sort of come to myself and realized I was wet through and it was getting late, and I made up my mind to get along home. Then who should I see but Sid coming along the other side of the street.'

'Sid? Where was he going?'

'Wasn't going anywhere. He was just walking like I

was and smoking cigarettes. He hadn't even got his cap or coat on. He didn't see me and I went on. Then I thought no, I'd go back after him. And he was walking ever so fast, and I thought if only I could catch him up, I'd talk to him and I'd make things all right. It seemed like a chance sent like fate, I thought.

'So I ran along after him—and I got quite close behind—and several times I was just on the point of shouting out to him. Once or twice I'd really made up my mind to shout and somehow when I tried I couldn't.

'We went on, and I was following him ever such a way, it seemed, and then I saw we was right down by the Regents Canal. And I promise you, mother, absolutely honest, I never, never once thought of throwing myself in to commit suicide. I wouldn't never do it.

'But I began to think if only Sid saw a woman in that canal he'd be after her like a shot, because he is brave, you know. No one can say Sid isn't brave.'

'Oh, he's brave enough,' said Mrs. Plowman.

'Well, I thought, supposing I was in that canal, how wonderful if Sid brought me out and then on the bank he found it was me. I thought that would make him sorry, and then we could forget everything and it would be all right.

'Then I thought there can't be any harm in it. I can't possibly drown because I can swim a bit, you know, I thought. And I went on a bit trying to do it—and wondering what Sid would say when he saw it was me. I never thought of drowning myself—never.

'Then suddenly Sid turned round, and before I knew what I was doing I sort of stumbled and shut my eyes and then fell right into the canal.

'And then as soon as I got in the water I was terrified. It was all so black and so terribly cold—and I found with my clothes on I couldn't swim, and I wanted to scream and

scream, but I got a great mouthful of water. Oh, I thought I was gone, I did reely.'

'And what did Sid do? Didn't he haul you out then?'

'That's one thing I forgot—I forgot all about it. I was so *distracted*, I suppose. Sid can't swim hardly at all—and he can't stand water. He's told me so himself. It makes him go all queer. He can't help 'imself.

'I was almost gone. I couldn't get myself out. It seemed hours and I thought I was going to drown, but Sid yelled for help and there was a policeman over the palings—and he pulled off his jacket and boots and came after me. Then he got me to the bank and Sid saw it was me.'

'What did he say then?'

'He couldn't say anything. He just kept saying, "Oh, Flo, oh, Flo," but I just pushed him away and told him I never wanted to see him again. Then I don't know what happened. I just seemed to lose hold and cried and cried—and I couldn't stop myself. I kept thinking how nearly I'd drowned. I felt as if it was something inside me going on crying.'

'And you told them to fetch me?'

'I suppose I must 'a' done. They kept asking me questions, and the doctor came and gave me brandy and hot water. All I wanted was for them all to go and leave me alone. I thought I was going mad. And then I suddenly found you were in the room. Oh, mum, I thought I was going to drown, and I never meant to do anything dreadful.'

'Don't you think about it any more,' she said. 'That's the best way. Only let it be a lesson to you. You always act so hasty, that's the trouble.'

For a time they neither of them spoke.

'Well, well,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'Think 'ow much worse it might 'ave been. Remember that in your prayers

to-night. I believe you're getting sleepy. Do you think you could settle down and go to sleep now?'

'I believe I could.'

'Well, I don't think a couple of aspirins'd do you no more harm—just to settle you down, then to-morrow perhaps you'll be able to see Sid and fix everything up.'

'Yes,' said Flo. 'I must.'

In the kitchen again, Mrs. Plowman sighed heavily and sat down. The others were still out. The house was empty save for her and Flo. She put the kettle on to make herself a cup of strong tea. That was what she felt she must have. While it was boiling there were one or two tidying up jobs to do. She carried the supper things out to the sink, hung up Flo's clothes to dry, then made the tea and settled down to it thankfully.

She had hardly drunk half, however, when she was interrupted. A commotion outside her gate; angry voices; men shouting. Mrs. Plowman leapt to her feet and ran to the door. The others were back. There were dad and the three girls, and quite a little crowd and a policeman with them. What on earth mischief had they been getting into?

The policeman was talking in a loud voice.

'Now, miss,' he said, 'no more o' that. You take her in, sir, I should, or I shall have to.'

Dad seized Bessie by the arm and dragged her in.

The door shut behind them and they crowded into the kitchen all dripping and wet as they were.

'What is it *now*?' said Mrs. Plowman. 'I've had enough trouble for one night.'

'Oh, we're all right. Where's Flo?'

'Tucked up safe in bed. Don't you go waking her up. I've just got her off to sleep. What have you been playing at, Bessie?'

‘I’ll tell you how it was . . .’ began dad, but the girls took the words out of his mouth.

‘We’ve been all round,’ said Rose. ‘Couldn’t find out nothing about you. So we come home again, wet—well, look at us—and feeling fed up with Sid and everything. Then who should we find at the gate here but Sid.’

‘Sid—outside our gate? What was he doing?’

‘Staring at nothing. As soon as we saw him he tried to sneak off. But you should have seen Bessie, mum. She ran straight up to him and started scratching and slapping him.’

‘Bessie, you bad girl. What on earth did you want to do a silly thing like that for—out in the street, too?’

‘I’d do it again,’ said Bessie, whose hair was down, and whose breath was still short. ‘Sid’s a rotter.’

‘You should have just seen her,’ said Lily proudly. ‘My, she did go at him.’

‘What girls,’ said Mrs. Plowman. ‘What a family—You’re—— Incurable!’

She nodded and shook her head; and as she did so she realized that pools of water were dripping from their rain-soaked clothes where they stood.

‘You’re wet,’ she said. ‘You’re wet through.’

‘Ugh,’ said Bess, wriggling out of her coat and hat, ‘I should say we were.’

‘There, Dad,’ said Mrs. Plowman. ‘You mustn’t stand about in your wet things. You take your boots off and warm your feet by the fire. Here, give me your coats.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mrs. Plowman, collecting all their coats. ‘You’ll catch your deather colds if you aren’t more careful. You sit down, all of you, and have some tea—the kettle’s boiling now. Then you go straight along to bed. I’m going to put a hot-water bottle in all your beds. You make some tea for your father, Bessie. I’ll tell you all about Flo to-morrow.’

There followed an active twenty minutes for Mrs. Plowman. A dry pair of socks for dad at once. Fresh kettles to be boiled. All the dripping clothes to be hung up in the scullery. Hot-water bottles to be filled and placed in the beds. From their own bed she took the sheets right away, so that dad could get in between the blankets.

It was now nearly midnight, and one by one the family went upstairs. When Mrs. Plowman came back, the kitchen was silent, the fire almost out. Now, she thought, I really will have that cup of tea in peace and comfort, by myself. She picked up the teapot. It was empty. So was the kettle.

Not one of the family had had the thought to keep it hot, though they'd all taken one themselves. All the evening she'd been, and not had the chance even to get one cup of tea inside her without something happening.

She sat down at the table for a moment. No, she couldn't be fagged to make another now. If only someone would just make her one and give it to her. If only someone besides herself had a little sense, or ever thought twice.

And suddenly Mrs. Plowman put her red face on her arms and burst into tears. The kitchen grew chillier. Flo turned and moaned in her sleep, while Sid slunk off home through the rain. After a few minutes Mrs. Plowman stopped crying as quickly as she had begun. She sat up, sniffed and looked round the room.

Before her stood her youngest daughter, solemn-faced and wearing only her nightdress.

'Don't cry, Mum,' she said. 'Please don't cry.'

'Don't be silly,' said Mrs. Plowman. 'What'd I want to cry for? I must have fallen asleep.'

'You come to bed,' said Lily, and taking her mother by the hand, she led her to the door of her room.

She was Living with his People

FROM the very first Emerald had never taken to her mother-in-law. And certainly she was an odd little woman ; so cold and distant. Em liked people who gave you a bit of a welcome, and made you feel at home, as if they were pleased to see you.

But the first time Emerald had met 'Ma,' as all the family called her, she had had quite a shock. Ma had just said, 'How do you do?' and had gone on talking almost as if she wasn't there. How different it was when Em had taken Percy round to see her own mother ; and how happily they had all got on together.

Em went over all these things in her mind, as she often did since they were married. She had bought a large bunch of chrysanthemums cheap up at the market, and was arranging them in one or two vases round their sitting-room, before Percy came in from work.

She heard a loud knock at the front door, and put her head out of the window to see who it was. Down in the street, three floors below, she saw Mr. Blakeney, a breezy man of forty or so, who was one of the machine-shop foremen from Percy's works.

'Good evening, Mrs. Matthew !' he shouted. 'Your Perce up there ?'

'E ain't come in yet,' Em called out.

'Well, I should 'a thought he'd come running back, so

soon in his married life,' said Blakeney. 'Never mind, you'll do. I've got——' He seemed quite prepared to carry on a ten minutes' conversation by shouting up from the street.

'Wait a minute,' said Em, 'I'll come down and let you in.'

She ran as quietly as she could down the stairs. Six months ago she had jumped at the idea of their having two rooms at the top of her mother-in-law's house so cheap. Mr. Blakeney followed her up into the sitting-room and looked round admiringly.

'Well, Mrs. Matthew,' he said, 'this is a snug little place you've got here. Haven't you made it all look nice, too! You wait till you've got a baby, though: then you won't have so many sixpences to spend on flowers, I'll bet.'

'They look nice, don't they?' said Em.

'Ever so nice,' said Blakeney. 'Quite reminds me of the Assembly Rooms on a dance night. However, I'll tell you what I came round about. I'm getting up a sort of Christmas Club at the Works, and seeing it's Friday and pay day, I'm just calling round about. Everyone takes a two-bob ticket, and then we share out the prizes a week before Christmas. Just adds a little excitement, you know. The first prize is a fiver, and there's lots of little ones.'

Em studied the little book of names and tickets hesitantly.

'Ought I to?'

'You ought if you want to,' said Blakeney. 'But there ain't no sort of duty about it. I bet your Perce would want one, though: that's why I came.'

'Right you are, then,' said Em, 'and mind you draw me that five pounds.'

'Ah,' said Blakeney, 'that's what they all say. Got your two bob ready? Well, there's good management for you: before Perce comes back with his Friday money and everything. First year I was married, we always used to run out

about Wednesday. Well, it's a life, isn't it? Good night, Mrs. Matthew,' he said, opening the door. 'So pleased to have seen your little place. I must tell Mrs. Blakeney all about it.'

'Good night,' said Em. 'How's Perce doing at his job?'

'Oh, he's doing all right. He's quite a clever workman, is your Perce.'

'I know's 'e's clever,' said Em, 'but we mustn't tell him so.'

'That's right,' Blakeney shouted from the landing below, and rattled off down the stairs.

Em turned and looked round the room with pleasure. It was nice of Blakeney to notice and talk to her about it. She began to get Percy's tea ready. In a minute or two the door opened and she turned round to greet him—but it was Ma.

'Come in,' said Em, brightly.

Ma was a frail-looking little woman of sixty or so: her hair had already turned white. She was small and slight in every way, with neat features and a bright spot of colour on each cheek. Em was larger altogether, with black, rather untidy hair and wide dark eyes. Ma always made her feel too big and awkward.

Ma looked round the room for a moment, half humming under her breath, a few notes that never quite became a tune. Em knew quite well that she wanted to be told who the visitor had been.

'Won't you sit down?' said Em.

Ma still paused uncertainly. 'I just looked in to see if Perce was back,' she said.

'No, he's late, isn't he?'

'I thought I heard you talking to him just a minute ago.'

'No,' said Em.

'Well,' said Ma, 'it's a qucer thing I should have heard someone so plain.'

Em felt angry. Why couldn't she ask right out who it was, if she was so nosy and curious, instead of always hinting all round? She always managed to put Em in the wrong without seeming inquisitive herself.

'Oh, that wasn't Perce you heard,' said Em. 'I had a visitor.'

Ma went on with her humming, and began to look at the flowers.

'It was Mr. Blakeney from the factory,' said Em.

'Oh,' said Ma, immediately affecting indifference. 'However much did all those chrysanthemums cost you?'

'Very little,' said Em. 'I got 'em cheap, up at the market.'

'Too many flowers in a room don't look well,' said Ma. 'Just a few looks much better.'

'Mr. Blakeney said how nice they looked,' said Em.

'And too many flowers ain't healthy. That's what the doctors say,' said Ma, as though she were communicating a well-known fact to someone very ignorant indeed. 'You ought to put some of them out on the landing. Let me do it for you.'

'I'll do it later,' said Em, busying herself about her cooking arrangements. As Ma watched her, without saying anything, she became more and more uncomfortable and awkward.

'What's that for?' said Ma distastefully, as Em put a couple of cooked pig's trotters in a pie-dish to heat them up.

'Them's for Perce and me,' she said. 'One each.'

There was a long silence.

'What men really need when they come in is a good bit of steak or something with some nourishment in it. Them things may be all right for *you*.'

'But Perce likes these very much.'

'Well, 'e didn't used to,' said Ma, implying that she knew far more about her son's likes than his wife did.

'Well, he asked for them,' said Em. 'He did really. Why should you think I'd go givin' him anything he don't like? Besides, we often 'ave a good piece of steak; we did last night.'

'Oh, well,' said Ma, 'we all have different opinions. I should have thought your bit o' money was better spent on good food than on *chrysanthemums*. But you know best.'

Em could have screamed with exasperation. The old woman was so artful. She said the most outrageous things without ever saying them at all. Ma waited for a few moments, and finding Em made no reply, turned towards the door. On her way she caught sight of the Christmas Club ticket which Em had left on the table.

'I suppose this is what that fellow Blakeney come round about,' she said. 'Perce wasn't having any, so he thought he'd try you. Seems a pity when the husbands have got too much sense they has to come round and try the wives. They find it pays, I suppose.'

'Why, what's the harm?' said Em. 'It's just an ordinary Christmas Club. We may get a five-pound prize.'

'Yes,' said Ma, as she closed the door. 'But it's Perce's money. It's 'im what does the work for it and brings it in. That's what you've got to think of. And if you take my advice, don't you let Father ever get to hear of that ticket. He'd call it sheer *madness*.'

She was gone. Why should Ma accuse her of wasting all the money and not feeding Percy properly, and make everything she did look wrong? Only ten minutes before Mr. Blakeney was telling her how well she managed; and that was what ordinary people thought about it. When

Percy arrived, rather late, she began to pour it all out to him. She told him everything that Ma had said.

'Oh, don't mind it,' said Percy. 'She's just a bit like that. That's all: just a bit narky.'

'But I do mind. Why don't you stand up for me a bit more, Perce? Why don't you tell 'er I am a good wife, and I do feed you properly, and how happy we are?'

'Oh, she knows it really.'

'She doesn't say so. I should have thought you'd like to have stood up for me. Anyone'd fancy you wanted her to go on thinking I was a bad wife to you.'

'Oh, I couldn't go saying things like that to her,' said Percy.

'Why not?' said Em.

'Oh, she'd think I was a soft fool.'

'Oh,' said Em, tearfully, 'I don't seem to understand any of you. If you're happy with me, why can't you go and tell her so? The truth is you're absolutely under both their thumbs, and you'd do anything they say, regardless of me. Can't I even take a two-shilling ticket in a club draw without their leave?'

'All the same,' said Percy rather gloomily, 'I wish you hadn't taken it.'

'Why ever not?'

'Look,' said Percy, 'I'm afraid I've got some bad news.'

'What?' said Em, with a horrible premonition of what was coming.

'They've gone and closed down the whole of my shop at the factory. I've lost my job. I'm one of the three million now.'

'But only just now Mr. Blakeney said how well you were doing.'

'Did 'e?' said Percy. 'Well, I believe I was. But what's the good? You can do as well as a living marvel, and still lose your job these days. What's happened is

simply this : I and a few other chaps were making ball-joints, and now they've suddenly decided they can buy all their ball-joints cheaper outside. So out we all go—and that's the end of it. There's no arguing at all. Blakeney doesn't know. It may be his own shop next time.'

'Oh,' said Em, 'I've been telling you my troubles, and you've had this on your mind all the time. Why didn't you tell me straight away?' She began to kiss him, and after a while they felt much happier.

During the next weeks Em found things more and more difficult. With Percy no longer earning they seemed to have no more independence than children. She thought Percy was silly to be so cautious and careful always to do what his father and mother wanted. 'It's no good looking at it any other way,' he said to her many times. 'He's paying for us ; he's supporting us ; and the brass tacks of it is I've just got to do what he wants.'

'Then he oughtn't to expect,' said Em. 'Why don't you tell him right out you aren't a child now and you've got a will of your own?'

'Because I can't possibly, and there you are. It's no good, Em ; it really isn't. What's the point of having a row? It will only go on a few months, and then I'll be in work again.'

'It seems it's going on for ever. Aren't we ever to do anything that *I* want?' she said plaintively.

Percy sighed and swung the blind cord about.

Ma seemed to have more and more of a finger in everything they did. Now Em hadn't a penny of her own, she had no way of doing or buying anything that was hers. She tried all she knew to get a job, but the factories were all running short-handed shifts ; the shops needed no help ; she wasn't a skilled needle-woman ; she put her name down as a daily, but she had no reference or experience of any kind, and she was told there were hundreds waiting.

There were long, rain-sodden days, and she leant against the window-sill gazing into the little yard and the other little yards all round, and grew more and more depressed. Percy was out a good deal, and he seemed unwilling to tell her just what he was doing all the time.

One day Ma said to her : ' You and Perce better come down and eat with us. It's silly you cooking your own meals up here now.'

' Oh,' said Em, taken aback, ' we'd rather——'

Ma interrupted her. ' Then I can make certain he gets something proper to eat instead of those pig's feet things.'

Em felt she would like to hit Ma for saying that.

' I've spoken to Perce about it,' the old woman said, ' and he thinks it would be best—he wants it.'

Afterwards Em said to Percy, ' Why can't you sometimes speak up for yourself? Why do you let her always say it's you wanting it, when it's only her really? You never think of me, and always of her. Soon she'll be saying we'd better sleep apart, and you'll just agree.' She began to cry, and when Percy put his arms round her she pushed him away.

' And she's always nagging me about that Christmas ticket,' she said. ' She hints I was careless with money, and threw it about. I wish I'd never seen it.'

At meal-times now she felt more than ever a stranger among the family. They were always quite a large party, as there was an unmarried brother and a sister of Percy, and two grandchildren living at home. Father used to grumble at his food. Sometimes he would push it aside and go out in a fury. The children would stare hard at their plates, not daring to catch his eye, and Ma used to say nothing at all, but her cheeks would turn very pink.

At other times Em would hear him ranting and going on at one or other of the two young motor drivers who were in his employment. He evidently enjoyed threatening

them with the sack, and finding fault with everything they did. He would haul them by the lapels of their coats over the front doorstep, back them up against the wall of the narrow passage and yell with his face very close to theirs. Outside, Em would see one of the cars standing at the kerb ; and passers-by would glance in hurriedly to see what was happening. Yet he kept his business going very well, paid good wages, and had many regular customers who always used his cars for a long trip.

Ma told Em that this was the only way you could run a job, and that the young men would always be slacking and letting him down if he didn't keep girding at them.

'He's got a tongue in his head it does you good to listen to,' she said with a sour smile.

In his jocular moods Father cracked jokes with Em and treated her better than he did his own family ; but she never felt safe with him. Once he caught her suddenly and roughly by the arm and said to her, half in fun and half threatening : 'What's this about spending two shillings on a blasted Christmas draw ?'

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I didn't mean——'

'Well, just you remember, it's my money now,' he said. 'All these club draws and sweeps is a lot of damn silliness.'

He stared into her face and Em suddenly felt frightened.

She began to see that he was often at the back of Ma's oddness. She began to see that Ma's digs and taunts at her were not always her own fault-finding at all, but a kind of reproach because she had never been allowed by her own husband to do this or that : a kind of envy. Nice flowers in the room, pig's trotters for dinner, Christmas Club tickets, all these things would have thrown Father into one of his rages or 'bust-ups' as Ma called them.

And Ma would talk as if Percy, as if all husbands, were just the same.

'I'll give you a piece of advice,' she said to Em one day. 'Never say "no" to your husband.'

'But you must sometimes,' said Em.

Ma looked annoyed. 'I'm merely telling you what thirty years of married life has taught me,' she said. 'Know better if you must.'

Em was silent.

Ma hummed in her tuneless way for a moment or two, and then went on 'Never say "no."' Not however tired you are, or whatever he wants, because if you won't, there's plenty others as will. I dare say you'll find that out.'

All day Em thought of this, and it seemed to her more and more horrible. She went up to her room and stood for a very long time looking out into the streaming night, watching the blurred lights of the streets and other houses all round. A dark shadow seemed to hang over her happiness and marriage. She wanted to run down and tell Ma she was all wrong. Percy wasn't like that. Her marriage with him was different altogether. That's what Ma seemed incapable of seeing.

It was a week or so before Christmas. Em was out one evening bringing home some things from the shops for Ma. She could not help feeling cheery at the approach of Christmas. Even when Ma had said, 'We don't take much notice of Christmas in this 'ouse—holly and overeating and all that silliness,' it had not depressed her.

A woman she knew, the wife of one of the men up at Percy's old job, said to her: 'You're lucky, Em. Heard about that Christmas draw?'

'No.'

'Your Perce has won the five pounds prize.'

Em rushed home as fast as her legs would carry her.

'Perce!' she cried. 'At last we've 'ad something nice happen. The five pounds! Isn't it splendid!'

Percy was quite silent. 'But, Em,' he said after a while,

'you know we told you that wasn't really our money if we won. It's Father's by rights.'

'But you don't really mean he'd take it?' said Em.

'Why not?'

'Well,' said Em, 'it's so—so—— Doesn't he want you to have anything?'

'As a matter of fact,' said Percy, 'I've settled the question beforehand. I've lost it.'

'You've what?'

'I've had it stolen. Someone in the crowd on the way home; must have taken it out of my pocket.'

Em was too stupefied to say anything at all.

'Don't be cross with me,' said Percy. 'It wouldn't have been ours, anyway.'

Later on Percy said to her, 'Look—if Father hears I've lost that five pounds I don't know what he won't do. Could I possibly tell him it was you as lost it?'

'Well——!' said Em.

'You see, he won't lose his temper with you. If it's me, there'll be a bust-up, and Ma will come into it as well as me. If it's you, he'll just pass it over.'

'It's always Ma you're thinking of,' said Em. 'But go on—I don't mind. If it's lost, it's lost. We shan't get anything of it, anyway. We shan't ever get any luck or fun or anything at all. I don't mind what you say.'

'After all,' said Percy, 'it's only been a month or two. I'm sure to get work after Christmas. Don't be unhappy, Em.'

'It's all right for you,' said Em, 'I shan't ever be happy in this place. Your Ma doesn't want nor like me. It'll be Christmas in a few days, and things ought to be so nice.'

'Don't cry,' said Percy, 'please don't cry.'

But on Christmas Eve Em felt she could bear things no longer. Father had gone out after dinner. Percy was off for a long walk with his brother, and she felt Ma had

deliberately encouraged Percy to go without her ; saying they would walk too far for her, and it did the men good to go out by themselves.

Em saw Percy off: then instead of going to help Ma with the washing up, ran up to her own room and burst into tears. She thought about her own parents and their country home. How much better it would have been if they could have lived there—how much nicer her parents would have been to Percy.

Last time her mother had come up to London Em had told her about everything. Her mother had sympathized and comforted her, but Em could see it made her unhappy. Suddenly her mother's very kindness struck her as rather silly and annoying. It wasn't any good her getting unhappy too. She couldn't really understand. She couldn't help her. No one, she thought, could help her but herself.

On a sudden impulse she ran down the stairs to the kitchen, where Ma was just beginning to wash up the dinner things.

'I want to say something,' said Em. 'I've been thinking. I never seem to please you, nor do the right thing. Can't we get on better? I'm sorry if I'm wrong.'

For a moment Ma made no answer at all, then she said, looking very hard at the sink: 'I don't know what you mean. We get on all right as far as I know.'

Em began to feel baffled, as she always did when she tried to have anything out with Ma. 'Well,' she said, 'I feel I don't please you. I don't see what I've ever really done wrong.'

'Perfect,' said Ma, with emphasis, 'is a thing we none of us are, and I never asked or expected of *you*. Do you want me to go about pretending I think you're perfect?'

'No,' said Em, 'but I don't see why you think everything I do is wrong.'

Percy had often told her it was no good talking to Ma like this, and she began to wish she'd never tried.

'I don't think everything you do is wrong,' said Ma, 'but young ones can't be always right. We all see things different, and you want me to say I see everything your way. What's the sense? I think you were silly to go and buy that ticket, and as for losing the five pounds, you can't expect me to come and kiss you on both cheeks, can you? I'm sure I feel I've been very forbearing about it. But you don't seem never to 'ave been crossed nor criticized in your life.'

It was a long speech for her, and all the time she was talking in her calm, biting way, Em felt more and more angry.

'Well, then,' said Em, her colour rising with her temper, 'I'm not the only person round here as can lose things. You'll find there may be others too, if you keep on at me so.'

'I wasn't keeping on at you,' said Ma, 'and there's no call to get angry. That's a nasty temper of yours.'

'What I mean is this, see?' said Em, breaking in. 'I've heard enough lectures and rows and snagging away at me about that ticket because I never lost the money at all. I ain't the guilty one. And if you want to know, it's Perce all the time as lost it, though he's got such wind up about what his pa would do I let him think it was me: so there. And I was quite willing to. Poor Perce is so under your thumbs, that's what it is. But if I'm to hear nothing but ticket, ticket, ticket, all the rest of me life, always ticket for breakfast, ticket for dinner, and ticket to tuck meself up in bed with, well then, I thought it was time you knew the truth. I'd have kept it secret, but it ain't worth suffering like a martyr for, all the rest of me life. It's bad enough having to live in this house as it is, with nothing but rows and disagreeablenesses.'

Em suddenly realized she'd gone pretty far, so she stopped. There was a moment's silence, and Ma began to pick up some dirty plates and carry them to the sink. As she did so she hummed a little tune in the back of her throat that never developed more than two or three notes.

'It makes no difference,' said Ma, with her back to Em, 'who lost that money. You, or that fool boy. And if you feel like that, you'd better go upstairs and cool your head. You've been very rude.'

'I'm sorry,' said Em. 'Let me help you with all this washing up.'

'I don't want help, thank you.'

But Em still hung about. Having worked off her anger, she felt, as violent-tempered people often do, rather friendly and anxious to make it up.

'Let me help,' she said, 'I'd like it. Really. I'm sorry, really.'

'Hadh't you better go upstairs?' said Ma in her most icy tones.

'Oh, all right,' said Em, and began to flounce out.

But as she reached the door it opened abruptly. Em was almost knocked over as Father pushed violently in. He threw the door to with a slam that made the kitchen ring.

Em began to go out again as quietly as she could.

'Here,' said Father, 'I want you. And you,' he said to Ma, speaking as if they were both criminals, and he some kind of avenging officer.

For a moment he stood and said nothing, but merely glowered. His face had turned very red, and his eyes too looked red. One grizzled curl, from his short-cropped hair, hung over his forehead like a bull's forelock. His leather driving coat was open, showing an old khaki muffler hanging down inside, and the fleshy bulk of his chest. He looked immensely strong and awkward, as if he were

cobbled up in too many clothes, which hindered the movements of his short arms and neck.

He stood planted massively, glaring at them, like some weighty and fierce old bull or stallion, gathering its bulk for an attack. In the silence created by himself he breathed aloud.

Em made a movement to escape, but he caught her by the arm.

‘Come back,’ he said. ‘I want to see you, my girl.’

Em felt really frightened. This was the kind of thing she had always feared from him. All the time Ma went on quietly with her washing up, walking from the table to the sink and back again to the table, pretending nothing was happening.

‘Yes,’ he said, still holding Em’s arm, and rubbing in the throat slowly and nastily, ‘I want to see you.’ He turned to Ma. ‘Think I’m going to be made a bloody fool of in my own ’ouse?’ he suddenly shouted. ‘I tell you there are ways of stopping that. Think that little brat there’s going to make a fool of me? There are ways of stopping that she won’t like. She’s got to learn if she lives with me.’

Em felt her heart beating. Ma still went on very calmly washing up her dishes.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘there’s no need to go on with all this bluster. What’s the girl done? I dare say she’ll be sorry.’

‘You’ve been telling me all this time,’ he said, turning to Em, ‘that it was you who lost this club ticket money?’

Em tried to speak, but nothing came out.

‘Go on, answer me!’ he shouted.

‘Yes,’ Em managed to say.

‘And all the time it was done on purpose to deceive me. Think you’re going to live under my roof and think of me last in the house, do you? Thought you could make a fool of me in public, did you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Em said, ‘I really meant——’

'Nice thing for me,' he shouted. 'I was sitting up at the "Gardener's Arms" with some friends of mine, and found they all knew it was that damn fool Perce, all the time, as lost or *spent* every penny of that five pounds. And I'd been made to think it was you lost the money. You've been making people laugh at me, haven't you?' He shook her arm. 'Well, I'm going to make you laugh the other way round; see that? When I come through the hall, I had a look to see if there was a good stick there that'd do for you. And there is. If I'd had the upbringing of you properly we'd have had this out ten years ago.'

Em felt as if she were having a nightmare.

'Once'll be enough, I dare say,' he said, pulling her towards the door.

'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' said Ma, polishing a spoon very hard as she spoke, and not looking at them, 'don't talk like that.'

'Oh, you're coming into it now—taking her side, I suppose.'

'Never mind about that,' said Ma. 'You can't talk to Em like that. She's a married woman, twenty years of age. She's acted for the best, and if she's done wrong, she's sorry. Don't be so silly.'

'Oh, it's silly, is it,' he shouted, 'just to take a few steps to prevent her deliberately making the whole street make fun of me? Why don't you call 'em all in here right away to laugh at me? Come on, let's do it! Come on!' He put his face close to hers and shouted into it.

'Don't be a big looby,' said Ma promptly, and Em could see that though she spoke quietly, two bright red spots of colour had flamed up high in her cheeks, and the pupils of her eyes were dilated till the whole iris was black. 'You keep your hands off Em, or you will 'ave the whole street down on you. And as for that silly deceiving you about the five pounds, it was *me* that put her up to it all along. It

was me made her think it was the best thing to do. So there.'

'What!' said Father. 'You mean you——'

'Why don't you go and lie down?' said Ma, in her iciest voice. 'No wonder you lose your temper, if you will go drinking so much. It always upsets you.'

'Calling me drunk!' began Father, but the words were lost in a sheer bellow of rage. He caught Ma roughly by the arm and dragged her across the room.

Em involuntarily shrank away, but by the look on Ma's face she could see that anything might happen now. He began hitting Ma with his closed fist. She saw it raised like a club and smash deliberately down in the old woman's face.

Then suddenly Em's temper flared up again, and she found she was joining in the fight herself. She pulled Ma away, and pushed Father back as hard as she could. Taken off his balance, he stepped heavily backwards into the dresser. One hand, groping for support, knocked a large dish off the table, and it smashed on the tiled floor. Then there was a splintering crash as his fourteen stone lurched into the dresser, and for a moment it seemed that all the china would fall about his ears. Half-dazed, he turned and fended off the tottering dresser.

Em knelt down by Ma and put her arm round her shoulders. The dresser, with a final crash, fell back against the wall again. Father looked round him, and without saying another word walked out of the kitchen. He left a breathless silence behind him. In a moment Ma got up, and almost pettishly twitched herself away from Em's arms.

'Silly old fool,' she said, and returned to her washing up. 'Pick up them broken plates,' she said to Em, 'don't stand about doing nothing.' Her voice quavered slightly. Em picked up the plates, and, without saying anything further,

began to help Ma finish off the work. After it was done, Em saw the kettle was still boiling.

'Wouldn't it be nice to sit down quietly for a few minutes and drink a cup of tea,' she said.

'You have one if you like,' said Ma. 'But don't go doing it on my account.'

Em handed her a cup, and Ma sat down at the kitchen table and began to sip it, putting both hands round it and staring in front of her. Em saw that the two scarlet spots were still on her cheeks. Her eyes were still bright and black. It was plain that her lip was already beginning to swell up and turn colour, and blood was coming from her mouth.

'It's a shame,' said Em suddenly. 'Does your lip hurt you?'

'Of course it hurts,' said Ma. 'My whole head hurts.' Then after a pause she added slowly, 'But it isn't that as really 'urts. I'm too old to be knocked about now,' she went on. 'My bones feel too old. I'm over sixty-five, you know. He oughtn't to 'ave done it. Going on like a great schoolboy. It's five years since he hit me; five years next February.'

She said all this in a flat, level tone, and stopped as abruptly as she had begun. Em saw that her eyes were brighter than ever, glistening with tears which refused to drop. Ma smiled a wry smile at her.

'It makes you feel a bit queer,' she said. 'Fancy his behaving so bad, in front of you; and at you, too. I'm ashamed of him, letting you see him act so. But I know what it is, Em, he treats you as one of the family now, that's what it is. You're in it with us now.'

Ma chuckled. 'If only some of his friends could 'a sometimes seen him,' she said, 'everyone speaks so well of him all the time. It's been better, of course, since the boys have grown up, but I've always wanted a daughter.' She

paused, and went on sipping. 'Don't think I'd say a word against him really,' she said, 'not to anyone outside of just us. But there, you've seen for yourself now. I've had some times with him these thirty years, I can tell you. He broke my collar-bone once in one of his silly bust-ups. We all had to keep telling the street I'd fallen down-stairs.'

'Did you really?'

'But you'll do him good, you will, with that little dander of yours. It does him good to be stood up to.'

Em looked at her, and Ma looked back thoughtfully. For once Ma met her gaze and didn't stare at something that she was doing. Suddenly Em realized that she had found a friend. Suddenly she saw the whole point of this crabbed old woman. She saw the fascination of her tartness and wry humour, and her loyalty to her violent husband. Suddenly she began to admire Ma intensely, and felt proud of having won her approval. She knew that she had found in her something that would be stronger and more helpful through her life than the gentleness and sweetness of her own mother. She wanted for a moment to put her arm round Ma, or to make some impulsive expression of affection. But she knew that Ma's straight look into her eyes and her sour smile was the closest physical sign of affection or approval she could ever give.

It was an hour later that Percy came back from his walk, and Em was still in the kitchen talking to Ma.

Without saying a word he walked up to the table and with a mysterious look spread first five pound notes upon it; then another five pounds. Em clapped her hands. Ma looked at the notes as if she thought they were imitations.

'What's this?' she said. 'A nice time we've been having with your stories about Em having taken that money, I can tell you.'

'Well,' said Percy, 'I'm sorry. As a matter of fact, no one lost it at all. I had it all the time.'

'But Perce——' said Em.

'I'm sorry,' said Percy. 'It couldn't be 'elped. I simply had to find a way of stopping Father from laying hands on it. I'll tell you what we've been up to.'

'When Blakeney heard they'd shut up the shop I was working in, he told the management as he could make all those ball joints off his own bat, and supply them at a cheaper cost than ever they'd made them for themselves. He'd already got an uncle as owned a small factory right out of the town where rents and overheads are low. He only had to have a little capital to start off on, and get just one or two lathes and things. But the management of our works wouldn't advance it. So Blakeney tried to get going on his own, and all of us, who possibly could, came forward with a few pounds to help him. And our five pounds was one.'

'And now I suppose he's closed down and lost everybody's money,' said Ma.

'Not a bit of it,' said Percy. 'He's doing fine—supplying our own factory and another one besides. And he may take up with other small parts besides the ball joints, too. He knows the job inside out, you see. And I've been working up there for the last two weeks, off and on, though I didn't want to tell you and Em for fear of its just being a disappointment. He's given me this money to be going on with, and after Christmas I'm going to start in a regular job. At foreman's wages, too.'

'Oh, well,' said Ma, her eyes twinkling with pleasure, 'sounds a risky, cranky sort of idea to me. But there, nowadays I suppose you 'aves to be content with anything you can get.'

A Young Man in a Hurry

OLD Mr. Gromm believed in taking his time. He liked to go about his business slowly, nodding his whiskered face with unhurried calm. This was the way to get things done well in the long run. 'I takes me time, but pretty general I gets thur arlright. But I takes me time.' It seemed that Mr. Gromm's time was almost different from other people's time—the outcome of a long collusion between two old cronies. With the aid of time, Gromm had conjured up substantial possessions ; his cottage and a neat little bit of land round it foot by foot, year by year, for fifty years. Gromm and Time understood each other pretty well by now.

But Percy Iggdon was a young fellow of a different temper altogether. He had auburn hair and a sanguine colour. He thought Gromm was an old hunk. One evening he came skidding and clattering down the road on his bicycle, just as Mr. Gromm was walking very slowly from his cottage to the well. Percy was in a tearing hurry to get home, because he wanted to see if he had won a prize in a newspaper competition. He was pedalling furiously and thinking of nothing else. He rang his bell, shouted several times, then banged violently into Mr. Gromm's back. The bicycle shot one way, Percy crashed on to the hard road, and Mr. Gromm was hurled into the ditch in front of his own cottage gate. Percy jumped up with a bleeding knee and torn trouser leg. He was terrified at the force of the

collision. Surely he must have broken some of those brittle old bones.

But even as he took stock of the old man lying in the ditch he felt a desire to laugh at him. Silly old garp. If only he'd had the sense to move and think a bit quicker this need not have happened, wandering over the road like an antique off a tombstone or something.

Mr. Gromm remained in the ditch quite motionless. Fortunately it was dry, and as it was summer, the lush growth made soft falling. He might have been sitting in an armchair with his feet stuck up on the road in front of him, and his back on the bank behind. His shapeless hat was tilted completely over his face, and his beard poked out from underneath.

Percy took him under one arm and gently pulled him up. 'I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Gromm,' he said, 'I am really. I 'ope I didn't 'urt you?'

Mr. Gromm very slowly dusted himself and picked a few stray grasses off his coat with care.

'I ain't 'urt,' he said resentfully, 'but it's little short of a miracle you 'aven't broke me back. I should 'a thought you'd got more sense than to come tearin' down 'ere like a scarlded tom cat. You'd 'ave only got yerself to thank if you'd mucked me up to rights.'

'I'm very sorry. I'm very sorry,' muttered Percy. He was thinking only of the competition. But as he turned away, Mr. Gromm laid a restraining hand on his arm.

'As it 'appens, it's arlright. But supposin' it 'ad been old Mrs. Mutch, or my grandniece Josephine as is carryin'? Wot would 'ave happened then, eh?'

'I'm sure I'm very sorry,' said Percy. He paused contritely for a moment, and started off, but Mr. Gromm hadn't done with him yet.

'You didn't pause for to reflect upon that, did you? Eh? You were in too much of a 'urry fer that.'

Again Percy felt a restraining hand on his forearm.

'I'll tell yer what's your trouble, Percy. Yer *always* in too much of a 'urry. Now don't get fidgetin' off. I'm telling yer this because it's something as I want to larn yer, partikler. Take yer time, Percy. You was born in too much of a 'urry—didn't yer Ma never tell yer about that?'

'Mother died 'fore I was school age.'

'So she did, poor decur : well, it's true,' he said, holding Percy's arm and working it up and down as he spoke. 'You be come into the world in a 'urry and now yer a young man in a 'urry. I'll be caddled if you ain't,' he chuckled, and paused. 'Now where's my old bucket as I was carrying before you basted into me?'

Percy found the bucket in the ditch, and Mr. Gromm moved off with measured step towards the well.

Percy picked up his bicycle. It seemed hardly worth while to remount it for the hundred yards that remained, so he ran swiftly home, leading his machine beside him.

Silly old jobbernowl, said Percy, as he raced along. Just because he's known me ever since I was child, thinks he's got the right to talk to me like a school teacher, now I'm twenty. But that's just the trial of living in a hole and corner graveyard sort of a village like Edgerly. Everybody do know everybody, and you can't enter for a newspaper competition without every soul alive in the place talking about it, till you're in your coffin.

Bother these old dummies out of the ark, he thought. Can't they imagine that things is changing and even Edgerly'll be changed in ten years? They want folks like me as can move a bit fast, and 'as got hold of one or two ideas more modern than Stephenson's Rocket, and they'll be respecting me for it one day. Only I shan't wait for that—I shall be off on some good job, running me own garage somewhere by then. Now I wonder, has that

paper come yet, and whether I'll 'ave got a prize? That's all I want, just a little money to start me off.

Percy was always in a hurry on Friday evenings to get home from the motor works where he worked, because Friday evening brought his copy of the *Live Wire*, and every week this paper ran a phrase-making competition for which Percy always entered.

He stood to make £500 out of this competition any week. Probably it would be soon, but certainly it must come eventually. Then he was always going in for other competitions and lucky draws. That brought the odds down still further.

He flung the bicycle against the bank and jumped up, scorning the steps. Percy's parents had died when he was young, and ever since he had lived with Mr. and Mrs. Feather and their son Amos who kept the one village shop—'Selfridge's' as Percy used to call it derisively.

'Hullo, Amos,' he said, pushing the door open so sharply that the old clapper bell rang madly. 'Post come all right?'

'Here it be, then, Mister Live Wire,' said Amos, throwing him the orange-coloured packet. It was always kept for Percy to undo. He quickly tore it open and turned to the competition page.

'Well,' he said after a few seconds, 'no luck this time—gone to a post-office worker at Birmingham this week. I bet that'll be some mud-headed old fool who don't know how to use the money.'

'Well, there's another of your sixpences fooled away,' said Amos, who was a good ten years older than Percy; a gentle, dark-faced fellow who spoke very seldom, and very quietly when he did speak.

'Oh, shut that, Amos,' said Percy, 'you're as bad as old Gromm you are, and how do you know I haven't won one of the small prizes. As it happens, I have, there you are. Ten shillings—now who's wasted sixpence? Eh?'

Percy felt triumphant and excited. It was an omen. He called old Mr. and Mrs. Feather in from the garden and astounded them with the news. As he ate tea he told them of his ideas for getting on, of the main road garage he would be running one day, and who knows what that might lead to? He talked very fast.

After tea he insisted on Amos coming down to the pub to see a few fellows and celebrate his win. Amos came reluctantly; he preferred his garden. Percy was rather annoyed to find Gromm and a number of older men in the bar-parlour. As he was telling them the news, they heard a car outside, and in another moment a stranger stepped in—a brisk gentleman in the forties apparently.

The assembled company had hardly taken him well in when they found he was addressing them with rapid speech.

‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘My name’s Captain Whitaker, and I’m helping to organize a kind of lucky draw to help the Cottage Hospital at Overleigh. We have to run it in the form of a competition so as not to come up against the lottery laws. The first prize is a thousand pounds, and this is what’ll interest you—the entries are confined to members of the county, so you see it’s bound to go to a county man. We aim to get another thousand for the hospital beyond the prize money, and there are only a few more tickets to go. Who’s on?’

Percy felt his heart jump into his throat—a thousand pounds! This must be the very reason why he had felt so certain that ten bob was an omen. As he stared at the beer-ringed table, the yellow panels and the red faces all round him, he had a curious feeling. They all bulged and leaned towards him with a heavy insistence. He was going to win that £1,000. He knew it. The excitement of the evening spun round this point.

‘Here you are, sir,’ he said, ‘I’ll have a ticket. I’ll ’ave two, and make certain.’

'Good man,' said Captain Whitaker, and began to tear them out of a book.

'I'll tell you what, Amos,' said Percy, 'you take one of them tickets, and we'll make a bargain to share the winnings if either strikes lucky—see?'

'Well, I doan know——'

'Oh, come on,' said Percy, 'do fer once 'ave a little gumption. Don't you *want* a thousand pounds?'

'Oh, all right,' said Amos, looking lugubrious. 'I'll take one. It's a bond, then.'

The other men in the room hardly seemed to have grasped the captain's drift. They watched him steadily as he tore out the coupons and explained the competition to Percy.

'Wait a minute,' said Mr. Gromm. ''Ow much did yer say these tickets were?'

A chorus of 'Ahs' and nods ran round the parlour, as if Mr. Gromm had found words for something the others had been unable to formulate.

'Five bob each.'

There was a silence : then Mr. Gromm spoke again, as if for the whole company.

'No, thank ye,' he said, 'I ain't got no five bobs to go chuckin' away, even if others have. Times be middlin' 'ard for that kind o' *rashness*.'

A new shifting of legs and elbows expressed a plain forthright assent to this, and Mr. Gromm, gathering way, shook his bearded face and was heard to mutter : 'Foolishness, if you ask me, all them 'ere sweeps and draws as seems to be all the go——'

'Well,' said the captain cheerfully, cutting him short, 'you're certainly at liberty to think what you please, and there's no obligation. Give us a half-pint, landlord, will you?'

He offered cigarettes round.

'I know,' he went on with the mug in his hand, 'you think that this is a new fangled sort of dodge. Now in the towns they're all on it. I've been right round Edgerly this evening—but not a ticket have I sold till our two friends here helped me out. They're the only two in the place who have got one.'

'You be struck us on a poor soil like,' said someone.

'Oh, that doesn't matter. As a matter of fact, we've really raised the money that we set out to get. The entries close to-night. We judge next week, and we'll let the winner know by post on Thursday. We shan't have the results in any paper.'

Again Percy's heart jumped. Only a week to wait, then.

'Well, I hope one of you enterprising young fellows wins it,' said the captain, and he was gone.

He went out of the door like a log out of a pond, causing a swirling and scuffling behind him, and a general effect of subsiding.

Through the stir Percy became aware that old Gromm's eyes were fixed on him, and he glared defiance at him.

'That be a fine thing to do with ten bob,' Gromm said at length so that the whole room could hear. 'You take it from me, no good never come out of tossing yer money about like so much hay. No good carn't come out of them lotteries and lucky dips, my lad. No good carn't come . . .'

'Ain't it my business?' said Percy, and he rushed out of the room and struck out into the quiet coloured May evening to try to walk it off.

Fed up, he was, with all their fatheaded naggings and niggling on in the same way that they always had done. Because it always had been done, then it must be right, and old Gromm lecturing him like any schoolboy in front of half the village. Of course he was in a hurry, and that was more than any of them ever had the sharpness to be. The

soil was in their bloomin' heads, that was what the trouble was, generations of it, and they wouldn't think or move much different to a clod of earth.

Their ways annoyed him. Their thoughts annoyed him. Their drawling old country speech annoyed him—he was learning to speak as if he didn't come from the back end of nowhere, why couldn't they?

And Amos would be as bad as any of them if he didn't look out. Though he had more regard for Amos than anyone. Amos was a fine chap and a brainy chap too, but why wouldn't he raise a bit more go and gumption? Time and again Percy had pointed out to Amos that as the town crept out towards the villages and the workers at the motor factory, many of them, now lived nearer to Edgerly than to town shops, Amos had a big custom waiting for him if only he'd look alive and stock a bit more and go after them. But Amos wouldn't; he was content to fumble and fuddle along like a grannie, just because he had always done it, because his Dad had always done it. Oh, he fairly wanted to take Amos and kick some more up-to-date ideas into him. It made him quite frantic.

And then to have that hairy old mommet of a Gromm sneer at him, the scrimping old muckworm, what right had he? He couldn't stand it much longer. He'd walk his chinks and clear out of the village.

Percy stumbled and kicked his way across a field. It was almost dark, and though he knew every bit of the land by day, he nearly went sprawling several times. Then he had to feel his way through a corner of wood to get back into the road again. He had to strain his eyes and feel in the darkness, and he forgot his anger for a bit.

When he regained the road, he felt calmer. At least, he told himself, he had already shown himself more capable of striking out than anyone in the village. Who else in Edgerly had ever had the gumption at the age of fifteen to

walk off and get himself a job at the new motor factory ? But for that he'd have been a farm labourer all his days. All very well to take your time if you've got nothing better to do than that. All he needed now was a little money to start off with. He thought suddenly of the Hospital Competition and of the curious sensation he had had in the bar-parlour. Yes, he still felt the same. Something was going to come of it. And he felt glad that Amos was in it too, it would be a bond of brotherhood between them. Through it he'd get Amos to his way of thinking : get him out of the old dead-and-alive ruts and they'd do big things together. And in only a week the news would be out. It would come in a letter on Friday. He was trembling with excitement when he got home.

So Percy's thoughts ran on all the week, wove themselves into the rhythm of the machines at the shops, raced in his head as he pedalled home from the works in the still cool evening. It didn't matter whether he or Amos won the prize. They'd both share it.

But on Thursday evening he found the suspense almost unbearable. He drifted out for a walk after tea and finished up at the pub. When he passed Mr. Gromm he almost felt a sense of triumph at what was coming. As he got inside the bar, a friend said to the landlord :

'Ullo, here is Percy : now be that right wot you were telling us ?'

'Right enough,' the landlord answered, 'sure as I'm drawing yer a pint o' brown ale now. There was a young feller in 'ere an hour ago from Edgeminster, said as 'ow he couldn't say nothing definite but there was a rumour round as an Edgerly man had won that 'er 'ospital draw.'

Percy clasped his head between his hands and tried to keep calm. It *was* him or Amos, then. They were the only people in Edgerly who had taken tickets. He told himself to think no more about it, and wandered out again.

He hardly knew how he got through the rest of the evening. His sleep was restless and half-conscious.

There was no early post in Edgerly, so Percy had to be content to go off to work without news. He was bursting to tell Amos what he had heard. But Amos seemed to have forgotten the whole affair, and Percy could not bring himself to speak of it somehow.

He rode back from the works that evening in a fever. Would it be him or Amos? Not that it mattered which, really, but he'd sooner it fell to him to open the envelope. When he got in, there was his weekly *Live Wire* as usual, and another letter. He picked it up with pulsing heart. It was addressed to Amos in typescript. Percy glanced heedlessly through his paper. There was no prize for him in that. He could hardly resist opening the letter.

Then Amos came in.

'There's a letter for you, Amos,' said Percy.

'Oh,' said Amos, 'for me? Whoever's sent me a letter?'

'Look and see, I should.'

Amos opened the letter and read it very slowly. An expression of faint surprise crossed his eyes, then very quickly he glanced at Percy and put the letter in his pocket. He turned away.

'Is there anything—anything in it?' said Percy.

'No,' said Amos, and he went into the kitchen and shut the door. Percy could hear him talking in a low voice to his father.

Percy waited some time quite numb and dizzy with shock. What the hell did it mean? Why couldn't Amos tell him the news? Did he want to conceal it? Then a dreadful idea crossed his mind: supposing Amos did want to conceal it, so as to keep all the money for himself? He had no idea that Percy had already heard the rumour. The captain had said the draw was not to be published.

The whole air seemed to grow foggy and difficult : as the suspicion crept on his mind, Percy wandered moodily out of the shop door and up the village street, his chin sunk on his chest. Then from the distance he saw Amos run out of the cottage, pick up his own bike that was lying on the bank and ride off.

Percy, desperate now with hateful suspicion, watched him go. Off to see some lawyer or bank, was he, and get the whole thing out of the village at once ? Then Percy walked on and found himself at the pub again.

He sat down silently.

'Let's 'ave a beer,' he said, and after a bit, 'Sure that was right what you told me last night ?'

'Sure as I'm standing here,' said the landlord. 'And there's two or three on 'em been in to Edgeminster to-day and say they 'eerd the same thing theyselves. 'Aven't you 'eerd nothin, then ?'

'Not a thing,' said Percy, 'at least . . .'

He never meant to talk about it, but it had been all pent up inside him for days now, and as he had another beer and then another the whole story came out.

'That ain't fair, then,' they were saying. 'Why, 'e agreed to share it with you in this very room. I 'eerd 'im with my own ears.'

'That Amos always were a silent one. You watch him—they silent ones . . .'

An hour passed ; and another. Time and again they thrashed it out. Percy drank and drank, and when he plunged out it was dark and his head was whirling.

The loathsome meanness of it sickened him. They were a lot of maggots raised on a dunghill, every man of them, and Amos was as bad as the lot. To think that he had been looking forward to sharing this with Amos, helping him to do something a bit better, and it was his by right, and now the scroungy little scab, eaten up by stinking,

mean-minded greed, to grasp every penny as if it was his ticket for Heaven . . .

A bicycle lamp flashed in front of him, shone in his face, and there was Amos on his own bicycle.

'Hi !' shouted Percy, and caught Amos by the arm, almost knocking him over.

'Mind out, you'll have me over,' said Amos. 'What the hell are you playing at ?'

'Who said you could take my bike ?' said Percy.

'What's up with you ?'

'Where's that money of mine ?'

'What money ?'

'Oh, you know all right,' shouted Percy at the top of his voice, 'that competition money, five hundred pounds, as is mine by rights. I know what was in that letter all right.'

'Don't be a bloody fool,' said Amos. 'You be drunk. Get home at once.'

He tried to move on, but Percy pulled the bicycle away. Amos pushed him aside pretty hard, and Percy fell down on the road. He at once got up, swearing filthily, all the tension of the week breaking out, and hit Amos as hard as he could in the face. Amos reeled back, tripped over the ditch, and fell heavily through the wooden paling around Mr. Gromm's front garden. It broke with a splintering crash. Amos caught at some rickety poles covered with ramblers and pulled them down with him. Instantly a dozen dogs began barking madly and leaping at the end of their chains. Doors were flung open and people shouted. Amos got up, festooned with brambles, and spitting a tooth out of his mouth. Then he snarled like an animal and rushed at Percy.

They closed and swayed in the darkness, and fell headlong into the ditch, clawing and pounding at each other. One of them was bleeding violently from the nose, but neither

knew nor cared which. Collars were torn off and faces punched and ground into the earth.

When they were hauled out of the ditch, and lugged off each other like fighting dogs, there was blood all over their shirts and faces, and Percy was sobbing with exhaustion and passion.

There was a ring of people round them. Shafts of light flowed out of the cottage doors, and everybody moved with huge grotesque shadows. To Percy it was all half-realized and nightmarish. Mr. Gromm was in the middle of the group.

'Hi, you two,' he said. 'Percy—Amos—whatever be arl this about, you young nineters, you?'

'It's 'im,' Percy shouted. 'Wants to sneak off with that five 'undred quid 'e won in the 'ospital draw.'

'I never won the 'ospital draw.'

'Yes, you did, you did !' yelled Percy. 'Then what was in that letter you 'ad?'

'It wur a price list of some tinned fruits for our stock, if yer want to know, and I 'ad to catch the post to-night with an order.'

'I don't believe yer . . . I don't . . .'

'Now, stop yer clapperclawin' yer blasted young fool,' said Mr. Gromm. 'Amos never won that.'

'Ow do you know?'

'Cause I won it meself, then.'

'What !' said everybody. 'Mr. Gromm ! You been mighty quiet about it. You took a ticket after arl. Well, there !'

'Yes,' said Mr. Gromm. 'So 'appened as I met that Captain Whitaker next day in Edgeminster, and 'e tarked me round to take a ticket along of two young cockerels as I sold 'im.'

'Well,' said Percy, as this new grievance bore in on him, 'of all the unfair . . .'

Words failed him. ' 'Ere 'ave I been goin' in fur these things for years, and now the very first time 'e tries, 'e calmly marches off with a thousand pounds.'

He broke away and was going off by himself, when he felt a hand on his arm. It was Gromm.

' 'Ere, Percy my lad. Come into my 'ouse. I want to tark to yer.'

Percy felt inclined to jerk his arm away. Why should Gromm always take it on him to lecture him like a school-boy? But the old man compelled him somehow.

Inside the cottage kitchen, Gromm made him sit down.

' Now keep quiet for a few minutes,' he said, ' I be going to make a good cup of tea.'

He busied himself with the kettle and tea canister, and Percy was thankful to sit silent, where no one could see him.

Mr. Gromm reminded him of Adam, somehow, everybody's forefather. His twisted hands were the colour of earth itself. You could hardly see his face for hair. He still kept his shapeless hat on his head.

Old Gromm had got the better of him, then. It was only luck, of course, but somehow it seemed to prove Percy wrong in everything. Gromm gave him a cup of potent brew, took one himself, sat down and said, very slowly, as he cut off some plug tobacco, rolled it up and lit his pipe :

' Didn't I tell yer no good couldn't come along of this? Now yer see.'

Percy sighed. It was all right for Gromm.

' But that thur wasn't wot I want ter say. Supposin' you 'ad won, wot then? I don't 'old with this easy come money. I'm in two minds to give the 'ole stook of it back to the 'ospital. Money's a thing as yer 'as to take yer time with, to my way of thart. As the years go on, bits o' things stick to yer. But yer 'as to take yer time, and do it fur yerself. Now I always said about you, as yer'd be lucky if

yer ever got a fiftieth part o' what yer thart to get. Been saying that fer years, I 'ave. Now what do you figure a fiftieth part o' this thousand pounds to be?'

'Twenty pounds,' said Percy.

Mr. Gromm rose and went to a cupboard.

'Well,' he said, 'take this twenty pound, Percy. The captain brart it me in banknotes along o' the news a couple of hours back.'

'What?' said Percy, unable to believe his ears. 'For me? But look 'ere, Mr. Gromm . . .'

He was cut short every time he tried to express his thanks. After he had said good night, Mr. Gromm stood at the window and watched him walk slowly down the road.

Percy was amazed as much at having the money at all as at the way it came. He held the notes in his hand inside his breast pocket. Twenty pounds was not so much as a thousand, but it was a lot. He had never had so much money in his life. A thousand pounds was too much to expect. But this twenty pounds was real, solid. It was *possessions*.

He had an impulse to run home at top speed and give the whole lot to Amos. Then he thought he could make it up with Amos without that. Amos had the shop and the house coming to him. Then what should he do with it? He would buy a motor bike. No, he would take evening classes. No, he would take a holiday in London. That might lead to some new job.

Percy walked more and more slowly. Eventually he came to a standstill, and let the night air fan his face while he gazed up at the stars. It was very still. Somewhere an owl was hooting, and there was a sound of murmured voices behind a lighted window. He felt the age-old life of Edgerly lap quietly round him. The beginning of the evening seemed a very long time ago. Somehow Percy

felt much older than he did an hour before. Somehow, now he had got the money, he did not want to do anything with it for a long while. He was in no hurry. He would just leave it for a few months—for a year or two. There was plenty of time. It was a good thing to take your time.

The Eyes

IT had been a long day at the hospital. Like arches in a cloister the grey hours stretched backwards, a succession of long, exhausting days. With quick nervous movements Dr. Sylvester sped down the corridor to the street door. His rapid step was on the verge of running, like a man escaping. He saw the green paint of the walls was moist with the rime of the November evening. Fog had entered the passage and each electric light bulb was surrounded by a nimbus of misty air. The cement floor resounded dully underneath his feet.

It was a double swinging door which opened on to the street, green painted, with a brown worn streak on each side where impatient feet had pushed it open. Drawing on his gloves as he went, Dr. Sylvester jerked his shoulder against the swinging door. But as it gave to let him through he heard a voice calling down the passage.

‘Doctor ! Doctor Sylvester !’

‘Oh, damn,’ he muttered, ‘what now, what now ?’

A second later he would have been through the doors away from the hospital. For a moment he hesitated and let the doors swing to behind him, but a nurse came running up the passage and he was caught again.

‘I’m so sorry, Doctor,’ she said, ‘Sister asked me to find you before you went.’

‘Well ?’

‘Dr. Sterndale isn’t here yet ; there’s a case come in ; in the receiving-room now—it’s a——’

Dr. Sylvester turned abruptly and ran past her up the passage, without listening to the rest of her explanations. As he pushed by making her step back against the wall with his sudden movement, she saw his face was white, almost grey, and very tired. His black keen eyes were sunk in his head, and the skin dark and discoloured underneath them. His lips were pale, nearly as pale as his face.

'Still,' she thought, 'it's no use being a doctor, or a nurse, if you expect to have your life to yourself. And Dr. Sylvester was lucky to have a home and a wife and baby; his life wasn't *all* hospital. And again, if a doctor likes to do a hospital job as well as a practice, of course he gets used up; it's his own choice.' She was forgetting, or perhaps never knew, that Dr. Sylvester's work at the hospital was unpaid.

Sylvester burst into the receiving-room and closed the door sharply.

'Well?' he said.

The Sister was there: with her, sitting on the bench that ran down one side of the bare boarded room, was a young woman; an old looking young woman, unbecomingly and dingily dressed. Her sallow skin and pale lips were utterly untouched by lipstick or powder, as if she had patiently refused to take any interest in her own appearance.

Lying limply in her arms was a little girl of four or five. The child's body seemed stiff and resistant: as if the arms could no longer make her comfortable. Her head hung back across the crook; rather too far back. The face was flushed and the eyes suffused with blood. The breathing was deep and heavy. The child was in a stupor of feverish sleep, or perhaps quite unconscious.

For a second no one spoke.

Sylvester, turning his back on the two women, flung off his coat and gloves and threw them on the table.

'Well?' he said, as he did so.

'This little girl was brought in about a quarter of an hour ago . . . ' began the Sister, not quite certain if she had his attention. 'Dr. Sterndale seems to have been delayed, and the case . . . '

'How did it begin?' said Sylvester, interrupting her and turning to the mother with spasmodic swiftness.

She glanced up at the Sister, not quite certain if she was to speak.

'Yesterday,' she said, and hesitated. Sylvester began to pace the room.

'Go on,' he said.

'Yesterday morning, when she woke up she seemed a bit queer and heavy; and as soon as my husband looked at her he said: "Oh, look at her eyes, whatever has the child done to her eyes?" I thought she must have caught a bad cold in her eyes . . . '

The woman paused. She found it hard to talk to this pale, abrupt doctor, who spoke in rapid nervous jerks, or said nothing and scarcely seemed to be listening.

The brilliant electric light beat hard on them, turning their faces dead white. It shed a dream-like brightness and cast hard-edged shadows all round them: the white starched apron and tall figure of the Sister stood vivid and luminous against the dark clothes of the mother. With an effort she went on speaking.

'Then she seemed very heavy all yesterday, and she had a bad headache. She just seemed to be asleep all the time, but was quite quiet—I didn't like her being so quiet. I gave her a little soup, but she didn't seem to care for it, though she took it.'

As she spoke Sylvester placed a thermometer under the child's arm. Then he began to take her pulse. He found the hand was very hot and dry and the pulse slow, yet strongly marked and irregular. He turned up one of the child's eyelids and gazed for a moment at the eye; the ball

was discoloured and filled with blood. He let it go, and as the dark lashes sunk again on the cheek, the child made no sign nor movement.

‘Go on,’ he said to the mother, ‘don’t stop.’

‘When my husband came in,’ she went on, “‘I don’t like her looks,” he said. “We ought to have the doctor, if she don’t look better in the morning.” So I told him, let’s see how she sleeps. I only hope I was right to leave it.’

She broke off, as Sylvester took the thermometer from the child’s arm. She sat very still, not moving the child on her lap, though her arms were aching. Surely he would say something, would tell her something about the child now, would let her know what he was thinking or what he knew.

He scarcely glanced at the thermometer, and handed it straight back to the Sister. In fact he scarcely needed to glance at it. He knew now the temperature would be a hundred and two or over.

‘Well,’ he said, his voice still sounding stern and impatient.

‘She slept quite quiet,’ said the mother, gathering resolution in some way from his abruptness. ‘She slept so well I thought it must be all right, but she was no better nor worse this morning. Just lay quite listless—then this evening she got so that I couldn’t rouse her at all. I couldn’t do nothing till my husband was back, and I brought her straight round here.’

‘Did your husband come?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I have two others—she’s the eldest.’

He nodded, and turned to the Sister and spoke quickly in a low voice, at the same time seizing his coat from the table and beginning to put it on.

‘Yes, Doctor,’ she heard the Sister answer, ‘of course. The small annexe of Ward B is quite empty. I’ll see to it at once. . . .’

‘No—I’ll see to that,’ he said, ‘you see to the child—then I must really go.’

He was at the door as he finished speaking. He pulled it open, then darted back into the room as the woman stood up with her child.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, ‘good-bye,’ nodded quickly, and was gone without waiting for her to reply.

Five minutes later Dr. Sylvester was again in the passage hurrying towards the door that led to the outside world. Once that door closed behind him he would be shut off from the strain and overwork of the last few weeks. It had gone too far now. He must rest.

But as he walked his step slackened, then involuntarily he paused before the door and stood waiting : he bit the fingers of the gloves he carried, pulling them with jerks against his teeth.

He had done all that was necessary. Sterndale was already in the hospital ; he could hear his hearty voice echoing in the stone-floored corridors behind him. It would be absurd to go back now to give him personal details of this one case : and he was too tired for Sterndale. Besides, it wasn’t the child he was thinking of ; she was going to die. She had meningitis ; the fulminant type that killed quickly. Already her blood-stained eyes had reflected their last image of her mother—the last sight of this world she would ever see.

For a few moments he stood biting his glove, then impulsively he pushed the doors open and stepped out, taking the direction which led to his home.

After a few moments he turned and walked back again, treading gently as if he were breaking some private rule. He passed the swing doors and reached the main entrance to the hospital. Here he carefully filled and lit a pipe, and took his stand in the shadow watching the tobacco glow in the darkness. From time to time a short sigh escaped him.

He had to wait ten minutes : then he saw the mother come out.

'Perhaps I'm going your way,' said Sylvester. 'Let me take you to the corner.'

The woman walked by his side in silence.

'Did the Sister tell you?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' she answered.

Again they walked in silence.

'She's not your only child, you said?'

'No, sir—I have two others.'

'But she was your first.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are the others perfectly well?'

'Perfectly, thank you, sir—*now*. But then so was she. Supposing one of them was to wake up with those eyes to-morrow. What am I to do? How can I be safe?'

She spoke rapidly but very calmly.

'Can anyone be safe?'

He asked the question in sympathy, yet it sounded almost like a rebuke. They neither of them spoke again till they reached the end of the street.

'I must go here,' said Sylvester. 'Good-bye.'

He watched her pass two or three street lamps and she was lost in the misty darkness. She never looked back.

Sylvester began to walk home at a fierce pace. He wished he had said more to her. But what was the object of dwelling on it? His duty was to rest his nerves and keep his judgment clear : why pick out this one case from a week of too much strain? It was his knowledge the hospital needed, not misplaced sensibility and exacerbated nerves.

She was beyond sympathy, too. For the moment the calamity, like a terrible wound, when it is first inflicted, gave her no anguish. 'My first-born child is dying,' she

was saying to herself—and it filled her with strange exaltation and strength.

☉ Sylvester began to share in this exaltation. He strode on down the long avenue of street lamps : they glowed, two or three in front of him, in the wreaths of mist, each one casting round it an exhalation of doubtful light : a wheel of yellow ringed with blue that slowly revolved as he approached.

Who can be certain ? A doctor faces danger every day, from fevers, from contagion, breaths laden with death, and touches of putrefying flesh. Closing the swing doors cannot cut off the dangers which may follow him out of the hospital into his private life and his home. Another tread was following his now ; he turned and in the fog could see no one, only the muffled steps went on and a man cleared his throat.

He turned from the lights and vivid pictures of the day were painted on the darkness before his open eyes. He saw the mother on the seat with the child unmoving in her arms : and the bright light beating on the child's face and fevered eyes : now rose-hued, now filled with flames and rubies ; now immeasurably extended and far away, like a red-eyed western sky where veins and arteries hang in the air.

Then he stopped ; and turning, at once walked quickly back to the hospital and shouldered through the swing doors.

'Sylvester,' said Sterndale an hour later in his deep, commanding voice, 'I'm surprised to see you still here. I thought you'd gone home. Did you have any sleep last night ?'

'Oh, an hour or two : I'm all right, just a bit tired.'

'My dear fellow, your face is grey—your eyes look a

mile away : and you're walking about like a man in a dream. Do go home and get to bed.'

'I'm going to stay to-night. There's something I want to see.'

'There's not the slightest need : I shall be here myself till midnight or after. What is it ?'

'A meningitis case in B annexe.'

'What, that child who came in this evening ? There's nothing to do. I can give you full details. She's bound to die.'

Sylvester looked hard at the floor as if he were talking to it.

'I know,' he said with a sudden jerk. 'That's why I'm going to stay.'

'I don't understand.'

'I want to watch the eyes just at the moment of death.'

Sterndale shook his head.

'Listen,' he said, 'you can do that some other time : you'll drop in your tracks.'

'I never drop in my tracks.'

'Why do you want to ?'

'Obviously,' said Sylvester without raising his eyes, 'because it's a particularly good opportunity. She will be unconscious from now till the time she dies : it will happen before the morning and then I can rest. Have you ever seen what I mean ?'

'Can't say I have.'

'Well, I have, but only once : and I want to see it again. I can promise you it's the only reason on earth that would make me stay to-night.'

Sterndale took him by the arm.

'You ought to think of the infection,' he said. 'You'll be bending over that child's face for hours, Sylvester. The breath from the nostrils is so dangerous. I wish you'd

listen to me, Sylvester . . . besides, you owe something to your wife and your own child : it's not safe ; especially in the state you're in.'

Sylvester gave a short high-pitched laugh. 'I'm sorry not to take your advice.' Then with galvanic swiftness he began to race up the stairs three at a time, and vanished.

Sterndale heard him calling on the floor above.

'Bring me an ophthalmoscope in the B annexe.'

Sylvester was alone in the room with the dying child. Save for the bright light at the head of the bed, the room was all in darkness. He paced steadily backwards and forwards, passing now into the light, now into the darkness again. Each time he turned, his shadow blotted out, then revealed again, the small unmoving body that lay propped on the pillows.

Sylvester's step was light and firm. He was no longer tired. He congratulated himself that he had stayed, and on his mounting exhilaration. Backwards and forwards he went, from wainscot to wainscot. In a steady rhythm of light and shade his shadow rose and fell, rose and fell. And the beam flashed in and out on the child's face as he passed now dark, now light, now dark, now light.

He paused and listened to the breathing just faintly audible in the stillness. A hesitation, the slightest flutter, and he was at the bedside, his face against the child's. For whole minutes he remained rigidly still, staring into the eye, feeling the faint whisper of breath against his forehead. It was now three in the morning, and Sylvester had lost all sense of time. The child seemed dead and yet not dead. Occasionally he paused and stared fixedly at her face from a distance.

There were three other empty beds round him. He rested on the bed farthest from the child, lost as it were in the shadowed distances of the room. He picked up a book and, holding it awkwardly so that some dim light fell on

it, peered at the print. He turned one page : then put it down.

Perhaps the child would not die till the morning. Already he had been waiting longer than he had expected. Sterndale had warned him of infection. He might next morning see his own child wake and look round with the same blood-filled eyes. That's what the mother had seen first. 'Look at the child's eyes,' her husband had said, 'whatever has the child been doing to her eyes?'

The breathing became more tremulous. Instantly Sylvester's shadow leapt across the room, and he was crouching over the bed. The eye was flooded with a bright light from the mirror of the ophthalmoscope ; the pupil had already been paralysed by atropine. Sylvester was looking into the depths of a motionless rose-red pool. The beam of light clarified the translucent outer tegument of the eye ; it shone past the cornea and the aqueous humour, through the tense and vitreous body with its hyaloid membrane, and gently irradiated the crimson floor of the pool itself—the delicate retina.

This deep background of red was now his whole field of vision. As he gazed the glowing pool changed into a vault of dark roseate midnight, stretching unfathomable leagues above his head, while he, sole gazer, stood rapt and frozen in timeless watching.

Far off at one side there glimmered a pale nebula of wax-like yellow, making the point where the optic nerve led to the brain behind. From here diverged the delicate and immense wanderings of the veins and arteries across his firmament : the veins deeper in colour and the measureless arteries gleaming like rubies. In those veins and arteries blood was steadily flowing, and would flow for a second more.

At the moment some purulent suffusion paralysed the brain, the blood paused in its steady passage, and the scene

changed. A minute colourless point, a hiatus in the blood-stream, appeared in each channel and moved in slow pulsations across the vault : then another. The flow changed to single beads, the last weak pulses of the heart. Sluggishly one final drop moved—paused ; moved ; then stopped. And the rose colour at once began to fade—faster and paler till the whole vision was drained of colour, and died away, misty and cere.

Sylvester stood back from his instrument with a sudden gush of human tenderness. It was a strange way to die. No tears : no love : just nameless material for medical observation. He closed his eyes, and under the lids the darkness became crimson and patterned like a damask : slowly it turned to purple, then to deepest black. He rang the bell for the nurses, and walked quickly out of the hospital.

In the street it was intensely cold. The street lamps were still burning, but not a soul was about. Sylvester felt too tired almost to walk. A horde of confused terrors attacked him. He should have followed Sterndale's advice. Sterndale was always right. He had been shut up for hours with the child. He had wantonly exposed his own child to the danger of infection.

Like a dwarfed figure in a nightmare he walked on through a dark and endless colonnade of light and shadows, tortured by the incessantly repeated thought of infection. He was oppressed by an intolerable feeling of eternity. His feet hurried him on faster and faster till without knowing it he ran.

When he reached home the house was silent. He felt his way in the darkness, without turning on the lights. His wife and baby were both in a sleep so deep that they neither turned nor sighed. He flung down his clothes quickly, forgetting even to wind his watch, and lay in bed trembling.

Soon a warm tide of sleep crept over him ; his limbs

were borne out like fronds of weed in a gentle stream ; he sank down through fathoms of deep green till he was lost in total blackness ; his body was carried restlessly this way and that on whispering currents. Salt fingers fretted at him, dissolving his flesh till his bones shimmered green and naked in the depths.

Shortly before dawn Sylvester moaned in his sleep. He was lying on his back with one arm flung behind his head. His breathing became spasmodic and heavy. In vain he struggled with the monstrous horrors of a nightmare. Lewd and ghastly faces pressed round, and touched him with their wet mouths. Cold tendrils closed round him, paralysing every limb. His soul wept with unbearable loathing and dread—abandoned and lost in the darkest pit of terror.

He screamed, yet knew he made no sound. His body lay like marble on the bed, and only deep sighs could escape the stifled penetralia of his bosom. He opened his eyes, and for many minutes lay awake, yet powerless to move. He sighed many times : and at last, with an effort of will, roused himself. The room was filled with cool grey winter light.

There was a rustle of movement from his wife's bed. 'What are you doing ?' she asked.

'I must get up for a few moments,' he said. 'I've had a terrible nightmare.'

She turned to look at him ; then cried out immediately :

'Oh, your eyes ! Whatever have you done to your eyes ?'

'What ?' said Sylvester, almost in a whisper.

'They're so terribly red and bloodshot.'

'Give me a looking-glass.'

He saw his eyes fevered and deep red, the whole ball suffused with blood.

Desperately calm, he told his wife what it meant. For a

few moments they sat silent, each avoiding the other's glance.

'Quick,' he said. 'Ring up Sterndale's house ; there's no time to lose. Ask him to help us. He'll do something.'

He watched her pick up the telephone by his bedside with trembling hands, and as she spoke the strength drained from his body. She turned to him.

'He says he must speak to you.'

He heard Sterndale's strong firm voice speaking in his ear.

'Is that you, Sylvester ? You should have followed my advice. Your nerves are running away with you. It's a bare twelve hours since you first saw that child : only three or four hours since you were in any real danger of infection.'

'Yes,' said Sylvester, dully.

'Well ?' came the voice.

'Good God,' cried Sylvester. 'The incubation period ! I must be going mad. It's absurd—how could I forget that ?'

'You'll forget your own name if you aren't careful,' said Sterndale. 'Go back to bed and get about twelve hours' sleep. Good-bye, Sylvester.'

'It's all right,' he said, feeling his heart beating wildly, 'it's all right. Good God, how could I forget. I must be going mad.'

'But your eyes,' said his wife. 'Your eyes !'

'Nothing. Just some queer nervous reaction. It's what I've been seeing and thinking. And my being too tired. It's strange the symptoms your mind can produce when it runs away like this. Damned strange . . . rather frightening. . . .'

He flung himself on the bed and burst into a torrent of tears and laughter.

Old Women are Tough

WHATEVER does that old woman do with herself alone all day? What are her thoughts, her feelings, her pleasures, her pains? Every day, every week, what goes on inside her?

The lane gradually grew more broken and grassy. It led right away from the village and the other houses, climbing as it went: at the point where it vanished into the fields stood old Sally's cottage, just under the brow of the downs. Clara left the pony and trap and went in. This was before the War, in the days when motors were very rare in the village.

The little gate was half open. The weeds and brambles of the hedgerow had grown through it and bound it fast. There was no sign of Sally.

The cottage door stood open, too. Clara went in. The sitting-room was silent except for an alarm-clock that ticked on alone. There were cold ashes in the grate. Dirty lace curtains were drawn across the minute window. On the bare-topped table someone had left a sooty kettle, an old black skirt, a shapeless piece of butter in paper. There was no sign of Sally. On the floor stood a packing-case.

Clara went into the garden and called again. A heap of ashes lay right against the front door and covered the path. House rubbish and dirt of all sorts, some of it parcelled in newspaper, was lying in the long grass. At the back of the cottage where the garden ran into a steep wooded

bank, the hedge had completely disappeared in the undergrowth.

It was on this bank that thousands of snowdrops grew every February: masses of white blossoms sheltered on thread-like stalks among the brambles and the rubbish. Sally used to charge sixpence to anyone who cared to come and pick the snowdrops, and plenty of people came.

'It's the slant of that bank,' she would explain, with an air of cleverness, as if she had arranged it herself. 'Catches the winter sun, and keeps the cold from the downs off: you won't grow snowdrops like that anywhere else. Give me your sixpence, and go and get 'em.'

Clara wandered about. Sally was nowhere to be seen. Presently a black cat approached and miaowed stridently and accusingly at her. Clara went back to the pony trap and drove away.

She had to make a long circuit to get back on to the road, and presently she passed the workhouse with its infirmary: a large grey-blue building with rows of uncurtained windows. As she approached, a black figure came into sight, bicycling slowly against the wind, and they met at the gate. It was her uncle, the rector of the village.

'Good morning, Uncle William,' said Clara.

'Ah, good morning, my dear,' said Uncle William, dismounting. He looked upset. He sighed, and shook his head as if to encourage enquiries.

'What's up?' said Clara.

'I'm upset,' he said. 'I'm really upset. It's about old Mrs. Briggs. I'm just going in to see her.'

'What?' said Clara, 'our old Sally Briggs that lives in the cottage past the Upper Pond?'

'Yes.'

'You don't mean to say you've put her in here? Why, she ate it.'

'She does hate it,' said Uncle William.

'I should think so,' said Clara. 'Why, she's half a gipsy. In fact mother says she was a gipsy till she married.'

'I know all about her,' said Uncle William.

'But surely . . .' Clara broke off because words failed her. 'Is she ill?'

'Well, she did have a touch of bronchitis, but I must say the doctor made the most of it. Spender was very anxious to have her in the infirmary where she would be properly looked after.'

'But what about her niece?' asked Clara. 'I thought she always looked after her.'

Uncle William nodded and sighed again. 'She has done for many years,' he said, 'but really it was getting too much for her. She's got a big family of children, you know, and there's another one impending. It was really she who especially asked me to get Sally in.'

'What's the mystery about Sally?' said Clara.

'I don't know,' said Uncle William. 'The other women seem to think very badly of her. I've been told her house is full of stolen stuff; but I always say I won't listen to such idle gossip.'

Well, she certainly never lets anyone in if she can help it: she has precious little to say to anyone. How's she getting on?'

'She seems to be up against everyone and everything,' said Uncle William. 'I wish you'd come in and see her with me: perhaps you could cheer her up a bit.'

'Well, I'll come,' said Clara. 'But I don't think she'll even know me. I haven't seen her for nearly a year.'

'Never mind, come and try,' he said.

They left the pony and trap in charge of the porter, and Uncle William led the way down stone corridors and past nurses to Sally's ward.

'Good morning, Matron,' he said at the door. 'I've

just come to have a look at Mrs. Briggs. Is she . . . ?' He expressed the rest with a despondent gesture.

'I think you'll find her somewhat better, Mr. Pedder. She's found her tongue a bit, anyway.'

Sally was not in the large ward. There were only five or six beds in the room, each with its old woman. They sat up wearing red jackets, either knitting or doing nothing. There were flowers about, and the room looked bright with sunlight.

They crossed to Sally's bed in the far corner. She was huddled up, half-sitting, half-lying. A pair of long brown hands were clasped claw-like on the bed-cover. Under her half-shut eyes she seemed to be staring at them intently.

'Well, now, Sally,' began Uncle William, 'and how do you find yourself this morning?'

No answer came. Uncle William tried again, in a sympathetic voice, 'Not too grand, I expect, eh?'

Sally opened her beady eyes and looked at him.

'Oh, 'tis you, Mister Pedder, is it? I thart as ye'd come to-day, somehow or other. Well, perhaps I'm not too grand. Tho' I must say I have felt a lot worser than what I do now. But there then, what can you expect, all stewed up together in this turmoil!' As she emphasized and lingered on the words a peculiar accent of grievance and venom came into her voice.

Uncle William, with a cheerful smile, hastened to introduce Clara.

'I've brought you a visitor, Sally. Look and tell me if you know who it is.'

Sally looked without interest.

'No,' she said. 'Can't say as I do. The light be all agin me here.'

Clara turned so that the light struck her face. 'Try again, Mrs. Briggs,' she said. 'I think you'll remember me.'

'Ah,' said Sally. 'I do seem to remember your face, miss, but I couldn't put a name to 'un. My poor old head ain't what it useter be.'

'It's a long time since we met,' said Clara. 'I haven't seen you since last February, I think. I came to gather some of your snowdrops.'

'Ah, yes,' said Sally. 'They snowdrops.' But she was still more occupied with her own thoughts than with her visitors.

Clara made another effort.

'I picked a splendid bunch,' she said. 'You had a wonderful bank of them, didn't you?'

'Yes,' said Sally, 'they snowdrops o' mine be great favourites. Everybody comes to gather 'em. Pay six-pence and gather yer fill. Ah, poor things, there'll be no one to look after them now I'm took. It'll be . . .'

'When I came,' said Clara quickly, 'we both of us had a good laugh at your cat. He was a black one with a very long thin tail. He sat before the fire and miaowed and miaowed, so that I thought he must be ill or something.'

'Ah,' said Sally, 'that'd be my Tummus. He were always a miaowler, he were. No, he weren't ill, young lady, he's just a rare one to miaowl.'

Uncle William nodded hopefully.

'I remember you picked him up to put him out, Mrs. Briggs,' Clara said, 'and he spat and growled at you like a fury. Then you took your besom and fairly swept him out of the door. I did laugh at him.'

Sally chuckled. 'Ah, I mind that day, I mind that day,' she said, 'and how it caused you to laugh, young miss. I remembers it now as clear as daylight. Fair swep' him out of the room, did I? Well, well. Yes, we had a hearty laugh together, didn't us? Tummus always were one to miaowl. Not so bad he weren't if I was set there alone, but he couldn't abide me to have company.'

'I expect he's a clever cat, isn't he?' said Clara.

'Ah, now, he be a clever cat. He never goes hungry, I can tell you. He takes particular notice o' that. Often he's been gone down to the woods two and three days together, and I begin to think as I've seen the larst of 'im. Then he turns up with his belly all stuck out like a flower-pot. And what is more remarkable, he never forgets fer to bring back a nice young rarbit for my stewpan, too. And when I put it on to cook, as soon as 'e savours the smell of it he'll miaowl and miaowl till I give 'im a bit. Yes, he be a clever cat, although a miaowler.'

Sally was almost smiling to herself now, and Clara and Uncle William's eyes met with a look of pleasure. At this moment a nurse bustled by Sally's bed.

'Why, you *are* all dumped down in your bed, Granny,' she said. 'Let's give you a lift up.' There followed a shaking and patting of pillows, while Sally watched her angrily.

'Say "thank you," Granny, do now,' said the nurse.

'Thank you, my dear,' she said, very bitterly.

'There,' Sally said when she had gone, 'that's just like *them*. Coming and shaking a body up like that, when I've got company too. They can't let me bide, always doing some tomfoolery or another, young hussies. Carn't please yerself how yer lay in bed now, it seems.'

'Come,' said Uncle William, 'you were rather sunk down, you know. I think you look much more comfortable now.'

But Sally stared in front of her and said nothing.

'I do like those red jackets you all wear,' said Clara. 'They look so nice and cheerful.'

Sally drew a deep breath. 'Well,' she said slowly, 'I can't say as I fancies 'em meself.' All the venom had returned.

'But, Sally, it really suits you very well. You look nice in it.'

'I don't say as perhaps there mightn't be here and there one,' she said, 'as the colour would suit. But fer to put 'em on arl of us right down the ward—like great glouts of blood they looks like to me. And to my mind blood is a very suspicious sort of a colour in a hospital, even if it is only the Union. Can't say as I ever cared much for the colour of blood.'

Uncle William cleared his throat and held out a shapeless parcel.

'There,' he said. 'My wife has sent you this shawl. She thought you'd be glad of it very likely.'

Sally slowly took the parcel and her bony gnarled fingers began to pluck at the knot. It seemed as if those rheumatic hands would never manage it, but when one of the others made a movement to help her she said nothing, but drew the parcel away resentfully. At length it was done, and she took the shawl out.

'Ah, now, that's a real kind thought,' she said. 'Eh, but that's a beautiful shawl, that be—none of yer common, half-cottony then. This be beautiful soft and thick!'

She held it to her cheek, and Uncle William glanced hopefully at Clara.

'Now you tell your lady, sir,' said Sally, 'as I thanks *her*. I thanks *her* most respectful and grateful fer her kind favour.'

'Put it on, Mrs. Briggs,' said Clara. 'I want to see how you look in it.'

'No, no, young miss,' said Sally, 'let it bide. Not while any of *them* is around. Like as not they'd come an' take that from off of me.'

'I'm sure they wouldn't. Why should they? They wouldn't take it from her, would they, uncle?'

'Oh, wouldn't they then,' said Sally with triumph.

'They tookt my own good shawl, miss, wot I come 'ere in. Indeed they did. I'd 'ad that for over thirty years, I 'ad, an' wore it almost day and night. It mightn't 'a been in its first heyday, as the saying is, but it were my shawl, and a great deal too good fer to be tore up to polish these 'ere floors with. What did they do that for then? Eh?'

Her voice rose to a shriller, harsher note: it began to smack of a tavern brawl, and a street fight between two women.

'Urrr——' she said, 'them young drabs. They be up to anything . . . young . . .'

Uncle William raised his hand with a calming gesture. Clara was beginning to find it almost a contest between herself and Sally's sense of injury. The only way to get Sally better was to overcome that element in her mind that seemed to be almost consciously resisting. She would attack it openly this time.

'How do you find the food here?' she said. 'They do you pretty well, I've heard.'

Sally sniffed.

'Well,' she said, 'I suppose there ain't no use grumbling about the victuals—not that it's much of 'em as *I* touches. A cup of tea and a morsel of bread and butter. Them's me breakfast, and they can't go fur wrong with that. But the rest's very middling. And you 'aves to take wot you gets, if you *can*. Now I could savour a nice bit o' rarbit—like what my old Tummus knew how to fetch me. But there, it ain't no use wishing after yer fancies here. It's nothing but that thur meat. I can't savour it some'ow—nasty tough tasteless stuff.'

'Now, now, Sally,' said Uncle William. 'You really must not say that, or think it. I've told you before we only buy the best English meat.'

'Hmph! Well, then you buys bad, sir. That's arl I

can say, or your cook don't know how to cook proper. Both, I wouldn't doubt !'

'There . . .' she began again. Then she suddenly relapsed into silence : drew back into herself with a jerk. It was as much as to say, 'Well, I've a right to think my own thoughts, even if it ain't civil to speak them out like that. None of you can't rule me in my own thoughts, anyway.'

Clara and her uncle were for the moment silenced too. Eye glanced rapidly to eye again. Uncle William's looked downcast. But Clara, being young, and having a will of her own, said, as she got up to go, with a cheerful voice :

'Come, Sally, don't be so against everything. Everyone here wants to help you. In a week or two when you've got used to things, you'll settle down and be ever so comfortable. You've only got to settle down.'

'Settle down !' said Sally, 'I ain't goin' to settle down here. I ain't going to be here long. I shall be out in a week : you see.'

Then she fell silent. She did not even look up at Clara. Her face gave no sign : behind the surface her old black eyes burned with unspoken thoughts.

'Well, good-bye, Sally,' said Uncle William. 'I'll be in again to see you.'

The patch of pale winter sunlight now creeping further round touched Sally's face and cut deep light and shade. Out of a sunken and froward old woman its bold hand carved them a statue of smouldering age. Sally watched Clara intently as she buttoned up her coat.

'Ah,' she said, 'now I mind you *well*, Miss Clara. 'Many's the time I used to see you round when you was a little girl. You features your father, don't you, more'n your mother, and your uncle's side ?'

There was a pause, while Sally's mind pursued its own thoughts.

'Your dad,' she said, 'was a man with a will of his own, such as I likes fer to see. There weren't no gainsaying him. He wouldn't be said by no one. No, not if it be the Lard 'imself come down to do it.'

Sally chuckled to herself.

'You ain't one to be said either,' she continued. 'You ain't one of them milk and warter young ladies, I knows that.' For the first time she became animated. 'You keep it up then,' she said. 'You keep it up. And if anyone tries to put on you—you think o' wot I tells you. Don't you never be rode on the curb. I warn't,' she said excitedly. 'I warn't. . . .'

Once again that harsher note came into her voice. Then she stopped : shrank into herself again. And for all the notice she took of their going, she might have been ignoring them on purpose.

'Good-bye, Mrs. Briggs, good-bye,' said Clara, but Sally's silence cut her words off with a dead sound. They left her as they found her.

They scarcely spoke till Clara was in the pony cart again, and Uncle William wheeling his bicycle down the gravel path beside her.

'You see,' he said, 'one can't do much good by talking. She's just determined, it seems. Determined to take it as hard as she can.'

'I hate to think of it,' said Clara. 'Poor old Sally. She's like a wild animal, caged at last. I'd far sooner think of her in her own cottage—even if she was ill. Why couldn't she just be left to herself?'

The rector shook his head.

'You can't do it, my dear—you simply can't. She'd got beyond it. She couldn't look after herself. She was getting so—so *dirty*. I suppose that's why they took that shawl.'

'Well, what does it matter? Let her get dirty.'

‘That’s what I’m sometimes tempted to say, too. But then, when you see it for yourself—well, this and that : you can’t let them go on. Besides, her own family wanted us to take her here : and they want us to keep her here too.’

‘But there’s not very much wrong with her, is there ? She’ll get better ? She seems determined to be out in a week.’

‘I’m afraid she’ll never come out. I’ve seen it before. They just seem to lose spirit. They last a few months—a year, perhaps.’

‘Then they die ?’

He nodded.

‘It’s not being their own mistresses,’ he said. ‘After they’ve had their own household since they were eighteen, perhaps. Not being able to make a cup of tea when they want it, and little things like that.’

They went on to the gate of the Institute.

Uncle William leaned across the saddle of his bicycle and stared at the road.

‘For Sally,’ he said, ‘it’s worse than most. There’s something hard inside her that she won’t let soften. She’s been such an old wrong ’un all her life—and that’s the truth. Her husband was the worst poacher in the village. I think she feels she’s got to fight us all. She’s got to go on with her own personality, so to speak—till the last gasp.’

Clara nodded. ‘Don’t you think there’s something she’s really trying to conceal ?’ she said.

‘Perhaps,’ said Uncle William. ‘I wish you’d pay her regular visits now she’s here. I think you can talk to her. Yesterday she was all huddled up to herself and wouldn’t say a word. Perhaps if you’ll help me, we might get her over it much better.’

‘Of course I’ll visit her,’ said Clara.

However, during the next few days she was unusually

busy. And it was not until late in the morning exactly a week later that she was again able to pass the workhouse. She met her uncle at the gate true to his usual time.

‘How’s Sally?’ said Clara.

‘My dear,’ said Uncle William, ‘I’m so glad I’ve met you. I hardly know what to do. The most astonishing thing has happened.’

‘What?’

‘Sally’s disappeared—vanished. I’ve just been to pay her and one or two of them a visit, and found Sally’s bed empty. She’s just gone.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ said Clara. ‘How could she have gone? She must be somewhere about the building.’

‘Well, come on in and find her for us,’ said Uncle William. ‘I’ll tell you what’s happened. I strolled into the small ward where she was—and her bed was empty. I waited a bit, then found the Matron and asked her what had happened. First of all the Matron said she’d soon find her. Then one of the other old women said she believed her bed had been empty the best part of the morning. Then they all started chattering at once: you never heard such a noise, like a lot of school children; and the funny thing was, not one of them could remember having seen her go. Her bed was near the door, you see, and she must have slipped out, just at the right moment.’

‘You know,’ said Clara, ‘she’s a cunning old thing. And do you really mean to say she’s gone altogether?’

‘Well, they’ve been hunting the place up and down for an hour or more, and she’s nowhere to be found. Yet the doorkeeper’s been at the gate all morning, and he feels certain he must have seen her if she’d gone through.’

‘I don’t feel at all certain,’ said Clara, ‘that anyone would see her if she intended that they shouldn’t.’

Uncle William shook his head reflectively, and gazed up and down the road.

'I think perhaps you're right,' he said at length.

'Good for Sally,' said Clara. 'But what did she have to wear? Could she get at her clothes?'

'No,' said Uncle William, 'she couldn't. All she had was her flannel nightgown, the big white crochet shawl I brought her last week, and the grey and black outer blanket they all of them have on their beds. That's missing, too.'

'Well, uncle,' said Clara, 'she's got some spirit. I must say I admire it.'

'Yes,' he said, 'plenty of spirit—and yet in a way, what a pity: how wasted it all seems: how misdirected. She is so unruly—she's such a Godless old woman.'

'No good worrying about that just now,' said Clara. 'Oughtn't we to go and find her?'

'Yes: yes. So we ought: but where? I really feel almost at a loss to know what to do.'

'She's gone home, of course.'

'I suppose she has. But what a notion to come into her head. It's five miles. It'll kill her in this cold weather.'

'You'd better come in the pony trap,' said Clara. 'We must catch her before she goes far.'

She set the pony off, and the trap jingled along at a smart trot. The road led first of all down a winding hill, where it traversed a small stream and a wooded valley: beyond this it climbed again, then lay for two or three miles across bare, high ground, where the walls were low, the trees small, and there was no shelter from the wind.

Clara felt sure as they set off that she could catch Sally up the long hill before she reached the open downs.

'Careful, careful, my dear,' said Uncle William, laying his hand on her arm anxiously. But she shook it off; she shouted to the pony, and gave him the whip. They rattled

down the hill and raced over the bridge at the bottom at a gallop, the trap swinging from side to side on its axle.

Then for a quarter of an hour or more they walked slowly up the steep hill the other side : but there was no sign of Sally. Clara pictured her toiling up in her nightdress and blanket : dropping exhausted on the bank from time to time : yet always pushing on.

At the top of the hill the sheltering hedges and clumps of trees died away : a keen wind began to chill them.

Clara was urging the pony into a trot, when she noticed a stonebreaker at work on a pile of stones at the side of the road. She drew the trap up to him. His eyes were shielded by dark glasses, and he went on steadily chipping away, seeming to ignore them deliberately.

‘Ask him,’ said Clara.

Uncle William got out of the pony trap.

‘Excuse me, my friend,’ he said, ‘have you been up here all morning?’

‘Since seven,’ said the man.

‘Have you seen anyone pass this way lately?’

‘I might have,’ said the stonebreaker, ‘but I looks at my work mostly.’

‘Have you seen an old woman go by in the last hour or so?’

‘Well,’ said the stonebreaker, ‘I believe there was an old woman along this way : but I don’t look at old women. I looks at what I’m doing.’

‘I thought you might have noticed this one especially,’ said Uncle William. ‘We’re friends of hers—and we’re most anxious to help her.’

The stonebreaker worked more intently than ever. Uncle William turned to go away.

‘Good morning,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid you can’t have seen the old lady we’re looking for.’

‘Well, wait a mo’,’ said the man. ‘You said you were friends of hers.’

‘Certainly we are,’ put in Clara. ‘We want to help her.’

The stonebreaker scrutinized her.

‘Well,’ he said at length, ‘I ’ave seen her. There has been someone pass this way an hour or so ago, only she said to me : “Don’t let any of *them* know as I’ve come this way.”’

‘That sounds like her,’ said Clara. ‘What was she like? What had she got on?’

The stonebreaker chipped a few stones without answering : and as he did so, slowly began chuckling to himself.

‘Well, since you asks, young leddy,’ he said, ‘all I can say is that she was the most ’eathenish sight I’ve seen for years : funny old walking picce of gingerbread she was. First of all she had bare legs and bed slippers on her feet : and as for her gown, it was a flannel nightdress so far as I could see : and over her head was a big white shawl, and round her shoulders she had an old grey horse-blanket. I suddenly looked up, and there she was. She stood right in front of me, with her nightgown blowing round her bare legs and ends of hair all over her face. I thought it was some poor old mad thing got loose from the looneys. But she spoke sensibly enough.’

‘What did she say?’ asked Uncle William.

‘She said, “Got a can of hot tea there, boy?” So I gave her some . . . piping hot it was, too—and she said it did her good. Then I said, “Where are you along then, dressed up like that?” and she said, “I’m going home,” and begging your pardon sir she used a bad word and said she’d be pleased to get there. Then, she says, if any of *them* comes after me, say you ain’t seen me, and she legged it like one o’clock over the downs this way.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Two hours or more.’

‘Thank you,’ said Clara. ‘Come on.’

They drove off as fast as they could.

They crossed the downs and the wind grew colder against them. The sky was turning to iron blue, and from time to time a few icy raindrops were dashed in their faces. There was a menace of worse to come. The pony put his ears back. The wind raced through the dry grass, and the high ground was desolate and bitter.

‘Fancy her coming all across here,’ said Clara.

‘She oughtn’t to have done it,’ said Uncle William. ‘If only she hasn’t dropped from exhaustion up here. How could she have escaped like that?’

‘*Escaped*? That’s just the word she’d use herself, isn’t it?’

They drove on in silence, peering anxiously ahead.

‘She must be nearly eighty,’ said Uncle William.

Then the road began to drop. They were suddenly sheltered, and a few minutes later the trap was standing at Sally’s gate. The place seemed very still and silent after the wind on the heights.

‘She must be here somewhere,’ said Clara.

The cottage and garden looked just as she had seen it a week before : tangled : damp : slatternly.

The door was open, and going in, they at once found Sally in the parlour. She was half-sitting, half-lying on the floor, with her back against the wall. She had managed to light some wood and rubbish in the hearth, but it was only smouldering, and cold smoke drifted round the room : on the fire was a kettle which had no chance of being heated. Clara at once closed the door and busied herself at the fire.

Sally seemed unconscious as they came in : her chin was sunk on her chest. The white shawl rose hood-like round her head, and the grey blanket was slipping from her shoulders. One withered leg stuck straight out in front

of her, naked from the knee, with the red felt bedroom slipper wet and muddy on her foot. The other leg was crooked under her. And in her lap was gathered a strange collection, round which her arms were circled.

There was an old wicker box from which were tumbling pieces of ribbon, strings of beads, one or two coloured post cards, an old ostrich feather, an elaborate antique silver mug, much discoloured and tarnished, a leather collar that had once belonged to a large dog. They saw that Sally was nodding and smiling over this box of possessions. She had already taken out a large coral bracelet and put it on her wrist.

In her lap, together with this box, was a saucepan out of which water was spilling on to her clothes : and in this saucepan a partly skinned rabbit. On the floor beside her a black cat crouched, and occasionally stretched his paw and touched the rabbit.

'Ah,' said Sally suddenly, without looking up or appearing to have noticed them, 'I thart as you'd be coming after me then. I suppose they was all set by the years when old Sally walked out like that. You ain't a-going to take me back, though, sir, so set your mind at rest about that. I'm on me own ground here, and here I stops.'

'Let me help you up on to the sofa,' said Uncle William. 'You can't lie there on the floor.'

'Oh, can't I, Mr. Pedder?' said Sally. 'I can sit where I pleases to sit, now I'm in my own 'ome. And I can say what I pleases. And when I likes fer to sit on the floor, I sits on 'im. You ain't a-going to move an old woman by main force, are you?'

'Sally,' said Uncle William, 'you're going on like a naughty child. I'm surprised at you. What you've done has been very wrong—disgraceful!'

'*There*,' said Sally, with relish, 'go it. It does me good to think I should live to hear the parson start naggywragging

at me and telling me I'm disgraceful again. Disgraceful, I call it, the way you treat an old body in that mucky place you sent me to, when I was too ill with brownkitis to put up a fight. No wonder I come back.'

'Now, Sally,' said Uncle William, 'there's no need to talk like that. I don't believe you really mean it.'

'What do you think I mean, then?' said Sally. 'So soon as I woke up this morning, I made up my mind I'd had enough of it. I thart of a nice bit of rarbit for my dinner-time : so along I come. No chance *they'd* give it to me. And I hadn't been in me own 'ouse quarter of an hour when my old Tummus brings me as fat a rarbit as you ever see. There's a cat for you.'

'Didn't you get terribly cold and tired coming across the downs?' said Clara. 'How do you feel now?'

'I don't feel at all,' said Sally. 'I ain't worrying. I'm not sorry to set down now I'm in : but I'm going to stew this rarbit up when I gets the skin off him.'

She lay quite still as she spoke. Her eyes had sunk far into her head. Her face was white as paper. The hair fell over it in matted wisps. Her hands trembled and seemed almost too weak to hold the things she had in her lap.

'Come along, Sally—do now,' said Uncle William. 'You ought to go to bed : or do let my niece help you dress properly.'

'I be arlight here,' said Sally. 'Here I stays. Nobody can't tell me where I've got to sit now. I told ye that before.'

'But you'll catch cold if you stay there. I wonder you haven't caught your death of cold already.'

'That's my affair,' said Sally. 'I can catch cold if I want to : and I can die if I want to : and there ain't nobody as can tell me the way I ought to do it : so you can let me alone, Mr. Pedder, and I'll get on all right by myself. I 'ave done for seventy-eight years now.'

‘Now, Sally, look here,’ said Uncle William sternly, ‘don’t be so stubborn. You’re ill : you ought to be in bed. You know we all want to look after you. I want to get you better : and if you think I’m going to leave you sitting there on the cold floor in your nightgown, you’re making a mistake. Now listen, Sally. If you don’t let us put you to bed, I’ll have you taken straight back to the workhouse, where you can be properly nursed. Fancy my having to talk so to a woman who’s a grandmother.’

Sally’s voice now took on a fighting note : and she shouted up at them from the floor.

‘Fancy you talking like that to an old woman in her own house. Ain’t I to have no say in what’s going to happen to me ? This is my own cottage, as was left to me by my ’usband’s uncle, old Caffy Briggs—d’ye hear that ? And I tell yer I won’t be put on by no one, Mr. Pedder : I won’t—I won’t. For Christ’s sake leave me alone. I’ve got my private affairs,’ she went on more calmly, ‘as I don’t want other people poking into. You see this old silver mug ?’ She made a motion towards it with her hand. ‘That comes from Thrushwood House. It got left over somehow from the other stuff. Then the boys wouldn’t take it because its description was out. My old Daniel brought that to me one day and told me never to let anyone see it. Never. That was twenty years ago. I think ’e meant fer to pass it on later, when all the fuss had died down a bit : but the next year he was in his grave. Poor old chap. And there ain’t never a soul knowed as he gave this to me. I’ve kept it safe : no one ever brought that home to my Daniel, and they ain’t going to now.’

Sally paused, and with a feeble movement pushed the cat away from the rabbit.

‘I’m telling you this,’ she said, ‘because if I’m going to be ill, I’ve got to tell someone, and I can repose my trust in you. You won’t pass it on, this young leddy won’t pass

it on. When it comes to waltzing me off to *that* place and my nephews and nieces coming mucking round my 'ouse . . . that's what's been vexing me all the time. That's what I 'ad to come back fur.'

She shook her head.

'Poor old Daniel,' she said. 'And now, Mr. Pedder, all this talkin' makes me tired. I ain't used to it.'

Her voice grew weaker and sank to a throaty whisper.

'I 'opes you and the young leddy will come in some other time,' she said. 'And now do let me 'ave a little peace and quiet. Leave me have my house to myself.'

As she lay back against the wall her head rolled on her shoulders. Gradually she slipped down to the floor : and when Uncle William went to pick her up, she was dead.

He lifted the warm body very carefully and gently laid it on the sofa. Then he closed the eyes. Then he picked up the silver mug and put it in his pocket.

The cat snatched the rabbit as it fell, and began cracking up the head with a loud greedy purring noise.

The Draught of Medicine

DOWN in the Autumn woods men's voices had been shouting for an hour or more. Three of Farmer Augur's horses, Lucy, Brownie and Emperor, were hitched to an entire elm-trunk. A hundred yards of marshy ground separated them from the cart track, and every wheel of the timber wagon had sunk in deep.

Lucy the leader plunged and threw her weight first to one side then the other—furious at being held back. Her rosewood quarters curved and flashed in the light. Even Emperor, the largest and most stolid of blacks, was excited by yells and whipcracks till he leapt in the shafts. His hind hooves, heaving up a whole ton of strength, sliced and tore up the earth. His mild eyes started till the whites showed. Steam rolled off him at every point, and his breath spurted six feet from his nostrils, like jets of smoke. The two carters, Mark and Harry Shiffner, both young men, yelled and yelled: and yard by yard the three horses tore their wagon through the clay.

But all this was down in the woods. Up over the brow of the hill, where the cottages of Edgerly stood grouped round the church and The Grange, the morning was very quiet. So quiet that those faint far-off cries that drifted up now and again from the woods seemed hardly real. Save for a few wisps of morning smoke from the chimneys there was no sign of life.

In one of the cottages old Abel Shiffner, the father of Mark and Harry lay in bed feeling very poorly. He could

just catch those distant shouts. He was not quite sure where or in what way he felt ill, but it was a bad thing to be abed when he ought to be about carting or ploughing. He looked at the medicine bottle by his bed and sighed. He felt a sense of grievance against this medicine. It ought to have made him well, and it had failed. Poor weak stuff, it must be.

Presently he was aware of low voices beneath his window. It was his wife and old Gromm at the gate : he could not hear what they were saying, but he felt sure they would be talking about him.

This was so. Mrs. Shiffner, with an apron of sacking round her waist, and her sleeves rolled up to the elbow, set down her bucket, as Mr. Gromm hailed her.

‘Marning, ma’am.’

‘Marning, Mr. Gromm.’

‘Ow be, Abe, this marning?’

‘Well, I hardly know what to say. ‘E can’t seem to make nothing of ‘isself to-day—nothin’ at ‘arl.’

Mr. Gromm pondered for a moment.

‘How’s that then?’ he said. ‘He ‘aves the doctor don’t he?’

‘Oh, yes. You know; that young Mr. Spender; young Jimmy Spender, old Dr. Spender’s grandson.’

Mr. Gromm scratched his head with the stem of his pipe.

‘I’ve heered ‘e’s very clever too; like what ‘is grandpa was.’

‘Well, that’s as it may be,’ said Mrs. Shiffner; ‘but his grandpa ain’t had time fer to learn him everything yet awhile. Though, I’m sure a nicer spoken young gentleman you couldn’t hope to meet : and tries hard too ‘e does jest. I likes him very well meself. But you step up and see Abe; he lies abed up there in the front room. That won’t do him no harm jest to see you, Mr. Gromm; he’d take it kind.’

Gromm came in shaking his head gravely, and with a good deal of noise clumped his way up the narrow stairs.

'Ere, Abe,' said Mrs. Shiffner, 'it's Master Gromm come to see you. Do you go along in now.'

Gromm walked in and studied the patient.

'How be, Abe?' he said.

Abe opened one eye.

'That you, George?'

'Ah. How be, then?'

'I be very middlin', George. Very middlin'.'

'That's bad. Doan'd the doctor do you no good then?'

'He med or medn't,' said Abe, and a long silence followed. Gromm nodded sympathetically.

'See that bottle of medicine?' Abe looked at it angrily.

'Well, this young man as comes to see me, he doan't know the way to mix up a draught of medicine. Look at it, then. Smell it, man!'

Gromm took out the cork and gave a deep sniff. Then he touched the bottle with his lips.

'Aye,' said Abe approvingly, 'you take a taste. Medicine he may carl it, but a glass of lemonade 'ud do you as much good as that. Why, it's got no taste to it!'

'It have certainly got a weaky, sickly sort of flavour,' said Gromm. 'You take it from me, Abe, that ought to be changed. You have it changed. There won't be no offence in that, if you asks civil and natural. His old granddad now, he knowed the way proper. Many's the one as I've 'eard say, they'd liefer have old Dr. Spender half sober than any other doctor, whoever he might be.'

'Ah,' said Abe. 'Old Dr. Spender knowed his work, that he did, old man though he was. Many's the poor woman he's delivered safe and sound, when she was well nigh gone. In fact, George, the very moment as she could hear his nag's footsteps trotting up the street, she'd seem to

rally, then : and to begin to *try* and take heart a bit. Seems to me like as if some were more gifted for it than others.'

'Yes,' said Gromm, 'or 'tis more of a knack then to my mind.'

Presently they heard a car come down the street and draw up.

'Well, there 'e is, Abe,' said Gromm, 'I'd better be getting along. But you get that medicine changed. That stuff won't do you no good of.'

Gromm went out, and the young doctor came in followed by Mrs. Abe, looking very respectful and carrying a basin of warm water and a towel.

'Well, Abel,' he said cheerily, 'how are we this morning? Much better, I hope.'

Abe shook his head dismally.

'Well, sir,' he said, 'I doan rightly know what to make of myself this marning. I ain't one thing nor another—and that's the truth.'

'Dear me,' said young Spender, 'that sounds rather bad. Let me have a look at you. Tongue——? Well that's about the same. Any pain?'

'No,' said Abe. 'I'm spared that.'

'Is he taking his medicine all right, Mrs. Shiffner?'

'Yes, sir,' she said, 'he do take it, sir, but that's just the main trouble, sir, to my way of thinking——'

She paused awkwardly and looked at Abe for encouragement, but he merely closed his eyes with an expression of suffering, and left her unsupported.

'Yes?' said the doctor, helpfully.

'Well, sir,' Mrs. Shiffner went on, turning very red, 'what me and Dad feels is that your grandfather, sir, was a rare good one for mixing up a draught of medicine. Not as we mean no disrespect to you, sir, for I'm sure you does your best.'

'That's all right,' said the doctor, 'I'll ask my grandfather just what he used to prescribe for Abel.'

Now that the ice had been successfully broken, Abe opened his eyes again.

'Ah,' he said, 'young sir, that medicine your grandpa used to mix up hisself, that was grand stuff. But it had to be mixed with his own hands, as I often tell him. You ask him if I didn't. As I said to Mr. Gromm just gone, there's few as could mix the proper 'gredients, as the saying is, like your grandpa could. Some seems to have that gift.'

Jimmy Spender turned hastily from the bed and was attacked by a violent fit of sneezing. When this was over he looked unnaturally solemn.

'I'm sorry my medicine has proved such poor stuff,' he said. 'Send over about three this afternoon, and I'll have some ready that will suit you better. How have you been eating?'

'Well, I have eaten,' said Abe, sadly, 'but I can't say as I eats well.'

'Been sick at all?'

'Well, no, not exactly sick—but sickly like.'

'Yes, yes. I understand to be sure. Well, you send round at three o'clock. Good morning. No, don't come down, Mrs. Shiffner. Keep him quiet for the rest of to-day, and I'm sure the new medicine will do the rest.'

He drove off.

When he had gone, Abel sighed. His wife gazed at him with silent sympathy, and he sighed again. He lay slightly propped up in bed a tall thin figure, his chin thrown forward on to his chest by the pillows so that he could see round the room.

He lay very calm. His was not the kind of illness that led to restless turnings.

His face like his figure was thin, with fine straight features. The cheek-bones were high; the skin a clear brown and

yellow, and wrinkled like paper that has been crumpled up and smoothed out again. He was carefully clean-shaven even though he was in bed.

His dark and deepset eyes looked as if they could never be brought to bear on such a short range as the little upstairs room with its yellow flowered wall-paper, or his wife standing by the end of his bed. Abel's eyes could pick out in a casual passing glance half a dozen small birds and animals, where most could only see a lifeless waste of ploughed furrows and stones. They were eyes that were good for noticing hawks in the sky, rabbits in the hedgerow—or for counting sheep across the valley. They had a steady look of distance, and were quite unsuited to closed rooms, to print, or the quick lively glances of animated conversation. His eyes were as calm and unmoving, as his body.

'Martha,' he said, gazing as it seemed past her head and through the wall beyond.

Mrs. Shiffner nodded.

'Those boys be down in the woods now—getting up that big ellum?'

'Yes,' she said, 'both of 'em went.'

'Those might be their voices I hear,' said Abel. 'Do you catch 'em. It might be shouts coming from the distance.'

'Now, Dad, don't you worry nor fret. They'll be all right.'

Abel sighed again.

'You don't think they can go wrong?' he said after a pause. 'They don't want for to go putting too much strain on my Emperor. That's all I keep thinking of. He looks so strong, but he's not so young as he was. It's that place on his near hind leg. They've forgotten all about that; they were only lads when it happened, theyselves. You can't call 'em much more now,' he added.

Mrs. Shiffner made disapproving noises with her mouth.

'Now, Dad,' she said, 'you don't give them credit for no sense at all. And there you lay worrying and thinking : that's no way to get well. I'm surprised at you.'

Abel folded his hands together on the white crochet bed-cover : apart from a few quiet movements with his hands, outside the bed, he lay as still as a statue.

'I was just thinking they'd better to saw that trunk up, and make several journeys out of him,' he said.

Mrs. Shiffner began to bustle about the room, collecting the towel and water that she had brought in for the doctor's visit.

'I'm going off to get a little something nice for your dinner,' she said. 'Something easy for your stomach. Then there'll be that new draught for you in the afternoon.'

Abel lay alone and pondered. He was suffering a great deprivation. The truth was that Abel loved his work for its own sake and hated to miss any of it even for a few hours. Even after supper he used to stroll up to the farm-yard in the dark, glancing round the hayricks perhaps, and picking out single odd bits and ends to make the ricks neater.

If he knew of a good bit of ploughing he would walk out of his way to look at it : a dead straight well-turned ridge, set by the coulter clean and neat upon its fellow ridge, at exactly the right depth and angle, gave Abel a feeling of perfect contentment. It was a thing to thank God for. Abel had won dozens of prizes for his own ploughing. They gave a regular worked out scale of marks : six for the ridge, twelve for the general work ; six for the finish of the open furrow : of the first six two for tight packing, two for straightness : two for not breaking up—and so on and so on.

Abel, the winner of contests, dressed in a bowler-hat, his best dark suit and a bright yellow tie, had seen the

judges' scale of marks often enough and forgotten them again. The right points came naturally to him, as a sense of masses comes to a sculptor.

Meanwhile, young Spender went his rounds, and an hour or two later was lunching with his grandfather.

Old Dr. Spender, who still enjoyed the best of health and three good meals a day, was a man of commanding size and florid complexion. He was given to side-whiskers and rather loud tweed suits.

He helped himself to his second stiff whisky since the beginning of the meal.

'Have a whisky,' he said to Jimmy. 'A little whisky never did anyone any harm, that I ever heard of. I don't know why you young men don't drink more of it.'

He took a mouthful and smacked his lips.

'I've been visiting Abel Shiffner this morning,' said his grandson. 'Can you remember what you used to dose him with, when he had these little attacks of his? He doesn't think anything of my efforts. In fact he practically said my line in drugs was the poorest he'd ever seen.'

'Well,' said the old man. 'I expect I could find you an old prescription of his. I'll look in the bureau. What did you give him?'

Jimmy told him.

'Yes, that's all right of course. But what did you put in to ginger it up, so to speak?'

'Oh, just some peppermint to make it a bit palatable.'

'Peppermint, my dear lad? That's no good. I should like to see Abe drinking peppermint.' He chuckled richly. 'Now look here; this is a prescription I gave him last year. This contains what I call a few little condiments.'

Jimmy took the prescription and looked at it. 'What!' he said. '"Tinct. Ammon. Val." How filthy! What on earth did you put that in for?'

The old doctor laughed, and returned to his whisky.

'They like a bit of flavour. You believe me. Send that out to the dispensary and let Abe have a bottle this afternoon. That'll make him all right.'

He settled himself in his chair, and Jimmy carried the prescription away.

A few minutes later Mrs. Shiffner called her daughter Alice to her.

'Alice !' she said, 'Alice ! Carn't you come quicker'n that when I call you. I want you to take your bike, and go get your father's medicine from the doctor's. It's to be ready at three.'

'Why can't Mark or Harry go ? I only just come in and I wants a set down.'

'Not so muth of what you wants, young woman, with your poor dad lying ill abed. Besides, you know as well as me that the boys is out at work. Now make haste, and get a move on——'

Alice drooped away.

'Then when you gets back maybe I'll help you cut out that dress,' Mrs. Shiffner called after her.

'Oh, all right,' said Alice, more cheerfully.

When she rang at the doctor's door it was answered by the housemaid.

'Please can I have the medicine ?' said Alice.

'Who for ?'

'It's for my dad, Mr. Shiffner of Edgerly, and will you please see as it's made by old Dr. Spender 'isself ; it's most particular.'

'What ?' said the maid.

Alice repeated her instructions and the maid went inside, considerably astonished.

Presently she returned with the bottle.

'Old Dr. Spender sends his compliments to yer pa,' she said, 'and you're to tell him that he and Mr. James made it

up *between* them. Where are you going to put it? In your jacket pocket. Mind you get it home safely.'

At six o'clock that evening Mark and Harry Shiffner had done their day's work and had gone up to their father's bedroom to tell him how they had managed. Mr. Gromm had also looked in again, bringing another friend with him. Mrs. Shiffner and Alice were there as well.

Abel was sitting up in bed holding a glass of the new medicine carefully and looking at it with respect. His wife stood by, ready to steady it, should his hand shake or falter.

Abe looked round at the company.

'Thur now,' he said. 'This here is what you might truly name a draught of medicine. That other daddocky stuff—huh! Well, it might 'a' suited some babby or weak girl, and given them no great harm, but this as I got here is different arltogether. I've had one dose of it, so I knows. Now I be going to take another.'

He shook the medicine glass cautiously and watched the viscous fluid clinging to its side.

'Here, Abe,' said Gromm. 'Let's see the bottle. I be a pretty fair judge of draughts and that.'

Mrs. Shiffner handed the bottle round. Everyone sniffed hard and Gromm pulled out the cork, took a small sip and tasted it with loud lip-smacks.

'Good,' he said. 'That be the proper stuff, Abe. That'll do you good, I'm sure; if so be you can stomach it.'

'Stomach it?' said Abel. 'O' course I can stomach it. Can't I, mother?'

'That you can,' she said. 'You've stomached a lot o' draughts as strong as that. Now then, Alice, don't be so rash with that medicine bottle. There ain't no call to go drinkin' of it arl away from dad like that.'

'Goodness, I ain't a-drinking it,' said Alice. 'Catch me.

Such muck I never did taste nor smell. Ugh ! I'd love to see dad take it, though.'

Alice giggled, and both parents gave her a look of displeasure.

'There,' said Mrs. Shiffner in an apologetic undertone to old Gromm. 'The young and giddy is arl alike, and never knows what's good for 'em.'

'Well, Dad,' said Alice, 'why don't you swallow it then, instead of looking at it like it was some toad or something ?'

'Now, Alice,' said her mother, 'that's enough of your boldness. Your dad will take his draught when it pleases him, and don't want no help nor interposing of your remarks. So now be'ave yourself.'

Alice being silenced, Abel raised his glass to his lips, and all eyes were fixed upon him. The moment had come ; everyone watched with close attention. But Abel took the glass away from his mouth again and nodded.

'Now, there's some folk,' he said, 'as might make a mort of trouble about taking a draught like this here ; but that ain't me ; when I takes a dose of medicine, I takes him and don't see no sense in boggling about with the stuff. You know it's going to do your innards a power of good and so——'

'That's right, Abe, that's right,' said Gromm.

Once more Abel raised the glass and let his lips rest upon the rim, and seemed to reflect. Alice was wrought up almost to hysteria, and another giggle burst from her.

'He's going to take it : he's going to take it,' she whispered loudly.

'Be quiet, child,' said her mother and Gromm together.

'Mother,' said Abel, 'you got that drop of water handy, ain't you ?'

'Yes.'

'And the handkerchief ?'

‘Here it be.’

‘Well, here goes, then,’ said Abe. One brown hand clasped right round the glass. He squeezed his nose between his other thumb and forefinger. He gave a last despairing glance at the company, screwed up his eyes, and in one shuddering gulp took the draught. Blindly he held out the empty glass, which Mrs. Shiffner was ready to take at once. Then with a look of agony he reached for a drink of water, and afterwards buried his face in the clean handkerchief.

Everyone looked on in silence, save Alice, who in spite of herself, giggled again. Her mother pushed her angrily out of the bedroom.

‘Downstairs you go and stop there,’ she said. ‘You don’t see Mark or Harry acting so onrational. If your dad were up and well, he’d give you what for.’

When his wife came back to the bedroom, Abe opened his eyes and sank back on the pillow with a contented grunt.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘that be grand medicine. It tastes right—that it does. Why,’ he said, ‘I feel better and more lively-like already.’ He turned to Mark. ‘You was saying you got that fallen ellum up without sawing of it, did you, Mark? Don’t tell me you let Emperor strain hisself. Never mind,’ he added. ‘I shall be thur to-morrow. I shall be thur. Why! I can taste that medicine yet!’

The Sergeant-Major

IN the gusts of icy air the dry leaves scurried and rattled across the pavement. Hand-in-hand with bus tickets which fell as thick as leaves, they prolonged hour by hour a dreary dance. A page of derelict newspaper led the ballet of refuse. It bowed from side to side beckoning on the scores of followers that fluttered after it.

It blew and clung at last, discarded even by the wind, against the sergeant-major's legs. He made no movement to dislodge it. This dance of rubbish was his view every day, as he huddled, sunk rather than sitting to the pavement level. To the sergeant-major's corner blew all straws, leaves, handbills, fag ends, tobacco wrappings, rags, waste paper; anything that was dirty, dreary, disused, here settled down to rest.

The sergeant-major watched them. All day this litter raced before his eyes, through his eyes, through his brain; backwards and forwards, to and fro, the dusty litter of a worn-out memory. He watched the pavement where he sat all day; seldom raising his eyes; the litter and the feet. Two hundred thousand people passed that crowded corner every day; so he saw in the paper. Four hundred thousand feet. Wasn't that enough to mesmerize a man?

'I wish our beggars would try to look more cheerful,' a voice said. A man stood irresolute for a moment, felt shy, and then went on.

But the sergeant-major saw neither callousness nor sym-

pathy. He had given up catching their remarks long ago. He only watched the feet.

Why should he trouble to clear a newspaper away from his own legs? It was the past that he thought of, the sergeants' mess, sun-helmets and card games on a deck hot to the hand, and then the office work at barracks in later years. He'd been a man once, that's what he kept hold of, though the world had forgotten it. And he thought of the future; no clear idea, but surely some day his luck would turn. He wouldn't always have to; but till then, just a bob or two a day. They needed it. He'd stick it out.

Near by just beyond the range of his eyes the taxi-cab drivers stamped up and down the pavement.

'Lovely cold day, ain't it?' said Charlie, 'more busted pipes.'

'More frozen radiators, more like,' said Arthur.

'No fear,' said Charlie, 'you don't need to get a radiator froze. Why don't you try some of that stuff? Pour it in when you get a cold snap and leave it as long as you like.'

'Talking of freezing,' the other said, 'our sergeant-major looks a bit blue. Go and talk to him, Charlie.'

'Oh, what's the good,' said Charlie. 'He never says anything.'

'Well, I tried last,' the other urged. 'Go and crack him up a bit.'

'Oh, *all* right,' said Charlie, and went.

He approached. The sergeant-major glanced at him from the knees downwards, but looked no higher.

'What cheer, Sergeant,' said Charlie.

No answer. No movement.

'Well, Sergeant, how's the picture trade, to-day?'

Hell, and hell and hell, why couldn't the blasted fools leave him alone? What was the use of rubbing it in what he'd sunk to? After all, he was facing it out, trying to do something. Little enough they knew what he went

through sitting there day after day, and winter coming on again ! Well, you got over being ashamed, it wasn't that ; he was past being ashamed. And blast it, what had he got to be ashamed of ? He was as good a man as any of them ; better, they hadn't none of them been a sergeant.

Arthur shifted about uneasily. Then, pushing his cap back on his head, he stood staring at the sergeant's pictures—his stock-in-trade. They were done in woolwork. One was called 'Tommy Atkins,' and showed a soldier with a bloodstained handkerchief round his head brandishing a rifle ; another, 'A British Camp on the Veldt,' a third 'A Sergeant-Major.' Arthur, like so many art critics, had not any idea what should be said about them.

'Lifelike,' he tried at last, with solemnity. 'How you come to do it all in wool beats me !'

Yes, thought the sergeant, if I hadn't been a man, if Sergeant John Short hadn't had the sense and gumption to keep out on the flank a hundred yards from the platoon, and save the whole boiling of them from a Boer ambush, he'd have never spent three months in hospital with a bullet through his knee joint. That's how I came to do them, if you want to know. Matron showed me while I was recovering from a wound won in the country's service. That's how ; if I'd 'a thought while I was sittin' in the garden doin' them things—some day—I should be . . . It took a man to do it, blast 'em, it took some guts to face it out.

'Look up, old son,' Arthur struggled on. 'Have a look at what's going on. Why don't you get up and stump about a bit ? Get a bit warmer, I should.'

Yes, and if life had played him square, he'd have been ordering coves like that about, he'd have smartened them up. What was it he used to say to those recruits ? 'Come on now, you : you got to move smarter than that : you aren't *pregnant*, I suppose !' Somewhere in the whirling

litter of his mind a smile hovered. The boots and legs hesitated and moved off.

'I can't get nothing out of 'im,' said Charlie. 'I give it up. What's the good of being so surly?'

'It gets me down,' said Arthur, 'to see a chap so beat. What's he think of all the time? What's he think of?'

'Plenty of them about, old man; they don't think much; I reckon they get past thinking, doesn't do any good.'

'Yes, I know, but when you think what this chap's been; company-sergeant-major!—and now—how are the mighty fallen, eh? See what I mean? Remember the sergeant in your platoon, Charlie? Look at that chap. Gone, busted, beat. Makes you think a bit.'

'He's not the only one,' said Charlie. 'There's plenty of men as good as him can't get a job, honest or dishonest. We're lucky, mate. Yet, when you come to think, we ain't got much to go raving mad with pleasure about. Things seems to have been blowed up into an untidy mess, like that corner of the pavement there. You go round and round, till you lose your puff of wind; then that's where you stays—same as he does.'

Charlie saw a fare approaching him and briskly began to do up his coat.

'Here you are, sir. Heath Drive, sir. Right!'

He cranked up his car and rattled off. There was a sharp backfire, then his cab was lost in the endless current of traffic.

The sound came to the sergeant's ears, but not the sense. That was a rifle shot. Mind out, boys! keep your backsides down, and crack, as they got within a hundred yards of that old farm, a bullet through Garry's arm, and then out of behind the building a single Boer on a horse riding, riding, riding for dear life out and up, up the long slope towards the horizon.

'There he goes ; get him now ! Put your sights up ! Three hundred—four hundred—put 'em up and shoot in *front* of him ! Miss after miss—and he galloped on nearer and nearer the skyline, clapped his own sight up to six hundred, aimed at a mark in the skyline, and got him within ten yards of his giving us the go-by. What was the name they chipped him with after that ? 'Jack Short, the crack shot !' That was it, wasn't it ? Again the spectre of a smile in the tattered relics of his memory. That was him ; and he was going to stick it out !

'Evening, Sergeant,' another of the taxi drivers said. 'Got an evening paper here. Want to know the winners ?'

At last he shifted his position and looked up. 'Yes,' he said. '3.30 Kempton.'

'3.30 Kempton. Half a mo'. Here we are, then. May Blossom, Punchbowle, Corfu.'

'What's that ?' he asked. 'Punchbowle ?'

'Punchbowle's second. No go ?'

The sergeant's head dropped into his collar again. It seemed as if the whole world were against him. Second ; why couldn't it have been first ? It seemed he was losing his grip on everything.

How long had he got to stick it out for ? When was young Sid coming along with a bit more money ? Always up to the old man, eh ?

'Look here,' said Arthur to his fellows on the rank, 'I got a couple of spare bob, and I'm going to take that old chap in for a drink. It gets me down somehow to see him sitting there hour after hour. Pop your nose in if I get a fare.'

Arthur straggled up to the sergeant's side in a careless way.

'Bit cold, aren't you ?' Did the old boy hear ? 'I just thought of popping into the bar there. Like a nip ?'

'What?' said the sergeant, after a pause.

'It's perishing cold. Thought you might like a drink.'

'Can't go till it's dark.'

'Oh, come on: that's all right. Your pictures won't run away!'

'Got to stay here—my post.'

'Oh, *come* on! Look here, I won this two bob on a horse, see, and I want to bust it.'

Arthur flipped a florin in the air.

'A hot whisky would do you good. Make a new man of you.'

The sergeant slowly got up.

'You make me the man I *was*,' he said, 'that's all I ask of anybody.'

'That's right,' said Arthur, taking him by the arm. 'Off we toddle—leg hurt?'

'Don't worry if it does,' said the sergeant. 'Damaged in a good cause. It's the cold.'

They reached the pub and Arthur pushed him in. It was hot inside and crowded. The air was heavy with smoke and the murmur of voices. Now and again someone shouted. Arthur piloted him through the crowd, and found him a seat on the corner of a wooden bench which ran round the bar-room. He sat down next to a woman in black. A glass of hot whisky appeared; he clasped his frozen hands round it and sipped it gratefully. 'Just for a few moments—needed it so much—not left your post really.'

'Evening, Arthur,' said someone, 'who's your friend?'

'Sergeant-Major Short.'

The sergeant, his eyes bent on his glass, saw someone click his heel, and salute with a grin.

'Evening, Sergeant,' he said. 'How's the troops—buttons nice and bright?'

'Troops?' said the sergeant. 'I don't quite . . .'

'Shut up, Grimmet,' said Arthur. 'Don't get kidding him. Can't you see he's down on his luck?'

'All right, chum,' said Grimmet. 'Sergeant who, did you say?'

'Sergeant Short. Good man, too. South Africa and—all that.'

'Oh! South Africa! Queen's Own Mounted Rifles sweeping o'er the plain. You and me's fought in a *war* since then.'

But Grimmet went over to the sergeant again, and took him another whisky.

'Here you are, mate,' he said. 'How's tricks?'

'You've got to stick it,' said the sergeant thoughtfully. 'Stick it. I haven't gone back on it.'

'No fear!'

'That's what they do nowadays. They want to stick it. If I was half the man I used to be . . .' he trailed off. Others came and talked to him, asked him questions, but never seemed to wait to hear what he had to say.

In the next half-hour, plenty of people gave him a drink. He got quite muddled with so many strangers. He found a game of darts was going on.

'Come on, Sergeant,' said Arthur. 'You have a throw.'

Agnes since he played darts in a pub.

'Used to be quite a dab at this,' he muttered.

'Come along, then,' they shouted.

But the heat and the whisky had made him a bit swimmy, his hand felt cramped and weak. He made a tremendous effort to concentrate, but his darts went wide.

'Used to do it,' he explained.

Everyone laughed good-humouredly.

'That's the way, Sergeant. Only mind the ornaments!'

'Yes,' the sergeant found himself saying excitedly. 'Straight up the hill. Not one of the others could get

him. Put your blinking sights up, I said. You want to shoot in front of him. But I shot myself—shot him myself, I mean—six hundred I had 'em at, through his head.'

'Didn't know you threw darts at them Boers,' someone said.

'Darts,' thought the sergeant. 'Wot the hell? I'll let 'em see I'm a man all right. You mind who you're talking to, my son. I was a crack shot,' he said out loud to their backs. 'Jack Shot the crack short!'

There was a chap over by the bar with a paper.

'Got a horse?' said the sergeant. 'What about Cross-lines for to-morrow? I'll lay an even bob with you,' he said to the barman.

'Come on, Sergeant,' said Arthur. 'You don't want to go betting. Bobs is hard enough to get.'

'You leave me alone,' said the sergeant. 'I'm quite capable of looking after myself, thank you.'

'Nothing doing,' said the barman.

'Come on, Sergeant,' said Arthur. 'Time we was moving.'

'Not so fast,' said the sergeant. 'Fair drinks all round. I haven't stood a turn yet. What's yours?' he shouted to the bar at large.

No one answered.

'That's all right, mate,' said Grimmet. 'You stood your turn last but three. Your memory's as good as your darts.'

'Did I?' said the sergeant. 'As long as I did.'

Arthur guided him through the doorway, and then helped him pack up his pictures.

'So long, Sergeant, see you to-morrow.'

'Trust me, I'll be there, my lad.'

'Maybe your luck will turn,' said Arthur. 'Your boy'll get a good job any day now—then you can put your feet up and stay at home.'

The sergeant limped off, muttering, into the darker quieter streets. Voices replaced the noise of traffic. The fried fish shops were getting busy.

'Put my feet up,' thought the sergeant. 'Stay at home, that's wot they think of you, is it? Think you're no use! Got to stay at home now, have you? Not me, you can do your bit, always done your bit. Those young chaps think you're done, but, oh no, you can show them, they wouldn't care to, I'll bet! No, sergeant-major isn't done till he's dead, bullet through knee and all. No use in a dead dog, granted, I grant you that, when I'm dead I'm done! But while you're alive you got to go on fighting! Stick it out, see. . . .'

Thud—the sergeant-major reeled across the pavement. A strong arm caught and held him.

'Sorry,' said a young man. 'Sorry—weren't hurt, were you?'

'Damn yer eys,' said the sergeant, 'that's not the way to walk about, my lad.'

'Gaa-ow,' growled the young man, 'shut yer bloody jaw.' He pulled himself away, grumbling. 'Silly old fool, said I was sorry, didn't I?'

These young men want smartening up, thought the sergeant. I'd show them. Young Sid, now, why doesn't he get a good job and look after his old dad? On half-time every other week—a pound now and thirty bob then. What's the good of that? Had his training as printer, hasn't he? But no! he's hanging on at this place—*waiting*. A few years with our lot of chaps would show him. We'd have shown him!

The sergeant-major stumbled up a couple of flights of stairs, and was home. You would not have guessed from the room that they were in real straits. Ellen had the same stubbornness in the face of the world as the sergeant. There was the old brass bedstead, that they'd always had, and the

white crochet counterpane. And the lace curtains in the windows, too. And the little table in the window with a coloured tablecloth, and a photograph of the sergeant-major in his uniform. There wasn't much else left. But there was not much room for anything else ; one or two wooden chairs and a bare table in the corner. Sid slept upstairs with a couple of other fellows.

The sergeant put his pictures down with a grunt. And there on the bed lay a packet of twenty cigarettes, a packet of his favourite shag, a bottle of beer and one or two more parcels.

There was Sid, standing up before the fireplace, smiling away, and there was a fire in the grate. And Ellen was smiling too.

'Well,' said the sergeant, 'what's happened?'

But he had no need to ask. It had happened, then. He was released at last. No more struggling and sticking to it. Fall out, Sergeant-Major Short !

'It's all right,' said Sid. 'I've done it, landed that little job, just as I said, Dad. Four pounds a week. That's all right, isn't it?'

'Well done,' said the sergeant.

'I knew I was right to wait there,' said Sid. 'I knew I'd make good there. I knew I oughtn't to try another place.'

'Well done, Sid. You've done well.'

'Look here, Dad,' said Sid. 'Look at this.' He spread three pound notes and a ten-shilling note on the bed. 'I been doing the new job all the week really. So there's my first week's money. Just bought these few things on the way home.'

'Four pounds,' said the sergeant. So Sid would make four pounds a week, would he? Four pounds ! He put his hand in his pocket. One and six : that was what he'd got to-day. Four pounds : one and six.

'Not too bad, is it?' said Sid.

'Very good,' said the sergeant. And he strolled about the room.

'Look here,' he said suddenly, 'tell you what, give me the ten-bob note.' He picked it up. 'I'll show you,' he said. 'I'll make a bit more of this for you. Wait a bit, Sid, I'll be back in a minute.'

'Hullo!' said Sid, 'what's the idea?'

'Got the very thing,' said the sergeant-major.

'You aren't going to put it on a horse?'

'Why not?' said the sergeant. 'I happen to know a bit about horses. You leave it to me, Sid, they all used to come to me for tips. It was always, what are you doing to-day, Sergeant-Major?'

'Well, we don't need to take risks now,' said Sid.

'No risk about it.'

Sid looked uneasily from his father to his mother.

'No,' he said, 'I don't care to risk my money.'

'That's all right, Sid.' He made for the door.

'Come back, Dad; look here, who earned that money? That's what I mean.'

'Why, you, of course. But I've earned plenty for you. It's our money, isn't it?'

'Yes, but not for horses.'

'Oh, go on, just because you've struck it lucky, I suppose you think I'm good for nothing now.'

Sid looked at his mother.

'Oh, all right, Dad.' And then as the old man went out he had to shout after, 'Just this time—mind!'

So that was it, thought the sergeant, thinks I don't know anything now. Thinks I'm an old fool, does he? Why, I made a pound or so a week over this game for years, when I was in the army, before Sid was thought of. I'll show Sid I can make a bit of money as well as he can.

There was not much of the ten shillings left when he

came back. There was that bob he owed them already over to-day's race. Then there was a bob each way on Mikado for to-morrow, and one or two drinks round among friends. He'd have been ashamed not to do that.

But as he came home to supper his mind was working furiously. What did it mean? What happened now? He'd stuck it for so long—stuck to his job—kept himself at it, day by day. He'd played the game so far, hadn't he?

He ate his supper in silence; a good bit of steak they'd got. The other two were talking and laughing, but he did not hear much.

After supper Sid lit a cigarette, then staring at the fire he said slowly:

'Look here, Dad, let's come to an understanding. I mean—after all, you needn't worry any more, I'll bring in the money now.'

'Yes,' said the sergeant. 'I've done my bit up till now.'

'Yes, I know you have. You've had a hard time. But don't think about it. Don't worry about the money now.'

'Oh, stow it, Sid, do you mean I'm not going to put a bob on a horse now and then?'

'Well,' said Sid, 'what I mean is . . . well, after all, it is my money now, isn't it?'

The sergeant sank in his chair a bit. That's how he sat all day, staring in front of him.

The crushing misery of those years swept before him. The truth he'd tried to escape; the failures he'd made, the money he'd wasted on horses. He wouldn't believe that Sergeant Short could fail in civilian life. Yet young men with health and strength, men with a trade and experience couldn't get jobs, what use was he?

But he'd never faced up to it, he'd gone on thinking to himself he was still a fine man, 'sticking to it'—kidding himself, that's what it was. One and sixpence a day! And

now ! nothing for him to do at all : nothing he could even kid himself he was doing : dead dog.

‘After all,’ said Sid, breaking the silence persuasively, ‘it’s *me* that’s been earning the money lately, Dad.’

‘Oh, go to hell,’ said the sergeant, ‘think too much of yourself. I . . .’

‘All right, Dad,’ said Sid, with patronizing calm. ‘Don’t let’s have words, Dad, I’ll give the money to mother instead, see ? Good night !’

Sid went out. The sergeant’s face quivered. He wouldn’t meet his wife’s eyes.

‘Oh, mother !’ he said. ‘I’m an old *fool*.’ And later : ‘I did stick it out, though ? I stuck to it, didn’t I ?’

Next day it was colder again. The taxi men stamped about and swore. The dust and rubbish pattered up into the corner and fell motionless. Sid went off to his job, with a light heart. The sergeant-major was still there—sticking it out.

The Ringed Word

CONWAY MARK. Conway Mark. Conway Mark. The footsteps would begin in a moment. His heart was beating. Now he might do it pat. Arthur shrank and shuddered back into the darkness of the hedge, crouched with beating heart and quick drawn breath, like a wild animal waiting for a deadly foe to pass.

Then he caught Mark's footsteps. Pat-pat . . . now the noise of his feet rang on the distant road clear as forge strokes : then the sudden quiet as he took the grass path. The field-gate clicked quarter of a mile away. And the night was so still he could hear his muttered cough. The bright frost and blazing moonlight preserved the faintest eruption of sound. Soon would come the delicate scrunch of the frosted earth beneath his feet. Unsteady footsteps.

Here they came. True to time. The government's time, Arthur thought, since that alone would make him stop drinking at ten—and then : every night. Blind to what was around the footsteps going home ; not using his faculties : faculties reduced to footsteps ; the noise of the footsteps—pat. Alternate, mindless ; full blown, his sins full blown.

Arthur crouched in the hedge, listening, straining, quivering : the leaves and brambles, drained of colour in the vivid moonlight, the blackened roots, the grass tufts cobweb-grey at his feet, strained and listened with him.

Mark was near now : the little gate at the foot of the hill shrieked and fell to with an iron clangour. How the still

night magnified the noise. Mark was in the same field : now just at the foot of the hill.

The path wound up the steep hill close to the hedge where Arthur was hiding. Mark came on. As he passed the hedge Arthur rose quietly to his feet, and, keeping a few strides behind, followed. He saw how the full glare of moonlight fell on the side of the chalk-pit : the white cleft in the hillside shone in the night as if a searchlight were on it.

A few yards ahead of him Mark's dark figure toiled and stumbled upwards. The moment was near. At the top of the hill the path turned along the edge of the chalk-pit chasm. The naked edge. Mark swayed along in front : beside him was the white cliff which dropped sheer and disappeared in shadows beneath.

One touch : the sudden pressure of shoulder against shoulder. He could feel the sensation of the two shoulders meeting : a sudden thrust—I'm sorry—my God !—in his imagination it was almost done.

Fifty yards further on past that black bush would be the point : he had marked it by daylight a score of times, a thousand times. That was the sheerest, deepest fall, the craggiest landing.

In the last fifty yards he felt exultingly excited : the body quivering, the mind outside it. He would touch Conway Mark now. Around his name all images of hate and dread crowded ; cruelty, luxury, the waking nightmare of broad daylight, the man without good, the child who had run with a toad and put it on the fire.

He poised himself to do it : then stopped. Mark stumbled along five yards ahead, now twenty : now lost in the darkness. Arthur waited, listening, unable to move. From the foot of the hill he had heard the iron gate clang to. Somebody was coming. He walked from the edge of the pit to the hedge again. No one came up the path :

no one in sight. The gate had swung in the wind : or a dog had pushed it. No one ever came that way so late.

He crouched for a long while. He closed his eyes and the iron clang went on and on. At the critical moment always that iron note, and the agony of having done it and finding it still undone lived over and over again. And the ironical clang.

Arthur Clifford looked through his library shelves : took out books here and there, flicked over the pages, and with an abstracted air replaced them. Finally he chose one, and carried it to his armchair. He poured coffee from a tall silver pot, port from a cut-glass decanter, and selected a cigar. His experiments had gone too well during the morning to be hurried further that day.

He smoked and sipped, the book lying unread on his knee. By daylight, by the daylight of after lunch, he could judge with serenity. The iron gate still rang in his mind, but now without any trace of horror. He had been on the point of accomplishing it when the gate had swung in the wind ; nothing more. He had hesitated rightly : his self-control was wisdom : his retreat to the hedge, even his fear, all had been reasonable. Yet why should the gate have swung ? Was it a warning ? For a while his cigar burned unheeded and he sat motionless : then he smiled and turned to his coffee and port. It was an absurd notion, a mere night thought. That was just where reason supported him again : simply a trying test of resolution, private to himself.

He fell to glancing through his book, not reading it, but searching for something. All his books were marked for their bearing on one subject ; there were certain loved passages he approached with a physical sense of coming pleasure. But as he glanced a strange mark caught his eye : a red ink line in the margin : a single word circled neatly

in red : a date of three years before, with two small query marks.

Extraordinary to have missed it : he must have passed it over a dozen times since. He began reading.

‘Regarded in its essence, therefore, or according to the definition of its nature, virtue is a moderation, a middle state, but viewed in relation to what is best and right it is the extreme of perfection.

‘But it is not all actions or passions that admit of moderation. There are some whose very names imply badness, as malevolence, shamelessness, envy, and among acts, adultery, theft, *murder*.’ (This was the ringed word : and he read now with growing dread.) ‘These and all other things like them are blamed as being bad in themselves, and not merely in their excess or deficiency. It is impossible to go right in them : they are always wrong : rightness or wrongness in such things does not depend on whether it is the right person and occasion and manner, but the mere doing of them is wrong.’

He stared in front of him. An omen. An omen, chaos rising again and that word riding the storm ; the iron gate opening and shutting, plucking him back at the very fraction of the very second. And now in calm reflection to have found such a passage at such a time.

He sighed profoundly : his sigh welled away from him, filling the library and the winter air outside with its languor : the bare elm boughs beyond the panes, the grey hillside and grey air beyond the elms quavered in the sad pulsations of his heart.

The door opened and closed. Arthur looked up and saw that Conway Mark had come in. He was a large man, not past forty, but already running to seed. His features were loose and flabby, drawing attention to a mouth that was horribly shapeless : lacking the expressive mould, the humorous line, the scornful twist or tight-sewn avarice : a

meaningless gap into the head, inside which the tongue could be seen moving.

Conway Mark looked round the room.

'Do yourself pretty well, don't you?' he said.

Arthur made no answer.

Mark took a cigar from the box. Arthur watched his flaccid mouth close round it.

'I said something,' said Mark. 'I said you do yourself pretty well.'

'You know how I live,' said Arthur. 'There's nothing new about it.'

'Do you ever hear what your relations say about you?' Mark poured out some port, splashing it carelessly till it overflowed.

'Unfortunately I can imagine it.'

Mark appeared to find this funny. He laughed in the rather childish way that is common to chronic drinkers.

'Unfortunately you can imagine it,' he repeated.

'There's a hare in your field,' he said suddenly.

'I know,' said Arthur. 'It's been there all the winter.'

Mark laughed again.

'It's not there any longer: you won't see *that* hare again.'

'Have you shot it?'

'I put some holes through it. It ran off into the copse—sideways.' He laughed.

'Horrible!' said Arthur, rising from his chair and looking involuntarily through the window. 'For God's sake, if you must shoot hares, do it when you're sober. Wounded animals are beastly.'

'Tender-hearted Arthur,' said Mark. 'Dr. Arthur Clifford, the famous cancer research worker, benefactor of the race: so kind to dumb animals—— Don't be a dam-fool. By the way, Arthur, I know you're always pleased to see me: I'll have some more port—and I thought we

might celebrate my visit by something a little extra—fifty pounds by Saturday.'

As usual Arthur noticed his eyes went down on to the carpet. It seemed more baffling and more disgusting always to have to talk with an eyeless face.

'By Saturday. I simply haven't got it. You know it's impossible as well as I do.'

'What about your radium research grant? Didn't you get fifty pounds from them last week?'

'How do you know?'

'I wouldn't worry about that. I do know.' He laughed the drunkard's peculiar laugh again.

'But look here,' said Arthur, when he had come out of it, 'I've got to spend that fifty pounds on research; there's apparatus to buy: it's not mine . . . besides, I'm more or less in honour bound to show the committee how it's spent: and . . .'

'It's damn funny,' said Mark, 'to hear you get going about honour—you!' He laughed.

'And as for the radium research grant people, how would the committee like to know just how long you were mixed up with that fellow Chalkhill: or that you were actually in the *house* when that abortion case girl died—what was her name—Esther something or other? Are you honour bound to tell them that?' He laughed again.

'Must you have the whole fifty?' said Arthur. 'Say thirty.'

'Well, say thirty,' said Mark. 'It's so plebeian to haggle. To-day?'

'I'll have to go to the bank.'

'I'll come again. I'll come here at half-past ten. It'll be on my usual way home from the village. I pass here every night.'

'Yes,' Arthur nodded.

Mark drew at his cigar.

'By the way,' he said suddenly, 'talking of that chap Chalkhill. Did you ever see him after that?'

'No.'

'Well, I must say it was pretty good the way you shoved the whole thing on to him.' He laughed. 'Ruined him completely, didn't it?'

'I don't know what became of him. I've told you often enough. I was acting in pure ignorance. I understood there was a certificate regularly signed. I'd no idea. If it wasn't for you, I'd seek that chap Chalkhill out now and make every reparation to him. I'd give him money: but you drain me of every penny. *Then*, it was impossible for me to do anything. I was just getting the grant—and the radiology job. I had to put things in their true perspective.'

Arthur paced about the room. Several times he made as if to speak: then began in a calm, even-toned voice.

'I can't tell how to appeal to you, but perhaps you'll listen while I try to explain a point. Cancer is a foul disease: every year it causes suffering and misery. To conquer it, to go any distance in conquering it, would be of incalculable benefit to the world. In a purely physical way: I'm not asking you to consider anything you can be sceptical about. It might happen that in my brain there is some special knowledge: some intuitive twist which could turn the corner in cancer research. But I've got to concentrate. I've got to live with it day by day—brain and emotions—especially emotions. Then I believe my mind would give the answer: almost like an unconscious instrument. It's a kind of creative job—the one thing that counts most isn't under control.'

Mark said nothing.

'Now comes the point. I can't do it. You interrupt. Day by day you fill me up with other problems and violent, maddening emotions. I shall never do it like that. Isn't

it, in your own judgment, worth leaving me alone for the sake of the job? Take a settled amount. Take half my income: or three-quarters—and leave me in peace.’

For a moment he hoped against hope, as Mark appeared to hesitate, that it might still be ended this way.

‘I wonder you go on wasting your breath,’ Mark said. ‘Do you think I’m going to be mixed up with bankers’ orders and instructions to solicitors? We’ll go on with the informal way, thank you. That suits me.’

‘Well, I say we won’t go on this way. It’s too important. There are two ways out, if you won’t compromise at all: and I’ve made up my mind to take one of them.’

‘Yes?’ said Mark.

‘First, to let you produce the letters and everything you’ve got against me. . . .’

‘Don’t be a damn fool, Arthur. You’re much better off as you are. You’d lose the grant, and you might get let in for manslaughter.’

‘The other way,’ said Arthur, ‘is to kill you.’

Mark nodded. ‘By God,’ he said, ‘that’s the first sensible thing you’ve thought of to-day.’ He rose from his chair and came near. He peered into Arthur’s face, smiling. ‘Only you haven’t got the guts to do it!’

The door slammed, and Arthur was left alone.

For an hour or more the taunt took the reins, driving his mind about. Conway Mark. Conway Mark. All dark associations of evil. The enemy principle of life.

He became calmer, and began again to look out books from the shelves. What was the answer to that passage? He sat down at his desk and wrote in silence. Later he read carefully through what he had written.

Reasons why I should:

1. Because in general principle to remove him would be a moral good. A bloody, bawdy, lecherous, treacherous villain.

2. Answer Aristotle's argument that murder is *always* wrong by discovering what murder is. Various definitions. American law distinguishes *degrees* of murder. In early English law to kill a Norman was murder, to kill a Saxon was not.

Coke's Institutes : 'Where a person of sound memory and discretion unlawfully killeth any reasonable creature in being and under the King's Peace with malice aforethought.'

But Conway is not a reasonable creature : not mere quibbling. Coke's carefully chosen definition.

3. The cancer research. 'The greater moral good to be chosen in favour of the less.' The end justifies the means.
4. *Cui licitas est finis etiam liceant media* : famous catchphrase from Busenbaum, which, taken in its context, goes on to say that the means should not be wholly bad but merely indifferent rather than good means. Conway's self-deliverance : the act made unexpectedly easy : the means surely no more than 'indifferent.' Various other people my money ought to be helping, including Chalkhill.
5. A kind of self-defence : choice between *felo-de-se* or Conway : the lesser of two evils.

This paper finished, he folded it up and put it in his pocket. It lay on his breast as a final argument. The night was falling dark and cloudy.

He realized that he had forgotten to go to the bank for the money.

The wind was too high to-night for him to hear footsteps in the distance : the moon was in darkness and the chalk-pit lay on the hillside unrevealed, a deeper element in the darkness. No footsteps in the distance : no warning cough : he would appear suddenly.

His heart was beating. Even now he was fighting the doubt that he could do it : the dark decision and its wavering doubt border gleaming behind the decision like a rim of light. The decision not covering the doubt behind it : with impartial eclipse of reasons against it. Or was it only fear? Fear of the consequences : fear of punishment. The Christian furies. He began to pray—thinking, not saying the words.

‘God, maker of the world and men : help me, most insignificant of men. You made my reason ; stop it from choosing the wrong act. If now through a fault in my reason rather than my will the act is wrong, I pray for mercy. Let my death expiate the fault.’

He could add nothing. He felt calmer. Can God direct an action and punish its agent?

Almost before he knew it he was following Conway stealthily up the hill. Foot by foot, Conway lurching in front. It had happened so often before. They were past the corner now, the dark figure in front stumbling perilously along the edge.

They came to the very point. Arthur, stretching out his arm, saw in a flash the puniness of human reason : the unconquerable doubt, the voice in his mind of the one reality. . . . Suddenly Mark tripped : swayed for a moment on the very edge. From the darkness Arthur touched him lightly on the breast, and it was done. A crash came up as the carcass fell a hundred feet below : and then blank silence.

During the next few days, the amazing release grew more and more intoxicating. The inquest removed his last qualms. He saw his life changed in an instant : an hourly pain gone for ever. Already his mind was making revelations in his work. In the library, where the winter sunlight streamed, the whole thing was unreal—a vanished nightmare.

A stranger was shown in to him.

Arthur looked at him long and uncertainly.

‘Chalkhill,’ he said at length.

‘You can’t have forgotten me.’

‘You’ve changed.’

‘I’ve been through it,’ said Chalkhill, without expression.

‘I’m glad you’ve come,’ said Arthur quickly. ‘I’ve been wondering how to find you. Recently my affairs have been changed. I have been wondering if I could help you.’

‘I’ve been about here for some time,’ said Chalkhill.

‘I knew you lived here.’

‘I’ve never seen you.’

‘Did you go to that inquest to-day, by any chance?’ said Chalkhill.

‘Yes,’ said Arthur.

‘Death by misadventure?’

‘Yes.’

Chalkhill was silent.

‘I’m afraid the chap was no good,’ said Arthur. ‘A chronic drunkard: that’s how it happened—apparently.’

‘People don’t always fall over edges by accident, do they?’ said Chalkhill.

Arthur felt his mouth turn dry. He tried twice to speak, and failed. Chalkhill watched him impassively.

‘What do you mean?’ said Arthur, at length.

‘You might fall over that cliff yourself one night.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Arthur again.

‘Don’t you understand?’ said Chalkhill. ‘Perhaps I counted on you understanding too quickly. The idea is too familiar to me. During these last two years, I’ve reasoned it out almost every day.’

There was an abnormal fixity in his eyes; a glance unnaturally intent, but expressionless.

‘I’m not revengeful, Clifford. But when I think of your

actions in the past ; your life now—the speciousness of it ; your cancer grant, your reputation, I make certain conclusions. I don't know what crimes you may have committed since : that's not the point. It's the principle. I tell you again there's nothing personal about this. It's rational. I can quote you authorities for it. There are times when murder becomes morally right. I don't suppose you could understand that. Has it ever occurred to you, Clifford, that murder might be morally inescapable ?'

In a sudden access of terror, Arthur sprang to his feet. ' You're mad ! ' he cried.

But as he said it, he realized that it was true : that Chalk-hill, who was now pointing something at him, had spoken this insane, paranoiac mockery of his own cool reasoning in all seriousness ; in deadly earnest.

' Of course,' said the madman, watching him with peculiar intentness, ' the pit would be more artistic.'

Iodide in Hut C.4

OH, would she be all right now : let her be all right : when can you know ? All through the morning's work, moving from hut to hut inspecting, asking questions, have those tests been taken, and all the time she was going through it. Yet so many have : but you mustn't think about it. Keep your mind on the work : how blue the air is, going to be hot. Take temperatures everywhere ; inspect, inspect. Driscoll isn't safe. Find out at dinner. Four hours, it may go all day : keep her letter in your overalls, finger it, read it now and again.

As you come round the corner of the small brick office buildings there was a notice DANGER—BEWARE OF THE TRAINS : white painted over red, rusted, creaking when there was a wind. Men came out of the office quickly and turned towards the huts half a mile away. They forgot this single line. Trucks only came along it twice a week. In a plant where risk was the whole job, men forgot this simple danger. There had been accidents.

Canary hurried from the offices. His eye was on the notice, yet it meant nothing to him : he had seen it too often before. His heart gave a quick, sickening leap as he found two silently running wagons right upon him. Hooks dragged at his inside. What will become of her ? But he found he was safe. He had jumped clear. He leant against the wall, and waves of terror and relief spun downwards from the detonations of his heart.

‘Keep awake, you fool,’ the driver yelled as he went by. He had had a bad few seconds himself.

Canary took a deep breath. Then a hand clapped him on the shoulder. It was young Driscoll. He stood smiling down at Canary, keeping his hand on his shoulder : always at his ease. He was dressed in a blue serge suit. Canary had on a brown drill overall.

‘That was a pretty near squeak,’ he said. ‘Shaken you up a bit, hasn’t it? I’m surprised at you, Canary—the most careful fellow in the whole works, and you forget all about the line. We shall have to make the notice bigger.’

Canary stood. He made no answer. He saw Driscoll had two visitors with him, two other young men.

‘Look,’ said Driscoll to his friends. ‘I’m just going to show you something. If you were to take an ordinary piece of cotton wool, dip it in a mixture of sulphuric and nitric acid, then dry it, you wouldn’t see any change : but if you gave it a crack with a hammer you’d get a nasty surprise.’

He drew from his pocket a thin blue rod eight or nine inches long and not much thicker than a pencil.

‘Know what this is?’ he said. ‘Just one of the nitro-glycerine mixtures, commonly known as dynamite : this is actually blasting gelatine—a specially powerful sort of dynamite : more erratic in its behaviour, too.’

Before they had time to realize what he was doing, Driscoll pulled a lighter from his pocket and put the flame to the end of the dynamite. Both friends stepped back involuntarily. The dynamite burned and hissed for a few moments, a bright glowing point of red in the blue air. Then it went out.

Driscoll laughed.

‘Did you get wind up?’ he said. ‘You’ve got to put it in a confined space before it gets violent. All the heat and energy are wasted on the air, like this.’

Canary saw that in spite of Driscoll's reassurances one of the visitors had turned pale.

'Come on,' said Driscoll, 'I'll take you to the nitro-cellulose and nitro-glycerine group, and we'll see the stuff made. I'll show you the places where it really may go up in the air if we do things wrong. How about the drying rooms, Canary?'

The two friends nodded.

'Yes, let's see them.' The one who had turned pale laughed.

Canary took a sudden step forward, coming in Driscoll's path as he turned away, and pulling him up abruptly.

'That's a fine thing to do,' he said. 'You've no right to do such a thing. I should have thought anyone in your position would have had a sense of responsibility.'

Driscoll looked at him, smiling, good tempered.

'Don't you fret, Canary,' he said. 'You know as well as I do we're a good half-mile away from the nearest hut.'

Canary said: 'Of course I know. I knew that while you were still at school. It's the principle. If I saw any of the workmen this side of the line with matches or lights or any sort of tomfoolery—they'd go, and you know it.'

Driscoll still smiled, but not quite so good-humouredly.

'Oh, shut up,' he said. 'After all . . .'

'You're too young,' Canary said. 'If you'd seen one or two of the things I've seen at thirty years of this game. Accidents aren't funny. Did you ever hear what happened at the Waltham Abbey works, when I first started? You weren't alive then, I suppose. I was. I was in it. I was working then. . . . I started pretty young.'

Driscoll's smile died away, and he stood for a time silent. Then he said:

'All right, Canary. Forget it. I'm in the wrong. And there's something I want to tell you. I've got some special stuff in hut C.4, for some experimental work—there's a

few pounds of the new iodide in there.' I've put up that big red tin notice in the hut. Tell everyone to keep out. I shall be going there later in the morning. Will you go round the nitrating plant for me? Will you look after those Abel heat tests?'

'Hut C.4?' said Canary. 'You can't . . .'

But Driscoll had already turned aside with his friends. They went inside the office buildings.

Canary stood for a moment. Over him arched the immense vault of a blazing summer sky. He could feel heat rising from the asphalt. The office building threw a sharp shadow, dead black and knife-edged, across the sunlight. He stood for a moment feeling the letter in his pocket.

Canary strode rapidly away across the asphalt space. Then he reached rough broken ground covered by pits and hollows. Here and there coarse tussocky grass was growing. It was all dry and yellow after a blazing summer, and the earth between dusty and hard as brick. Here and there among the hollows lay heaps of metallic scrap: and pools of water dried to their last gasp, covered with iron rust and spirals of bright chemical colours, yellow and cobalt, floating on the surface. And over all was the hot blue air, depth upon depth.

Here and there between the hillocks he saw a few workmen moving. They were dressed in strange pocketless suits: pocketless and buttonless too, because each fold and crevice might collect explosive dust and fumes: might make a man a walking explosive.

'Here, Joe,' said Canary, as a man approached silent-footed in rubber soles, 'Joe, Mr. Driscoll has put some prepared iodide in hut C.4. You know what that stuff's like.'

'Yes.'

'Tell everyone to keep away; no one's to go in there.'

‘Yes.’

‘If you ask me, he’d no right to do it.’

Canary went on. The whole plant looked like waste land, like the derelict ground enclosed by hoardings. But all this was arranged with a purpose. Some of the huts, where the most dangerous processes took place, had to be spaced out at distances of a hundred yards or more. All cartridge huts or storage houses were built with space in between. The houses with heavy machinery were isolated.

Explosions spread like epidemics, by contacts sometimes, by shocks spreading in the ground or even in the air : sometimes by a piece of broken or twisted machinery hurled through a roof many yards distance. Many explosives detonate savagely at lesser shocks than that. The iodide would explode at the touch of a feather.

Canary reached the picric acid plant.

Picric acid, known also as lyddite or melinite, had given Canary his name. Workers who handle picric acid are often known as canaries. He was a canary among canaries. Fumes, acids, liquors and exhalations seemed to have withered, and wizened him, too. His hands and forearms were stained to the elbow—intense yellow. The whites of his eyes looked out over yellow cheekbones.

He called a man to him, and gave him some rapid instructions, pointing to the flow sheet on the wall. The man nodded.

‘Don’t let anyone go into hut C.4 to-day,’ said Canary. ‘Mr. Driscoll has put a lot of dangerous stuff in there—iodide for some experiments.’

‘Yes,’ said the man. He turned away.

‘He’s no right to do such a thing,’ said Canary. ‘Tell everyone to keep out : it’s not safe.’

‘Why,’ said the man, ‘it’s all right. That stuff isn’t so very violent. He’s only got an ounce or two, I expect.

It goes off if you talk about it—but it hasn't got much guts really.'

'I don't want any explosions to-day,' said Canary. 'My daughter. She lives too close.'

He was walking again. Thirty-five years ago it had happened. In one flame the sudden roar and the enveloping sheet: the man he had watched. He glowed and grew incandescent in the face of the explosion, white yellow-green sheets of flame, and the man glowed and burnt while he lived.

Canary stood. Over him blazed the sun almost silver now, at its zenith in the dead blue sky. There was Driscoll's hut: and the notice enamelled red and white—DANGER—KEEP OUT. The hut was light woodwork and glass. Two sides all glass, the other half-buried in a mound.

To-day DANGER was written everywhere. He was walking to the nitro-cellulose group. Oh, for God's sake, for heaven's sake, don't let it happen to-day. For God's sake keep me safe for to-day. Help her: she's going through it now: save her.

'WHAT,' said Canary. 'The heat tests were never taken on that batch. WHAT. In this weather. Have you ever heard what happened to the French battleship *Jena* at Toulon before the War.' He stared at the faces of the men round him but they gave no answer. 'The gun cotton in the heat—it changes in heat and releases itself. There were a hundred and thirty-seven men killed.'

'Take Abel tests on all that batch, now, this minute. My orders. It ought to have been done days ago.' He was walking: stumbling as he hurried. What right had Driscoll? Oh, punish him: by God you can't lie down for ever.

It was the changing nature of the nitro explosives. Instability. Trinitrotoluene and picric acid are fairly safe if you leave them to themselves. Nitrocellulose decom-

poses in heat. It's always on the stretch—molecules striving to run into each other : the nitro groups suddenly splitting off. The acid set free hastens and hastens the decomposition till you have a whole storage room raging with pent-up fury. You could see no change. Only at any moment the tension might break—the whole mass might roar into flame and life by itself. That's what happened in hot countries.

The sun blazed silver-white above him. The explosive was changing now, each atom striking another, flowing, moving, working itself up. He felt for the letter in his pocket, opened it. No one could see him : he began reading it out loud to himself, quickly and quietly.

'DEAREST DAD,

'This is to let you know the pains came on early this a.m., shortly after you left, and I think this is it. Dad dear, don't you worry about things. I shall be all right, as so many other women have been before me. Keep at work as usual, and don't think about me. It's getting quite strong in my back now—but it may be all day yet. See you when it's all over.

'MARY.'

He went on reading and re-reading the letter.

Then it happened.

There was a thunderous roar : in the air, underneath, and all round him. At the same instant he felt himself swing into the air, and heat beat round him. Is this the end, he thought. He had no feeling of up and down—till his body received a shattering blow, and he staggered to his feet.

Then his head cleared and he knew what had happened. One of the huts had gone up. Intense flames rose from the spot : high columns of flame topped with dense white smoke that spread out like a mushroom.

He saw he had been hurled many yards. Another hut was just behind him, collapsed like a pack of cards. He

saw figures were lying on the ground, others were running away from the furnace looking small and black in front of its glare.

All round him there began to fall burning fragments that blazed and detonated on the ground. Then with a dull shattering roar another storage hut blew up. Canary began to run too—to the gates on the far side, to the street beyond, to the house. Then he stopped. Other men ran by him. One called :

‘Come on—there’ll be more in a moment.’

Canary ran back towards the huts. He ran among the hollows towards hut C.4. In that hut was the iodide. It exploded at the touch of a feather.

In that hut also there were several thousand pounds of trinitrobenzene. It had been placed there yesterday. Driscoll didn’t know that. Hut C.4 was not an isolated one. Normally no explosive would be stored there. The trinitrobenzene had been prepared for a special order. It had been put there for a day only, because it is one of the most insensitive and stable of all explosives. But once detonated, it is more violent than T.N.T. or picric acid : it explodes at the rate of eight thousand yards a second.

The iodide was beside it, like a detonating charge in a shell, ready to set the whole mass off at the faintest touch. It would burn and smash up acres. And the hut was central. The nitrating plant would follow : the explosive cellulose, the drying picric acid, store after store. Her house was within a bare quarter of a mile.

Canary ran on. As he ran he felt sick and dizzy and the ground seemed to heave. Then again the whole earth shook and threw him violently down. Burning gas played on him. Molten and flaming fragments fell about him that blazed and roared on the ground. The air was full of fumes, nitrous gases, carbon monoxide, stifling, brown and yellow. Out of the smoke a man ran past him, on fire.

Over everything the August sun blazed in the cloudless blue.

He reached hut C.4 and hung for a moment, gasping, to the handle of the door. As he waited, he groaned aloud.

He entered the hut and closed the door gently. It was almost filled with cases of trinitrobenzene.

On the cement floor was a glass tray with numerous bottles of chemicals : beside it a large white canister with a red band on it. That was the stuff. He could move it in one journey. All he had to do was to take the canister and walk away with it quickly and carefully to a place of safety.

He seized the canister and opened the door of the hut. Instantly a blast of hot gas and flames drove him back. He tried again, but it was useless. Heat and suffocating fumes came in on him, almost overpowering him in an instant. He kicked the door to violently.

Then he cursed. His heart gulped in his throat. That shock might have exploded the stuff in his hands. He turned and saw that a streak of fire had come into the hut when the door was open. It lay like a pool on the floor in front of him—little blue and red gaseous flames quietly spreading out.

Slowly and carefully he carried the nitrogen iodide as far off as possible and put it down. Then snatching some rags from a shelf he rushed to stifle the flames.

The rags burnt up and he beat at the flames with his hands. The inflammable molten stuff adhered to his hands and they became all flame. He stamped and rolled on the flames, cursing Driscoll.

Then he found he had mastered the flames and was leaning weakly against the wall. He was cursing his hands and Driscoll. He looked out of the window and saw that flames ran all round the hut. The air was filled with white and yellow smoke. He was trapped—trapped. It was the

end. Mary was in childbirth. Driscoll had brought all this about. Driscoll should have been here now while he was with Mary, warning her, getting her to a place of safety.

On the wall was a yellowed and bent cardboard sheet. A large plan. At the top was the word Coal. From it there sprang a fantastic family tree, the names of the deadly explosives derived from coal, with their chemical relations—cousins and marriages. He read the names of the heads of the houses begetting long lines of new deaths, out loud. Benzine, Toluene, Xylene, Napthalene, Phenol, Cresol, Driscoll. They took on diabolic human personalities; Driscoll was one of them. Black giants with a lust for devilish torture. He read the names right through, repeating them slowly to himself—Tetranitro-diphenyl-ether, hexanitro-diphenyl-sulphone. Was it an hour or minutes he had been studying the chart—or days?

Outside the burning was still fierce. The ground was spouting green and yellow flames: dangerous gases and smoke were pouring up everywhere. They would mix with the air and form violently explosive combinations. The very air would begin to explode. Sheets of flame would leap from hut to hut, down troughs and pipes where chemicals were flowing. A stage is reached in which rapid burning changes to one vast explosion: that would be the end.

Then through the flames and smoke he saw someone come staggering—some fellow who hadn't got clear. But he still had a chance of escape. He was the right side of the belt of flames that made hut C.4 a prison.

Canary saw that it was Driscoll. He was coming through the flames: fighting his way through. Canary could see blood on his forehead. His face was grey. Canary locked the door of the hut on the inside. Driscoll beat on the window-pane. He was shouting.

'Let me in, damn you—let me in.'

His voice came through faint and muffled.

Canary shook his head—he pointed to the canister of nitrogen iodide.

'I'll take it,' yelled Driscoll.

Canary turned away. The flames came right up to the door. Driscoll kept shouting: 'Let me in!'

Then Driscoll staggered away, back into the flames. He had only gone a few yards when he became flame all over. He glowed in a nimbus of white heat.

Canary saw what had happened. That's why they made the men wear clothes of special fabric, without pockets or buttons. Driscoll's blue serge suit was full of explosive: atoms of explosive dust in the weave, in the pockets, in every crevice and seam: fumes and gases trapped and clinging. He had been walking about—a living explosive.

For a second white and red flame leapt from Driscoll, with a hushed muffled roar. He saw Driscoll whirl and whirl till he fell on the ground, motionless.

Canary felt suffocating gases all about him. He choked, and as he choked he laughed. He would be stifled after all, not burnt to death. Perhaps Mary was dead already. How many had been killed? How many would be killed when his corpse went up with this hut.

He was laughing steadily now. Then he knew he was inhaling nitrous oxide—laughing gas. He began to fight against it. He laughed and laughed. Mary was still alive. God, save her, let me get to her once more, let me see her, spare her . . .

He laughed and cursed and shouted with laughter. Then he fell on the floor.

Canary found he was peering through darkness to weaving mists and through mists to lights, which were the windows of the hut. And there was a pain. It was in his

hands. He staggered to his feet. The ground was blackened and burnt all round. He went out, and a few wisps of acrid smoke came up as he walked.

On the ground lay a naked charred human body. He turned it about with his foot. That was Driscoll. Driscoll had caused the accident and killed people. He had been killed himself.

Canary began to run, stumbling and blundering over the hollows. There was no one about. Through smoke he saw some dim shapes with a hose.

Canary ran to the gate. There was a group of firemen, some policemen, some of the workmen. As he ran they came out towards him and held him.

'Good God,' said one, 'here he is.'

'Thank God, old man, you're safe.'

Canary looked at them.

'What's the trouble?' he said. 'I'm all right. I must go. Let me go, please.'

'Wait a minute.'

There was quite a knot of people round him.

'Where have you been?'

'Let me in, please.'

He was running up the street. It was all smashed. Near the explosion windows were blown in: bricks, windows, window-frames blown into every room. Further off they would be sucked out.

They mustn't have an explosive works within two miles of a royal palace. That's to keep them safe. Yet his home was in a few hundred yards. Canary ran up the street. There was a crowd round his doorway.

'Let me in, please.'

'Well, tell me, how is she? Are you the doctor?'

'Wait a minute; come into this room, please.'

'Where? Where is she? What's happened?'

'I'm afraid we had to take her in an ambulance to the

hospital. She's very bad, I'm afraid—but don't despair. Ask the nurse. I have to go at once.'

'Are you the nurse? Why won't you tell me what's happened? Is the baby born?'

'Wait, please. I will tell you. Your daughter has gone to hospital. The ambulance will be back in a minute. There's another case next door.'

He was running up the street. There was the ambulance coming, and there were many people in the street. All the houses looked smashed.

'Can I see someone? I want the doctor.'

'Yes, she'll recover. There's been great danger, but the worst is over, we hope. I'd better see to those hands of yours.'

'She's comfortable now?'

'The birth was well advanced—the head actually presented when that first terrific explosion came. It knocked the window-frame out and some bricks which came right into the room. She was partly conscious at the time—but instantly she knew what had happened: she tried to struggle up from the bed. She was thinking of you. She kept saying: "My father is up at the works."'

'Her husband was killed there last year.'

'I'd better dress those hands of yours. They're terribly burned. Then her heart collapsed. We could give her no anæsthetic—we had no oxygen. It was best to bring her here.'

Canary nodded.

'And the child was killed in the birth?'

'The child was born safely: at her house. It was a boy. He was still at first, but I got him to breathe and I gave him back to the nurse. At that instant there was another terrific explosion—the third and last, I think. The shock threw me back. This left hand's far worse than the other. A chimney came crashing down through the roof and ceiling.

The nurse was knocked down. The infant's head was quite crushed. He had lived and breathed for some minutes.'

'He was my first grandchild,' said Canary. 'It seems only last week I used to sing nursery rhymes to her. Curse him. Doctor, I curse the man who caused this accident. Will that hand ever get right? I shouldn't tell you—but there was one man whose damned conceit and carelessness . . . He was put over me. I shouldn't tell you—but he's dead now.'

'It's as well he is. There were six men killed at the works—more terribly burned. There were two women killed in houses near yours.'

'And the baby.'

Later he was talking to others. Was it that day or the next? His hands were bandaged up to the elbow.

'Joe, accept my deepest sympathy,' he said. 'Yours is a terrible loss.'

Joe was a grey-headed man from the works.

'She was a good wife,' he said. 'I can't seem to realize the loss. What's your view of how it all started?'

'You're asking the very man who knows. What was I saying to you in the morning, Joe? I oughtn't to give names, but I know where the blame lies well enough.'

Joe looked at him but said nothing.

'If they go putting a young fellow in a responsible position—still, he's dead now.'

Joe thought for some minutes.

'You mean it was something young Mr. Driscoll did?'

'I mustn't talk or I shall say too much.'

'If you knew anything, you ought to tell it. It's a duty.'

That night or another night two men came up to him in the street.

'We want to shake you by the hand—if you hadn't got

it burned,' said one of them. 'You've saved the whole district. You don't know us, but everybody knows what you've done. You must have saved hundreds of lives.'

'Thank you,' said Canary. 'I only did what I had to do. Not much: it's all a bit hazy now.'

'Poor chap. I don't wonder. Don't worry, though, old man—your head'll clear in a day or two.'

'I only know when other people make messes, someone has to clear them up.'

'D'you mean it was someone's fault?'

'Mean it?' said Canary. 'I know. Listen. I'll tell you what I found up at the works that morning.'

He was talking to others. In shops and on pavements. Under the street lamps in the evening they came up to him, friends and strangers. He was explaining what happened: now in lighted club rooms: now in a bar where others stood and sat all round him: now in the kitchen and parlour of his own house.

'It's scandalous.'

'Perhaps I shouldn't talk like this. But they put him over me. It was my job. I wouldn't have let that happen. That's straight. I had to watch that chap make mistakes. And now he's killed my grandchild, and very nearly killed my daughter too.'

'And he's killed my young brother,' said one.

'And my cousin.'

'And my sister come to that.'

'And there's a dozen good chaps maimed for life—burnt.'

Their faces were all round him, looking up at him as he stood.

Then later one hand was out of the bandages, and he was up at the works again. He spoke to a group of fellows, putting on his works overall out of habit.

'Don't make me talk,' he said.

He felt he was beginning to remember. Being at the works put his mind back to that morning again.

He was in the office buildings, in the manager's room. The chairman was there.

'The Board and myself have appreciated what you have done. And it will be rewarded, too.'

It was very calm and quiet in this room.

'There is a higher post left for you by the sad death of Mr. Driscoll. Perhaps you should have had that post before.'

They meant him to answer.

'I'm not a college-trained chemist,' said Canary. 'I'm a practical and responsible man who has done this work for thirty years.'

The chairman nodded. He paced about for a moment. He polished his glasses.

'Of course,' he said, 'later there will be an enquiry—there must be: a full enquiry into certain things that happened on that morning. We are glad to see you up here again. Perhaps your knowledge can, indeed we hope it will, show where the blame lay.'

Canary nodded.

'Yes, I have certain things to say,' he said. 'I don't care to talk ill of others and go scattering blame. That's not my lay. But there are things to speak about.'

He could feel queer lights and flashes of memory. Things were coming on him suddenly. Something would detonate in his mind in a moment.

'Well, I shall trust you. Now will you come outside with me for a moment? I believe the men have got together a little presentation and speech to welcome you with.'

Canary followed him, putting his free unbandaged hand in the pocket of his brown drill overall. He saw how it had been charred in several places.

In a swift blinding flash his memory blazed up. Like iodide when you brush it with a feather. He saw the whole morning clearly now. The vivid sky and sunlight. He had gone about in a dream, thinking of Mary. He had nearly walked into those trucks. Then Driscoll had told him he had sent the iodide to hut C.4 : yet he had never remembered himself that cases of trinitrobenzene had been stored there the evening before. He had cursed Driscoll and walked about in a daze.

The manager patted him on the shoulder.

'Come along,' he said, 'don't hang back. Don't be shy. They've been looking forward to this for days.'

Canary followed him. Now he saw what had happened just before the first explosion. He had stood by one of the store huts reading that note Mary had sent by messenger. And he saw something else he had done. . . . But it was impossible. He turned sick at the thought.

A ragged and self-conscious cheer broke out from the group of workmen, swelling in volume and heartiness as Canary came out and stood before them.

It was impossible, he told himself. But in his overall pocket, unworn since that day, his hand closed on the proof—the damning proof. A box of matches, half empty : a packet of cigarettes half used. That was the feather that had touched off his memory and at the same time had shown him the true cause of the accident.

The cheering went on and on.

Mother is so Wilful

‘SO long, mother,’ said Will. ‘You’re all ready, aren’t you?’

‘I’m ready,’ said mother. ‘Been ready all day, my son. It’s Ronnie that’s keeping us waiting now.’

‘Well, I’m just going up the road to see if I can meet him,’ said Will. ‘Then we’ll start. I’ll be back in a couple of shakes.’

‘Don’t you fret over me,’ said mother. ‘I shall be here. I’m used to sitting alone.’

Will went out of the garden, with its profusion of vegetables and cottage flowers, and set off up the road. Twice before he was out of sight he turned round to wave and smile at his mother : but her eyes did not follow him or give any sign that she was watching. He strolled on for about a mile, till he passed the other houses in the village, and came to a fork in the road where there was a signpost marked ‘Five miles to Sanditon.’

He could see the road winding away up the hill in the distance towards Sanditon. Presently a car appeared, and in another few minutes drew up beside him. It was new and small and shining. His brother Ronnie climbed out.

‘Well,’ said Ronnie, ‘here I am, Will. Is she all right and ready?’

‘She’s ready,’ said Will. ‘Been ready hours.’

‘That’s good,’ said Ronnie, and nodded. ‘Well there’s nothing to keep us now. Get in, Will. We’ll take her along in the car at once.’

Will fitted himself in beside his brother.

‘I hope she’ll come in the car,’ he said.

‘Don’t you get putting her up to things,’ said Ronnie. ‘Just like you, Will. Why shouldn’t she come in the car?’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ said Will. ‘She’s taking it all a bit funny. You might expect that.’

‘The less said the better.’ Ronnie let the clutch in and they moved off. ‘I’m sure it’s the right thing for her. Now she’s all alone here, and we shall both be living at Sanditon. The new house looks a treat, Will. Wait till you see it. She’ll have running hot water in the kitchen with a double sink, and a patent cooker. And she can pick any girl in the village to come and help her. She’ll have the time of her life, as soon as she’s settled in.’

‘Look,’ said Will. ‘There she is : she’s been sitting in her sun-house all day, pretending she’s not thinking about it at all.’

The two men got out of the car and paused to look at her for a few moments before she saw them.

Mother’s sun-house was a flimsy erection run up one afternoon fifteen years ago when they were still in their teens. It was simply a couple of matchboard sides, without a roof, anchored into the soft earth of a flower-bed against one side of the cottage. Flowering creepers now grew all over it and had turned it into a canopy of tangled greenery, jewelled in turn with yellow jasmine blossoms and pink and white dog roses. Nasturtiums massed themselves round its sheltered corners, and two giant sunflowers grew up beside it turning their yellow-bearded negro faces to the sunshine.

Here in her favourite seat, which kept out all the wind and let in all the sun, mother sat whenever she was not busy ; her eye roving round the garden ; her brown wizened hands flying over her knitting. She seemed to her

two sons the most indefatigable old woman in the world.

Ronnie called, and pushed open the garden gate. Mother put her work away with her spectacles in a brown-paper bag without looking up.

'Here I am, Mother,' said Ronnie. 'Are you ready?' He saw her eye travel for a moment to the motor car; but she made no comment.

'I'm ready,' she said. 'I've got my bonnet on my head and all. I shan't go in the house again. I don't like to see it all looking so empty.'

'I've got all your furniture set out in the new house,' said Ronnie. 'It looks a treat.'

Mother said nothing.

'Well,' said Ronnie briskly. 'There's my little car, mother. Don't you like it?'

Mother nodded.

'Would you like to sit in the front with me, or at the back with Will?'

There was a long, threatening silence. Mother drew a deep breath and compressed her lips tightly together. Then she said:

'You know full well, Ronnie, I never rode in no motor cars yet; and I'm not going to now.'

'Ah,' said Will. 'That's right, Mother. I was afraid you mightn't like it. We'll soon find some other way.'

'You'd better,' she said. 'Here have I been sitting an hour or more waiting for you two boys to take me over, and now you bring a motor car. Well, I'd better go back and sit some more.'

She returned to the sun-house. Ronnie made an angry gesture to Will to be silent, and he went over and stood close to his mother's chair.

'But, Mother dear——' he said.

'Don't you get dearing me.' She was already at her knitting again.

'But look, Mother. I've had that car for months now. I go everywhere in it.'

'It may suit you all right, my boy : but it don't suit me. Cars is for the young.'

Ronnie was a successful shopkeeper in Sanditon. He was used to persuading people. He felt sure he could win her over.

Will wandered away. He was not happy about the line his elder brother was taking. In a quarter of an hour he came back and drew up at the gate of the cottage with a pleasing jingle of harness and clatter of hooves. He had borrowed old Mr. Thurston's mare, Polly, and dogcart : the last dogcart in the village.

He left Polly to stand in the shafts and came into the cottage garden. He found Ronnie still talking, and his mother knitting hard.

'Say what you like, Ronnie,' he heard her say at length, 'you can't talk me into thinking I want to go into that car of yours.'

Ronnie made an exasperated exclamation and pushed his hat on to the back of his head.

'But, Mother——' he began for the sixth time.

At this moment Will came forward.

'It's all right, Mother,' he said. 'Don't worry, Ronnie. I've got old Thurston to lend me his dogcart. We'll go in that. Come on, Mother.'

Mother looked up the garden and glared at a cat. She was not attending, it seemed, to her sons or the dogcart. She said almost abstractedly :

'I saw you bring old Thurston's dogcart up, Will. And I'm not going in that tittupy thing, neither.'

Will made no answer.

'That cat,' said mother. 'I believe it got one of my

young chickens last week. No, Will, I should look a pretty sight morrissing round the country in old Thurston's dogcart at my age. And you'd tip me out like as not.'

'You'd much better come in the car,' said Ronnie.

'I could bring round the milk-float,' said Will. 'But I thought you used to like riding in that dogcart.'

'Like it,' said mother, 'you're going zaney, Will. I never rode in that dogcart in my life.'

'Surely, Mother——'

'Now you let me speak, son. I never rode in that dogcart in my life. And I never rode in any dogcart belonging to anyone. And now you set me thinking, I never rode in any cart. So don't start talking to me about dogcarts and milk-floats. I never rode in anything as far as I recall, in all my born and blessed days, and I ain't going to begin now. Seventy-five years my legs 'as been good enough to get about on, and I ain't going to start riding abroad like all these fat good-for-nothing young trollops. I've walked the bettermost part of my days already, and I shall walk them out now. My left leg's a bit funny but it's good enough to get me over to Sanditon once more. I shall walk. That's what I shall do.'

As she finished talking she put her knitting and spectacles back into the brown-paper bag once more, and stood up.

'Out of my way, you two great men,' she said : and carefully turning her eyes aside from the car and from Polly, who was now pulling brambles out of the hedge, she set off into the heat of the afternoon.

She was a small, wiry old woman, bent, but unsubdued ; and her step was lame but brisk. For a moment Ronnie and Will stared at her, uncertain what to say or do. Then they hurried off after her.

'What did you want to bring that damn dogcart for ?' said Ronnie. 'See what you've made her do.'

'It was you arguing about the car that's done it,' said Will. 'We'll never get her out of this fancy now.'

At the end of the village they caught her up, and began to walk one on each side of her.

'You're a silly old woman,' said Ronnie, loudly and angrily. 'You'll make yourself ill. That's what you'll do.'

She answered in a very quiet, icy voice.

'A nice way to talk to your old mother. A clout over the 'ear'-ole would do you good.'

Will guffawed at this. Ronnie, exploding with anger, turned away, and went back to attend to Polly and the dogcart.

'That boy Ronnie,' mother said. 'Bellocking out at me like that! I know they all think the world of 'im at Sanditon, but I won't stand it.'

After a little while Will offered her his arm, and was thankful that she took it, and leant on it heavily. Her brisk pace soon died away, and they made slow progress.

'I ain't so good at walking nowadays,' she said. 'But I shall get there! all in good time.'

It was now about three o'clock, and the sun was glaring down with full strength. Ronnie and Will had planned to have their mother comfortably installed in Ronnie's new house by tea-time. But at a quarter to five Will found himself still 2 miles away. Mother's pace grew slower and slower; and for the last half-hour she had said nothing at all.

'I'll tell you what, Mother,' he said. 'I want to take a stone out of my shoe; so we'll sit on this nice shady bank, and you can have a rest.'

She sat down thankfully and gave a sigh. Will was shocked to see how pale and ill she looked, and unhappy pictures began to come before his mind. It was a bad thing for her to be uprooted from the cottage where she had lived for so long. Suppose she never reached that new

house at all. He knew he ought to prevent her walking any farther ; but he had no idea how to do it.

‘There’s no need to go looking at me all a-gloar,’ she said severely. ‘Give me ten minutes to rest ; and I shall be fine.’

At this very moment they heard a hoot ; and Ronnie’s car turned a corner and drew up beside them.

He had brought Will’s wife with him, and a good tea packed in a basket. There were plenty of tasty sandwiches, and smoking hot tea in thermos flasks.

After a cup, mother began to recover her spirits. She made a good meal, and her sprightliness came back to her. Ronnie was all attention to her, and half an hour or more passed very quickly and pleasantly.

Presently, Ronnie said, ‘It’s nearly six. Won’t you come the rest of the way in the car, Mother ? You’ve practically done it now.’

‘No,’ said mother. ‘No thank you, Ronnie. I know you mean it kindly, so don’t take me amiss. I’ve never rode in anything in my life, and I’m going to do this on my own legs. Once I get there I shan’t do no more journeying. I’m too old to start riding.’

‘But, Mother,’ said Will. ‘You must have ridden some time or other. Surely, you’ve been in a train ?’

‘No,’ said mother. ‘Never.’

‘Then in the hay-carts when you were a child ?’

‘No.’

‘What about a perambulator ?’

‘We never had them things *then*.’

‘Well, on your wedding-day ?’

‘There wasn’t no call. We were too close to the church. Now don’t you boys start arguing with me again. I’m going to walk it all now.’

This time it was Will who drove the car. An hour later mother entered her new house, exhausted, but smiling

on the arm of her eldest son. After she had rested, and Will and his wife had joined them again for a friendly supper in the kitchen, they set their chairs on the tiled verandah outside, and the men lit their pipes.

A peaceful, brooding quiet had now fallen; and the summer dusk was closing round them, soft, and brown, and scented. Though Ronnie's house and garden were new, the little town of Sanditon was all old, and they looked across the garden to the square church tower, and the rich outlines of oaks and towering elms soft as black velvet in the night air. They breathed in the scents of grass, of yellow night primroses, and of the earth deliciously refreshed by the evening dew. Both men were thinking the same: and their thoughts were a little sad, but peaceful.

'Well, Mother,' said Ronnie. 'I think we'll make this garden pretty good for you in a little while. Wait till you see it in the afternoon sun, and we'll plan just where to build you a new sun-house.'

Mother nodded.

'I shall be well enough here,' she said. 'And I ain't going to spend all my time sitting about, either. I'm glad I comed here on my own legs, too: now I can say as I never rode a yard in all my days.'

They listened, and she ran on:

'And that's more than most women can say, I'll bet. I'll get abroad in this garden and up the street. And none of your nasty bath chairs. When my legs give out I'll get crutches; and when I can't use them no more, you can put me to bed, and let me lie. And then you can say, "She never rode on wheels: her own two stumps was all she asked and needed," and you can put that on my grave-stone.'

Silence fell, and in the darkness their minds ran on from what she had been saying.

'Ronnie,' she said, 'and Will; I want to ask you two boys something particular.'

'Yes,' said Ronnie.

'There will be another journey,' she said. 'And I shan't be able to walk it.'

They nodded. The countless leaves whispered and sighed in the night air.

'And I ain't going to do *that* on wheels either: do you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'Promise me?'

'Yes.'

'Honest to God.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Will and Ronnie stared at each other.

'How will you do it?'

'I don't quite know, Mother. We'll manage somehow. Hadn't ever thought of it.'

'Well, think now. And you too, Will. Can you carry—Can you carry——?'

Her voice broke off. She failed to make her mouth say what they could carry. Ronnie said nothing. It was Will who answered tapping out his pipe on the pavement.

'Not alone, we couldn't. Not us two.'

'But there'll be enough men there,' she said. 'There'll be plenty besides you.'

'Yes.'

'I'll tell you what,' she went on, her voice brightening up. 'You have some handles put on. Plenty of good, strong handles. Not just one at each end: but several good ones down each side. You get 'em to do that for you.'

'That's it, mother.'

'Well, that's *that*,' she said with great decision. 'I wonder why neither of you two couldn't have thought of

that for me. I never set out to be a scholar like our Ronnie. Now before we say good night, you boys would like a drink. I saved up a little of my money last month, and I've brought over a bottle of whisky for Ronnie, as it's my first night in his new 'ouse.'

In another five minutes the occasion became cheerful and festive. Will made the whiskies good and strong. Mother took some whisky herself and proposed her own health.

'Here's to your old mother,' she said. 'As never rode on wheels once the whole way from the cradle to the grave—and proud of it, too!'

You Must Break Out Sometimes

THEY say the old-fashioned doss-houses are all going, and giving place to these municipally controlled and licensed places. It's thought to be a great gain in hygiene : but the war taught us a lot about fighting parasites, and bugs no longer lead their old easy life.

Anyhow, Happy Jack's is as clean a place as anyone need worry to find. And most men would agree that there are worse smells to meet when your spirits are down than bugs : and one is the smell of official rules and regulations working hand in glove with the police. Name ? Married ? Any money ? Where been ? Where living ? Where last employed ? Take your clothes off and leave them here. Yes, we're going to bake them, you lousy beast ; and turning the key in the lock quietly and silently behind you : sign here : and here : here's your passing-in ticket. You'll get your passing-out one to-morrow when the superintendent's seen you.

Well meant ? So's a snake bite well meant ; but not to the man that gets bitten.

But Happy Jack's isn't a doss-house of the official sort at all. It's friendly. Happy never let a copper or any sort of official through his door without passing the word round first, and keeping them on the doorstep for about five minutes. He had reasons of his own perhaps for holding them off.

And then in his unspeaking, heavy sort of way, Happy hindered them and stood in their way the whole time. He hung round them like a mournful elephant ; sixteen stone of him : calling them ' Sir ', wheezing at them, and misunderstanding everything they said. Happy had a face like a gigantic bloodhound, with red eyes and drooping pouches under them : and sagging folds of flesh that hung down and made him look as if he were going to cry.

So ran Dave Barker's thoughts as he dragged along his exhausted limbs and rain-sodden clothes. He looked up at the doors of the casual ward—the end of his day's walk. The winter twilight drew round him like a cold, damp cloak, making him shiver.

This casual ward had an evil name. There were two or three men sitting on the bank outside. They would not be admitted for half an hour yet. Dave was wet through, and aching in every limb. His bones felt soaked and rotten and numbed with the rain.

Then he thought again of Happy Jack's down in the town three miles away. He began to see the fire that Happy always kept going : the big, blazing fire he could push his way up to. Happy's wasn't the cheapest sort of doss ; it cost a bob. Dave had one and tuppence—and another two days' walk before him. But the fire and friendliness at Happy Jack's struck him as the thing he needed most in the world.

He dragged himself along for a mile more. Then he gave it up and took the tram down into the town just as dusk was coming on. The people in the tram looked at him : the conductor seemed a bit surprised to find he had got the twopence for the fare. The tram banged and rattled on, and he fell asleep.

' You get off here,' the conductor said to him. ' Your twopence is up.'

Dave got out into the rain, and the tram went on.

He took to the back streets. He had only been to Happy's once before. He buttoned up his soaked jacket and pulled up his trousers. You couldn't ask a bobby the way to a place like Happy's. You couldn't ask anyone.

Dave wandered on. Suddenly he found the place : simply a door in a dirty brick wall. It was quite dark now, and the street was small and ill-lighted. He lifted the latch and pushed : the door opened. The first door led into a stone passageway. There was another door at the end. He pushed this and it opened too. At once he was in the main room of Happy's doss.

This was a very simply constructed place. The floor was the broken, pitted concrete of an outside yard, surrounded on all sides by bare brick walls. It had been roofed over with corrugated iron carried on iron posts. It was a rough job—but it kept all the draughts out.

As he stepped through the door, Dave walked into a delicious red warmth. There was no light—only the glow of a leaping fire against the far wall. There was a second stove in the middle of the floor. The whole place was blinking in the half light of the fire. Dave stood uncertainly by the door. Dark shapes of half a dozen men were grouped round each fire. Some had dragged up mattresses and benches to the warmth. There were a few more benches and trestle-top tables about, and beds and mattresses in the dark corners.

Dave went up and stood near the open fire. One or two of the men looked up at him. There wasn't much talk. Dave stood behind, and presently his clothes began to steam, and the warmth began to creep through. After a while he crossed to the far wall where he opened a door and looked through. He shut this, and looked round for another door, which he soon found.

The other men looked round with interest as he opened this.

'Hey !' came a voice. Dave turned back, with his hand on the door, but made no answer.

'Stay here. He'll be up to take your bob. You can't go through there.'

A man came up to him in the gloom and looked into his face.

'I'm going down to see Mike.'

'Do you know him ?'

'Yes. He's a friend of mine. I've been here before.'

'When did you come ?'

'Eighteen months ago,' said Dave. 'It's all right. I'm a friend of Mike's.'

He ended the argument by stepping quickly through and shutting the door behind him. He turned down some stairs and reached a stone basement passage in which a faint bead of gas glimmered. He heard a murmur of voices and saw light coming from under a door.

He waited outside the door for a moment or two, with his heart beating quickly. Then he knocked loudly. The talking stopped and in a moment the door opened. He was confronted by Happy Jack himself.

'Well,' said Happy, in a slow thick voice, rather drunk, 'who are you ? What do you want ?'

'I'm a friend of Mike's,' said Dave. 'I've been here before. Dave Barker.'

Happy breathed heavily for some time, and looked at him as if he had not understood. He shook his head and said :

'Wash you say ?'

'I'm a friend of Mike McCann,' said Dave. 'Your door-keeper. Mike knows me well.'

'Friend o' Mike's ?' Happy shook his head slowly.

'My name's Dave Barker.'

Happy looked at him for an unbelievably long time in silence. Dave said nothing. He was too used to rebuffs to

make any effort. Then, half turning his head, Happy called :

‘Mike—there’sh a chap ’ere. . . .’

In another moment Dave was pulled inside the room. He blinked round, finding himself among bright lights and strangers. Mike held him by the shoulders and started pumping his hand. Dave dropped at once into a wooden chair, leaning his elbow on a table. He was in front of another blazing fire. He gave himself up wholly to the warmth. He had found Mike, and his doss for the night.

It was a cave rather than a room he was in. It was a great vaulted cellar, with bare stone walls which arched away in the darkness far beyond the range of the gas-light and fire.

The fire was a big kitchen range, glowing brightly. Above it was a rack with frying-pans, and from the rack a clothes-line ran, with one or two things on it : the other end was fastened somewhere in the darkness. The floor was cement—but in front of the range was a derelict and colourless square of carpet : and a bare-topped table. Happy and one or two other men sat near to the table in wooden chairs, their legs stretched out towards the fire. The red light of the fire on the worn carpet looked cheerful and comfortable in the surrounding gloom.

On each side of the range built against the wall like the berths of a ship were fixed five or six sleeping bunks : each was provided with a mattress and a couple of grey blankets. On a lower bunk next to the range Mike always slept himself. Mike sat on his bunk next the fire, smoking. All round him, covering the walls and sides of his bunk, were pinned and pasted photographs of girls and men, and odd bits of letters and reminders of other scenes from his life. One of them was a newspaper cutting describing his arrest and removal to gaol after a knife fight in another town.

Mike's bunk was the network of crossed and rewritten memories that most men carry only in their minds. Mike liked posing in public.

Mike and Happy were very careful about the men they let in. Only men well known to them ever found their way to the beds round the fire in this cavern. Through it passed an ever-changing flow of one and two night visitors, some coming regularly four or five times a year. To get in at all was to gain some trust and friendship from the others already there. In this way a great deal of information came to Happy's ears, and all kinds of deals, honest and dishonest, passed through his hands. He was a good fence: unlike many he acted on the square with his own clients, and gave a good hand-out. In the course of years the doss upstairs had become little more than a useful cover for comings and goings of greater purpose.

'Well, Dave, mate,' said Mike after a while, 'how are you blowing?'

'Bloody awful,' said Dave.

'Where are you going?'

'Back up home.'

'Nothing doing in London?'

'Nothing doing anywhere,' said Dave. 'Bloody awful. I dunno.'

'What you been up to, Dave?'

'Oh, nothing; nothing. An odd bit of scaffolding I got once or twice. Thankful to get twopence from anywhere for a cup of tea—Christ.'

'What are you doing now then, Dave? Going back home? When was it you were here before?'

'A year and a half ago. Things were hopeless at home. So I thought I'd see if I could get a job near London. I promised my wife I'd send for her in a year. I haven't seen her for eighteen months.'

'Is she still living at Stavely?'

'She's been there all the time. She's been ill. Now I'm going back, I've nothing to bring her.'

'You'll get your out-of-work money.'

'I used to earn four pounds and four-ten a week when we was first married,' said Dave. 'Ten years ago now. We had a decent little house, when I was working up at Handley's yard. They haven't built a boat there for eight years now : they never will.'

Dave sighed.

'Well, Mike,' he said, 'when we was kids together, who'd 'a thought it was coming to this. Glad I didn't know then. Thank Christ I'm dry for once, anyway.'

There was a clink of glass, and Happy poured out of a whisky bottle into a thick tumbler.

'Ere,' he said, 'you need a drink. Take that. Don't put no water to it.' Happy pushed half a glassful of neat whisky into his hands.

Dave clasped his hands round it and stared into the amber liquid. The aroma of whisky came into his face. He didn't like neat whisky ; but it was a godsend. He took a gulp and felt it trickling like golden fire into his chest and heart, and the pit of his stomach.

'That's good' he muttered to himself. 'Well, cheerio, Mike,' he said, 'it's good to see you again.'

There was an old pear tree that grew outside the town where he used to live when he was a kid ; a pear tree in an old country garden. The town had grown up all round it. It was brilliant with white blossom. It overhung the wall, and the blossom fell like snow on the roadway. Mike and he, at twelve years old, watched the little pears ripen. By August they were large and green.

In September Mike said : 'We'll pick 'em any day now.'

'We can't take 'em,' said Dave. 'It would be stealing.'

'Don't be soft,' said Mike. 'Those as overhangs the roadway is ours by right.'

It was a blazing day : hot and dusty. By now the pears were fat and yellow all over.

'You're taller than me,' said Mike. 'Hook the branch down.'

'They aren't ours,' said Dave. 'It's thieving really.'

But he pulled the bough down, and Michael picked a dozen or more enormous ones.

What a hot day that had been. The very dust in the road was a hot powder ; their eyes ached from the blue of the sky. The delicious juice of the bitten pears had trickled into their dusty throats. Then an old man from inside the garden had seen them. He waved a stick and shouted. They ran away ; but Michael had stopped and thrown a stone and some bad language. Dave had it all on his mind for weeks afterwards.

God, what was the use of it all ? That was twenty-five years ago. To think what he'd come to. Down and out ; unable to earn a bob ; without an ounce of guts left.

He looked round the cellar : looked at the other men who were staring at him ; and he wondered what the hell he was doing there.

'Well,' he said to Mike in an undertone, 'I'll be glad to see my wife again. Though God knows what she'll want to see *me* for.'

'I heard she'd been ill,' said Mike. 'Haven't you got any cash at all ?'

'I've got one bob,' he said, 'which I owe to Happy for a doss here to-night.'

'That's all right, Dave,' said Mike. 'We'll fix that.'

'I'll pay,' said Dave.

'Shorl right,' said Happy thickly, turning his enormous heavy face towards Dave.

Dave began feeling in his pocket for the shilling.

'Hullo,' he said, 'what in hell's this ?' He brought out,

entangled in his fingers, staring at it incredulously as he did so, a dainty wrist-watch and bracelet.

All the men in the room began staring at it intently, and at Dave too.

'By God, I remember,' he said. 'I picked this thing up in the tram an hour ago, and shoved it in my pocket. I thought it was a kid's toy. I meant to give it to the conductor; and then I dropped off to sleep and forgot it.'

'Pretty good child's toy,' said Mike. 'Here, Charley, have a look at this.'

He took the wrist-watch from Dave. One of the other men came forward from the shadow and picked up the watch and examined it.

'Platinum and diamonds,' he said. 'The whole bracelet's set with brilliants—there are one or two good stones as well.'

Charley looked from the watch to Dave, and back again to the watch, without saying a word to him. He opened the back of the watch and peered inside. 'It's inscribed,' he said. 'In here. Lady something—but I'll soon take that out.'

Charley looked at Dave again. 'Your lucky day,' he said. 'Pretty good. And he told us it was a child's toy he'd picked up in the tram.'

'Drink up that drink,' said Happy. 'And you mind what you say, Charley. If he says he found it in a tram—well——'

Happy Jack, whose face was far too ponderous and heavy to smile, laughed in a wheezy, heavy voice, as if someone were playing an accordion. A faint flutter of movement passed over his drooping dewlaps.

Dave drank up his whisky. It glowed inside him now. He stretched out his legs to the fire. The heat was soaking through his rain-sodden limbs from inside and out. He began smiling to himself. The gas-light and leaping fire

shone brightly in his eyes, and the room was lost in shadows all round.

Mike and Happy each took some whisky and half-filled his tumbler again. He drank it in small sips.

'Well now,' said Michael. 'Cheero, Dave, me cock. Cheero. This is the first mortal drop of drink I've had to-day.'

He took a good gulp of neat whisky and said 'Ah!' And then, 'Well, Dave, looks as if you was going to take back a little present for your old woman after all.'

'What do you mean?' said Dave. 'Is there a reward on it?'

Again a suety wheeze broke from Happy.

'Thash a good 'un,' he said, and drank a large gulp of whisky.

Even the pale-faced Charley smiled.

'The description of that watch is out,' he said, 'and there's a reward of three pounds offered.'

'I'll take it to the police to-morrow,' said, 'Dave and get the three quid.'

Michael said: 'Now, Dave, you take it from us. You don't want to get mixed up with anything like that. Charley here'll get you more like fifty pounds—what do you say, Charley?'

Charley swung the watch round on his forefinger, as if it were worth nothing at all, then flipped it in the air and caught it adroitly.

'That cost a lot when it came from Bond Street,' he said. 'I'll get forty or fifty quid out of it.'

'But . . .,' said Dave.

'There you are,' said Mike. 'Don't you see, Dave—ten pounds for Charley, because he knows the game: a fiver for old Happy, because it's his business introduction, and the rule of the house—and you'll still have twenty or thirty pounds left to take home to your wife.'

Dave looked thoughtful.

'I dunno,' he said. 'I don't quite like it.'

'Wash 'e grumbling at?' said Happy. 'Not enough dough?'

'Come on, Dave,' said Mike. 'It's as good as done.'

'I've always been on the straight . . .' said Dave.

'See where it's got you,' said Charley.

There was a long pause. Mike sat with his elbows on the table, staring at Dave.

'Don't fush about that,' said Happy. 'You take the money.'

'You don't get the watch back, anyhow,' said Charley. 'I've got that. So long, all.'

He disappeared in the shadows at one end of the vault. Dave heard a door open and close—a different door from the one by which he had come in.

'There you are,' said Mike. 'That's all you have to do with it. You find a watch in a tram—you think it's only a kid's toy. Later on, you lose it. That might happen to anyone. Then a few days later you turn up here again and Happy gives you a little money in connection with a business deal.'

Happy nodded. Dave took a deep drink at his whisky. He had finished his second glass now. His limbs and head were throbbing with golden life and warmth. Mike's face, screwed up and looking at him humorously, was bobbing about talking easily. Far off floated Happy's huge jowl and mouth. Well, what they meant to do they'd have to get on with.

'Oh, well,' he said, 'when do I smell the money?'

'Good boy,' said Happy. 'Thash how to talk.'

'In a week or two,' said Mike. 'You can't hardly expect it right away. You'll have to give Charley a week or so . . . How far off home are you now?'

'Two or three days' walk.'

‘Well, you go home—and then come back in a fortnight’s time. We’ll have it for you.’

Dave wished he could have collected the reward from the police station the next day. But in the warmth of the fire all plans seemed pretty good.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Got anything to eat?’

‘Shertainly,’ said Happy. ‘You ask for what you want. Now your credit’s good, you’d better have a bottle of whisky. You treat yourself.’

Happy opened a new whisky bottle and put it on the table. Dave took some and passed it round.

‘I’ll cook you something,’ said Mike.

In another ten minutes Dave was sitting before a sizzling steak. It was thick and soft : crisply brown all over, but red and juicy inside. Dave ate it slowly, hardly believing it.

‘This is good,’ he said after a while. ‘I haven’t eaten a meal like this for a year. By God, it makes you feel different.’

‘Why don’t you take a stroll our way now and again?’ said Mike. ‘Happy would put you in the way of a lot. Regular meals are worth getting.’

Dave finished his steak and stared at the fire.

‘The trouble with this boy, Dave,’ said Happy, ‘is that he’s what I’d call too nasherally honest. There’s a fault in that. Any man can be too honest, just as he can be too fond of going along with women.’

They all looked at Dave, and he had nothing to say. He drank some more whisky. He stretched out his legs to the roasting fire.

‘Now here’s a chap in the paper this morning,’ said Happy. ‘I’ve got it here. “Local Bank Clerk Decamps With £1,800!” See that, Mike? Now there’s a chap got some sense, I say. He sees a lucky moment—and takes it. And you make a fuss about this little watch.’

Dave looked round, and the room was swimming and dancing. He wondered how the bank clerk could have done such a thing. He was dog-tired, and he'd drunk half a pint of neat whisky, the first alcohol he'd had for months.

'I've always been on the straight,' he heard himself saying.

'More damn fool you,' said Mike. 'Look at you, Dave. Strong, hefty fellow like you—walking about the country dead beat. Look at your muscles, Dave—you were a strong man when you were twenty-four or five. You used to take a pride in yourself. Look at your legs and arms now. You ought to be kicking yourself.'

These words bombarded Dave. It was unfair, he thought. He only wanted to sleep. They were all drinking too much whisky and getting argumentative.

'What are you getting at me for?' he said. 'We were always good friends.'

'That's why I'm talking to you,' said Mike. 'For your own good, when I see you coming in here dead beat like this. You used to take a little pride in yourself once; you could have smashed any chap in our street then, and you married the finest girl . . . I can't stand to see you coming in here looking like a damned kicked dog that can't bite back.'

'I can bite back.'

'Well, get back at the world a bit,' said Mike. 'For God's sake. What the sweet hell has it ever done for you? Downed and outed you all round. You've offered it your best, Dave, and it's treated you filth every time. Think of your last five years. If I was you, I'd get up now and show myself and my friends I wasn't such a bloody kicked dog.'

The misery of years and old despairs came rushing upon Dave in a single choking rage.

'What'd you do?'

'By Christ,' said Mike, 'I'd walk out into the town: and the first likely looking man I met in a lonely place I'd stick

him up with a gun and take his money from him. That's what I'd do.'

'Then I'll do that,' said a voice out of Dave's mouth. 'I'll do it.'

'You won't,' said Mike. 'I'll bet you a fiver you won't.'

A burning, raging heat came up and filled Dave's head and the back of his eyes with fire. He jumped up and shook his clenched fist at Mike.

'I'll do it!' he shouted.

He sat back, shaking with rage—and images of the past raced by. He saw himself at twenty and twenty-one: he saw his wife when she was young, and the summer nights when they were first married. To think it had all come to this.

There was talk going on round him. Happy and Mike were talking in quiet, low voices. The fire leaped and flashed, and the room rolled round and split up in lights and shadows. 'I'll show them,' he kept on saying to himself. 'I'll show the lot of them. Why should I give up everything and be kicked, when I can stick up for myself? I'll show them I've still got some guts.'

Mike was standing up now, and he was standing up with him. Happy had put out the gas, and the other men had gone.

'Come on, Dave,' said Mike. 'Let's start.'

'Start?' said Dave, and he felt his heart suddenly slogging.

'You can't go back on it now,' said Mike.

Behind his drunken anger a cold voice called him to stop: told him he could never do it, not even once: not even for a bet. The police . . .

'We're starting now,' said Mike. 'Sober up.' Mike took his arm. The room swung round. The grate which he had been staring at for two hours was gone. His feet

were feeling for stone steps leading up. He was out in the street now.

He leant against the wall for support. The pavement went racing uphill on each side of him. The rain was still coming down, and beat gentle and cold on his face. A street lamp danced and bobbed : it was a soft spot of light in the foreground, and in the far distance at the same moment. For the rest all was pitch black, save for flecks of light in the wet, shining road.

Michael was with him. He had forgotten that. Michael caught hold of his arm and drove his fingers into the muscles. It was an old trick of Mike's. The pain in his arm came through sharply.

'Pull yourself together, Dave. Walk straight, you sod. Sober up.'

'What's it all about? I'm not drunk.'

They went on slowly. Occasionally Dave lurched, and Mike clutched his arm and drove his fingers into the muscle and cursed him.

Dave tried to speak, but gave it up. The darkness flitted by them. They turned to the right, to the left, a dozen times. Through little courts and passages and small arches. The houses came at them from all angles, tilting and sliding as they came : then settled down into a steady wheeling ring. When he shook his head they broke up and went away in fragments.

They stopped for a moment near a pitch black recess. Mike caught his arm and pulled him in. Presently they heard footsteps. Mike must have heard them coming minutes before. They crouched together. The footsteps passed on the far side. They seemed to Dave an age in passing. But for the footsteps there was utter silence and blackness.

'Through here,' said Mike. And Dave stumbled through a wooden door. Dark shapes came bearing down

on them, as big as houses. After a while Dave saw they were in a coal-yard, with heaps of coal round them. He lurched and stumbled over loose slag. Mike clutched his arm, and the sharp pain came through.

'We've cut him off,' said Mike.

And suddenly the whole scene was vivid and clear.

They were on a canal bank : under the arch of a bridge. There was a high wall running along the bank. Behind it was the coal-yard out of which they had come through a door.

A quarter of a mile away along the bank a single lamp shone. Another lamp was bracketed under the arch of the bridge overhanging the water. It cast a quiet yellow light on the muddy gravel of the towpath and the sides of the arch above. The black water shining beneath the bridge was dead and unmoving. It looked solid and thick under the yellow light. A steady drip of rain fell from the bridge on to the water. Sometimes it went out of rhythm, and a little rush of drops would leave the silence more intense.

Dave stared at the scene as if he were looking at a painted picture. It was too still and small to be really there, and the details were too clear. He felt as if he were watching the scene from outside.

Then the footsteps began again in the far distance on the muddy gravel of the path—and under the far lamp the figure of a man appeared and was lost in the darkness again. He was coming towards them. Dave found himself holding something that Mike had given him. It was a revolver. Mike clutched his arm.

'It's not loaded,' said Mike. 'It can't go off. Get back in this shadow. I'm going to get behind this buttress. But I shall be here.'

Dave nodded and stared at the revolver.

'Now, Dave,' said Mike, 'it's going to be dead easy. That's a chap coming home from some office or shop.

Take him suddenly. Jump out quickly and put the fear of God into him : get his arms up above his head before he knows what's happening. Got that ?'

'You do it,' said Dave.

'What the hell should I do it for ?' said Mike. It's what you came for. It can't go wrong. If it does, get back through this door into the coal-yard. And I'll lock it after us. Can you do it ?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Go through his pockets. Then make him turn round and slip through the door and vanish.'

Dave saw it was a good plan. Trust Mike to know the ropes. After all, it was only for a bet. A bet about his having lost his guts. Suddenly he found Mike had vanished completely, and he was alone. It was damn silly, he thought, like acting. All he wanted was to get it over and get back to Happy's and sleep for twelve hours by that fire.

Suddenly the man appeared in the circle of light under the bridge. At once Dave jumped out and growled at him. He saw a look of surprise and then terror on the man's face. He was carrying an attaché case and was dressed in a macintosh and a bowler hat. He dropped the case and put up his arms. Only once did he try to grab Dave's arm. A voice came from the shadows.

'Stop that. There's another gun covering you.'

After that it was absurdly quick and easy. Dave went through his pockets and took out a wallet. He wrenched open the bag, which was locked. He took out a bundle of papers, and saw there were a few pound notes. He put everything into his own jacket. A moment later he and Mike were both in the coal-yard again, and the door was locked behind them. They hurried across. 'Did it really happen ?' Dave kept asking himself. 'I can't remember it clearly at all. I can't remember what happened.'

'That was damn good, Dave,' said Mike. They reached

the end of the yard and the shed beyond. 'We'd better go separately. I'll take the back yards. You keep to the roads. I'll tell you the way.'

Dave's dream went on. He dragged his legs mechanically : shadows and roads went by. Then he came to the door of Happy's. The big grate was still burning downstairs ; its red glow was the only light. He fell into a bunk, kicking off his boots and rolling up his coat to make a pillow. Instantly a delicious tide of sleep, black and visionless, flowed over him. . . .

Dave woke up feeling a new man. He swung his legs out of his bunk and stretched. He looked round. The underground vault was almost in darkness, but a single shaft of bright sunlight, thick with dancing motes, came through a grating high up in the wall. It must be broad daylight outside.

The sun picked out a small patch of light. It fell on Mike sitting at the table in a shirt and trousers, eating bacon and drinking tea from a tin mug. Dave walked from his bunk to the light. When Mike saw him he jumped up and shouted :

'Come on ! How are you blowing, Dave ?'

Dave sat down by the table and scratched his head. 'I feel a bit muddled.'

'You want some breakfast,' said Mike. 'A couple of good back rashers'll do you a lot of good. You'll find a pump in the upstairs room. Go and have a clean.'

Dave went up and washed his chest and arms in ice-cold water, and came back shaking water from his hair. When he came back he found Happy was talking to Mike, while Mike fried more bacon by the fire.

'Well, youngshter,' said Happy. 'Slept like a baby, didn't yer ? Now show us what you've brought back.'

As he said it, Dave felt a sudden rush of blood and fear in his heart. It had all happened, then.

He walked slowly over to his bunk and brought back his jacket. Happy took it from him and took out the wallet and the bulky bundle of papers. Dave saw some pound notes among them, just as he had put them in his pocket the night before. Happy pulled a bundle of pound notes out of the wallet.

‘Thatsh a fifty,’ he said, ‘and thash two folded-up fives. Not a bad shtart.’

He began arranging the other bundles of papers over the table. As he did so, Dave saw that there were more notes : and more still : packets of them. Then he saw that the whole bundle of papers which he had brought was made up of packets of pound notes. Some in envelopes and wrappers, still with the bank’s name on them.

‘There’s seven or eight hundred there,’ said Happy.

‘Count them,’ said Mike. ‘Don’t play with them.’

Happy rubbed his hands together. Then he seized Mike by the shoulders and danced, shaking his sixteen stone like a basin of jelly. His mournful face jerked about with its drooping folds as sad as ever. Then he sat down and wheezed and began to count.

‘Look here, Mike,’ said Dave, ‘count me out of this. You tricked me into it ; I was drunk, and you tricked me into it. There didn’t seem anything in it to go sticking up the first chap who came by for a bet. But look at all this. I’m not going to get mixed up with robbing someone of all this. I’m serious.’

‘All right, Dave,’ said Mike. ‘You did your part damn well. Don’t get cold feet now.’

‘But the police’ll be after this business like a knife.’

‘Don’t you worry, Mashter Dave,’ said Happy. ‘There ain’t going to be no policeman after this lot. They’re looking for a bank clerk what took away £1,800. He’s the fellow they’re after. And he’s not likely to go telling them someon’sh took half of it off him. No fear.’

Dave worked his fingers together and frowned.

'Don't you see, Dave?' said Mike. 'That chap was the bank clerk we were reading about in the paper. "Local Bank Clerk Decamps With £1,800." It's as safe as sitting in your own armchair. He won't tell what's happened. Nobody knows but him. He's got half of it left, and he'll be out of the country to-morrow.'

'I'll be——' said Dave. 'It's a million to one chance that's turned up. I go and take this on for a bet, too drunk to know what I'm doing, and pick on the very chap that's gone off with all this money, and we get half of it off him.'

Happy laughed and spat.

'It's not luck,' he said. 'It was all planned out, Dave, my boy. Don't you see that? We knew all about that bank clerk: knew just where he was—and where he was going. Why, he'd been working with us for years; and this time he was trying to double-cross us. We'd planned to get the stuff off him just at that very place—then in you walked, and Mike made you take it on for a bet.'

'Your turning up,' said Mike, 'made it all gravy. He'd have known me. Now he can't know who in hell's done it.'

Dave got up and took his coat.

'It's no good,' he said. 'Split without me.'

Mike caught his arm and drove his fingers in.

'Cut out that baby talk, Dave,' he said. 'You make me bloody sick. You're going to split that lot with me and Happy. You did the best part of the work, and you did it fine. Here, eat your breakfast, Dave.'

He put the bacon he had cooked before him, still crackling in the pan. He tore off a chunk of the loaf with his hands, and poured strong tea into a tin mug.

All the time Dave ate they talked to him.

'What the hell's the good of not taking your split?' said Mike. 'Happy and I'll split it alone, that's all. The

bank won't get it back, anyway. You earned that money, Dave. You got a bit of luck—for God's sake take it. Have some guts. Think of that wife of yours, and what you could do with it.'

'It'd be downright wicked of you not to take it,' said Happy. 'Man like you, with a wife.'

'Think of all the bloody luck you've had,' said Mike. 'Now a bit of good luck comes your way, you take it. Why, you could buy a decent little cottage, or fit up a shop.'

Later, Mike and Dave went out to a pub. After Dave had got a couple of pints inside him, he gave up arguing. It was a fine thing to have ten bob in your pocket, to be able to stand a pint of beer. He began to think of getting home to his wife and breaking the news. He saw himself meeting her after eighteen months: then telling her, and showing her the money.

They made the split that afternoon in Happy's cellar.

'You can't take your lot away at once,' said Happy. 'It all needs handling. Thash where I come in. But you take one or two quid away now, that'll be safe enough.'

'How many chaps come in to your place every night?' asked Dave.

'About fifteen or twenty,' said Happy, 'upstairs; there are about six or ten of us down here. Shay thirty all told.'

'Let's make our split,' said Dave, 'and leave something over. Then give everyone who comes in here to-night ten bob—and a damn good spread with plenty of booze.' Think what it would mean to most of them on the tramp like I've been.'

Happy and Mike looked at each other. Happy stroked his huge jowl for a long time. Then he began to choke and laugh.

'We'll give 'em champagne,' he said. 'Thash the idea.'

He went on wheezing and choking in chords of laughter

like a broken and punctured accordion played by a drunk man.

At about eight o'clock that evening Mike stood in front of the stove in the upstairs room of Happy's doss, ready to ladle out food to all comers. He had put on a white apron and a white chef's cap for the party. He was a small, alert fellow, with a wrinkled, humorous face: he was fond of posing and showing off in public. Soon everyone was calling him 'chef.'

Happy had disappeared and slept all the afternoon. Mike and Dave had arranged it all. They had run a couple of the trestle and board tables down the middle of the room, and had covered them in new, shining American cloth with a red and white check pattern. There were no lights in the place save a couple of dim bracket lamps which were never used: it was the leaping red glow of the big fire which brought everyone to Happy's. And that was all anyone usually needed.

But to-night Dave and Mike had got in a couple of dozen candles and massed them down the table in a sparkling, guttering row, stuck in the necks of empty whisky and beer bottles. Apart from the table, the whole place was in its usual dimness.

Mike had roasted in the range below an immense joint of ribs of beef. Pounds of potatoes and carrots had been boiled together in a great two-handled billy-can. On the top of the stove the beef and vegetables stood smoking. The table glistened with candles and brand-new white enamel plates. A small barrel of beer stood ready tapped at one end of the table.

Then Happy came in, dragging a big basket; and he placed with great care at regular intervals on the American cloth half a dozen bottles of Cordon Rouge.

As each new arrival came into Happy's that night, he stopped and stared; and asked himself where the hell he

was getting to. Lights ; a spread table ; a man in a chef's cap ; champagne. That was what he saw. Dave or Mike took each man of them by the arms as he came in and brought him over to the fire to shake hands with Happy. Happy laughed and wheezed and drank by the fire.

'It'sh a little party,' he said to the newcomers. 'A blow-out that'll make your belly bust, all free and nothing to pay. It'sh a friend of mine, Dave Barker, as is shtanding it. 'E's 'ad a bit of luck with an inveshment.'

At a little after eight they began to eat. At first the men coming in were too dead beat to warm up to it. They came up to the table silent and weary, and sat with their torn sleeves resting on it, staring and amazed. There were one or two burly men who by natural gift and long practice could make a good enough thing out of the road ; but most of them were tired to death, with stubbly beards and pale, sunken faces. Soon the good beef began to gladden them, and the heat of the room and the copious pints of free beer to make their hearts beat faster ; and a roar of conversation began. The men who could make jokes began shouting them out. Mike, standing by the joint, was ready with answers. Most of the jokes were sarcastic comments about the table arrangements and food, based on a mock refinement and luxury to which the men pretended they were used. It was a bitterness turned to wit ; an irony on their own lives, taking its bite from the intensity of their want and the brutality in which they really lived. It was the wit of the gaols, a wit that is muttered under the breath with unmoving lips in exercise yards : the most apt, the most allusive, the most secret wit in the world. But at Dave Barker's party it broke out into loud shouts.

The excitement rose when Happy opened the champagne. Most of the men had never drunk champagne before. Others made pretence of disgust at their loud hiccups and choking. Then Happy spoke from the end of the table,

and in Dave Barker's name made every guest a present of ten shillings. The noise rose to a tumult of shouting. At first half of the men thought that it was a new joke—a piece of ironic wit in their own vein, as if one of them meeting a friend had said : ' Well, how's tricks, mate ? ' and the answer had been : ' Not so bad—a fellow came up to me an hour ago and gave me half a quid——'

But immediately they found it was true indeed, and Mike and Dave went round the table and laid in front of each man the money itself—in silver and coppers. They put the money away quickly and fearfully—and presently they began shouting for Dave to make a speech.

Mike waved his big iron ladle from his post near the food and dragged Dave forward.

Dave was no speech maker : but he was fairly drunk by now, and he had been living in an unreal dream world for the past twelve hours and more. He found twenty or thirty strange faces staring at him. The men gave him a ragged cheer. He saw only the candles, the faces turned towards him.

Dave began to tell them about the first thing that came into his own mind—himself : his own life. As he spoke, his strange dream seemed to open out and doors were thrown wide in his mind. The white pear blossom came drifting across, snow against the azure sky : and he saw his wife, with the black lustrous hair and the white throat of her youth. Then he saw the wheeling shadow of the hard times swing across his town and settle on men's homes like a blight. The hungry thousands with sunken eyes and faces pressed round and called to him—from cheap dosses and cheerless wards and crypts that took in the destitute, from the open, from doorsteps and prison cells where they had been scattered. And he felt his own life merge into the lives of the many thousands of men like him : once whole, and now broken.

As he spoke, Dave Barker ceased to wonder how he came to be doing it at all ; and he gave utterance to feelings that flowed round him from many places.

He began talking about the police—defending himself against them.

‘Once you’re down,’ he said, ‘the police are bound to be against you. People who’ve got something can’t ever see it like that. The police are put there to *protect* people’s property. But if you’ve got no property, the police can’t protect you. A chap like me—like some of you—who’s been stripped ; had no job, no money, no dry clothes and can’t get any : who has tried for years and is still right down, he’s a danger to people who have got something. Who knows when he’s not going to break out ? And by God he doesn’t know himself. You must break out sometimes. Once you’re down, the police are against you. Anybody who’s been down knows that. . . .’

He paused. A strange and unexpected silence fell over the whole group of men. Dave Barker looked up. He saw Happy was standing at the foot of the table, talking to two men. One was a police sergeant : the other a plain-clothes officer. They had come in unnoticed in the noise.

The whole room fell quiet. The two police officers stared round. They saw the thirty men sprawled round Happy’s table. They saw empty champagne bottles rolling over the table. They saw thirty candles glittering : empty plates pushed back here and there. One or two men had left the table and were lying on mattresses round the stoves, smoking. Over all hung a gathering fog of pungent tobacco smoke.

Dave came towards the police officers. His heart beat suddenly, and he cursed himself and Mike and Happy.

‘Well,’ the police sergeant said to Happy, ‘what’s the meaning of all this ?’

‘Meaning of what ?’ said Happy slowly.

The policeman nodded at the room.

Happy waited, looking at them. He wheezed heavily, and frowned. He said nothing for a long time, looking as if he did not know what they were asking him to explain.

'Did you want to shée me, sir?' he said at length.

'What's it all about?' said the Inspector again.

'It's just a little party,' said Happy.

'Party,' said the Inspector. 'You'd better tell us, Happy. Where's all the champagne come from?'

Happy stared dully round the table.

'Champagne?' he said, and gave a laugh of deprecation.

'That'sh only a little fun, sir. Just a few empty bottlesh, to make a little joke. We can't afford *real* champagne here! This is only a cheap doss house, you know, for poor men. It'sh a poor man's place.'

The officers strode up to the table and looked round. The loose money had all vanished.

Happy looked at the officers with great respect and went on: 'Did you come for anything? Always pleased to help if there'sh anything I can do.'

The two police officers strode round the room. They stared at Dave Barker—and the other men. Happy followed them closely.

'What I came for, Mr. Happy, is this,' said the sergeant. 'We're on the look out for a very valuable wrist-watch that's been lost. Left in a tram, the lady thinks. You keep your eye open for it—and if you see a chap in here with it, don't let him get away with it.'

'A wrist-watch,' said Happy. 'Why, there was a chap brought a wrist-watch in 'ere only to-night. He didn't know where to take it, so he gave it to me—and I wash going to bring it round to the station to-morrow morning.'

'We'll take it now,' said the sergeant.

'Ah,' said Happy, laughing throatily. He signalled to Charley behind his back.

'You didn't think there was no chance of it not coming?' he said. 'Why I told you it'd been brought in 'ere. It'sh a lucky thing this is an honest place. Otherwise that watch might have gone astray. It'sh a poor doss house, this: but it's honest. Was that what you came round about?'

'You hand that watch over now,' said the sergeant.

While he was speaking, Happy had taken the watch from Charley.

'Of course, of course,' he said. 'Here'sh the watch. Didn't you say there wash a three pounds reward?'

'Yes,' said the sergeant. 'Call at the police station to-morrow.'

The police officers still showed signs of looking round curiously. Happy bowed them politely towards the door, wheezing and coughing.

'Good-bye, sir,' he said. 'Good-bye. What a lucky thing it wash me that watch got brought to. I'm always ready to help you offishers.'

The two police officers glared at him. They felt he was too tipsy to be worth talking to any further. Besides, he had given them the watch so promptly; and they had no suspicions about his larger operations.

After they had gone, Dave went up to Happy.

'Bloody hell,' he said. 'I've had enough of this. I thought they'd got on to that other thing.'

'Don't you think about it,' said Happy. 'It simply ain't possible. They got that watch off me. That's all they'd come for. They won't worry about thish place now. That'll have done me quite a lot of good. You go round and get that three-pound reward, Dave, to-morrow; if you got the guts.'

But Dave did not collect the reward the next day, whether it was lack of guts or some other quality that kept him away. Dave went home by train, in a new blue

serge suit. His heart was light and hopeful. He'd walked to London, and come back home in a train. The whole thing was a hand out from fate, and it was useless to fight against it.

It was Happy himself who collected the three pounds reward. The police gave him the reward, and decided that Happy's doss was a harmless, innocent sort of place. They did not see, nor did the lady who owned the watch ever discover, that Charley the jeweller had removed all the sapphires from the inside, and exchanged the two large diamonds in the bracelet for high quality paste. He did it really artistically. So Charley cleared seventy quid on it, too.

The Three Priests

ONCE inside the church, the breath of decay was pungent. It was dark and silent, the air undisturbed throughout the week.

Across the door hung a red and black baize curtain. It smelt damp and rotten against the face. The iron railing on which it hung was scaling away in brown rust flakes. A heavy fustiness came from the stack of old hymnals ; their black cloth covers were falling away with age and mould, their printed leaves breathing out a rotten dampness. In the gloom small spots of mildew shone green and phosphorescent on the straw-stuffed cushions of the pews. The smell of ancient woodwork, damp rot, dry rot, mingled everywhere. The crumbling mortar of the walls, the grey stone flags under which men were buried, gave out their own breaths. A dozen stale and heavy odours were brewed together undisturbed, unchanged, unfreshened from one week's end to another.

In the dusk of the autumn evening one uncertain oil-lamp hung and swung on a chain above the choir. It moved gently, casting its forlorn lights and shadows in slowly weaving circles on the nave, the empty pews, the lectern, and the carved screen. The corners of the church behind the massive stone pillars were lost in darkness. Against the windows, which still gleamed faintly grey with the day's last light, overgrown ivy branches rustled and tapped, as if trying to get in. In the belfry were startings and creaks of woodwork and movements and voices of birds.

Alone in the church, standing under the swinging lamp in the half-gloom and changing light, an old man conducted the service of evensong. Alone and unanswered he read the canticles and psalms ; crossed to the lectern ; gave out the lessons to the empty church : read the priest's part of the responses. He gave pauses as he read, for the congregation to follow him.

Arthur Underwood was seventy-five. His voice shook, and was taken up with faint echoes in the silence. His hands quavered at the lectern. His dim eyes and failing memory mistook the pages, gave out the wrong lesson, made foolish mistakes in the familiar office. He paused and felt ashamed, and corrected his mistakes. But there was not a soul to see or to criticize or to wonder at his mumbling : no one to reproach him but himself.

He found himself in the pulpit. What was he thinking of ? How could he preach to an empty church ? If only there had been a handful of people : if only there had been one person, one child, to whom he could have said good-bye. Or if only he could have had a word with Allistair, his neighbour in the next parish : but Allistair was too far above him ; a recluse, an ascetic ; a saint for all he knew.

This was Underwood's last service ; the last time he would ever stand in his pulpit or before his lectern : the last time he would lock up after Sunday evensong, hang up his surplice in the vestry and take the cobbled path through the dark churchyard ; through the broken garden ; into the vicarage ; through the stone paved kitchen and the firelight and warmth.

He stood in the pulpit and passed a trembling hand across his face. Forty years. But where were the last ten ? Dark bat-winged dreams at the nightmare hour.

Past them he saw his life clearly as it had been thirty years ago : before the War. Then he had worked in the July sun with the men : drunk beer with them, crouching in the

blue-black shadows of noon. The village had been full of good men then, and his church populous with the men and their families. One Sunday the bishop came; the old bishop, who had been his friend, who had given him the *Clere Crucis* living. It was a hot morning, and the church was full for matins. The door stood wide open all through the service, and the sunlight came pouring in on the flags: with it the murmur of bees rising and falling, and the delicious breath of the lime trees. After matins in the hot sunlight the people waited for half an hour talking in the churchyard and the lane, and he walked from one group to another.

He looked round at the empty church and the bright vision disappeared. The good men were all gone. They had left him alone. Now old age and rheumatism shut him in, locking his chin upon his breast, twisting his hands into trembling, contorted shapes. He stood in the pulpit, and the years sank down on him like shapes in a dark and terrifying dream. He clasped his hands before his face and sank on to the stone floor of the pulpit in an agony of weeping. He flung his arms across the reading desk of the pulpit and prayed.

Above him the lamp turned with circles of sad light. The dark shadows wheeling and weaving, the fluttering light choked by the shadows. With it a hundred vague shapes of failure and despair turned round him. Could these pictures be real? The empty, desolate church, the acrid smell of decay in his nostrils, the utter loneliness, the taste of his own salt tears upon his mouth—could he really be that young Arthur of forty and fifty years ago? Through the old memories, darkened and confused by drink, the dim flame of his mind still upward flickering, prayed for consolation and forgiveness, for strength to meet the last few years.

When he was calm, he left the pulpit, read out the last

hymn, and gave the blessing. He hung up his surplice in the vestry and put on his coat. He lowered the oil lamp on its cord and blew it out. A moment later he was feeling, in the darkness, for the door handle with the musty curtain in his face. A cold night wind blew into the church. For a few minutes he stood with his hand on the door, gazing back into the darkness behind him.

The vicarage of Clere Crucis was surrounded by elm trees which dwarfed and darkened it. They were black and motionless in the gathering gloom of the evening. The church was behind the vicarage. The village itself lay farther down the road at a little distance. Beyond it the road climbed out on to the windy high ground leading to the hamlet of Upper Crucis on the moors.

Hugh Beresford stood at the wooden gate of the drive of Clere Crucis vicarage. He was a middle-aged man with closely cut grey hair. His figure was slightly stooping and thin, his clothes worn. His face was lined and stamped with care from many years of curacies in large towns, with a family dependent upon him. He placed his hand on the gate and saw that the hinges were falling away from the rotten woodwork. Inside the gravel drive was weed grown : the grass banks and lawns wild and unkempt with fern fronds knee and waist high.

The house stood with empty windows inky black in the dusk. Hugh remembered the garden twenty years ago on summer afternoons, when tea was brought out on a silver tray and there was the sound of the mower, and a piano in the distance playing a Chopin polonaise that came and went in dreamy snatches on the summer air.

As the ghost-like sound haunted him, old memories and longing for lost years and for his boyhood were overwhelming. A Chopin polonaise half-heard across lawns and clipped hedges . . .

As he looked at the house, mournful and dispossessed of life, damp, slatternly, unpainted, it seemed incredible that Arthur Underwood, whom he knew as a boy, had been living week by week, year by year, in this tangle of vegetation and mildew. How had he lived, he wondered, how had he changed?

Hugh strolled to the stable yard at the back of the house, which he remembered alive with sunlight and with the clatter of horses. Now his foot slipped on cobbles moist and green with moss. One coach-house door swung loose and unlatched. The outhouses round the yard were unpainted and rotten with their roofs sagging and many fallen tiles: in one shed he found a heap of empty whisky bottles; in another broken gardening tools. He turned into a sidewalk to come round to the front of the house again. The laurel shrubbery was in the wildest disorder, with tangled undergrowth waist and chest high. The smell of rank vegetation was in his nostrils, and birds flew up startled from the thickets.

He came again to the front of the house and hesitated before the front door. He looked through the coloured glass panes; he pulled the bell and a wheezy creak of wire followed, but no answering ring. Presently he heard footsteps inside, and felt his heart suddenly beating at the thought of entering his new home.

A man opened the door: Underwood's one old servant. He must have been sixty-five or seventy, but his body was still straight and massive, and his shoulders square. He was dressed in a sailor's blue jersey over tweed trousers, and wore a tweed cloth cap on his head. His face was rugged and unyielding, and lined as if it had been rough hewn from granite.

"How do you do, Collyer," said Hugh. "You got my letter?"

Collyer looked at him with a surly expression, but made no answer.

'I'll come in,' said Hugh. He had to push past the man into the bare-boarded hall. There was an intense silence in the house, and a fustiness of old boards. He opened doors and looked at the tall empty rooms. This used to be the drawing-room, this the dining-room, this overshadowed room a study. Against the study windows rustled the leaves of the overgrown laurels pressing like curious hands. The room was filled with dark gloomy green. He tried the window catch, but it was stuck.

'I put the bed in here,' said Collyer.

Hugh saw a small camp bed in one corner of the empty room. Beside it a rickety tin tripod held up an enamel basin : and a chipped enamel ewer stood on the bare boards.

'Couldn't you have got me up a table and chair or rug for a few days?' said Hugh.

'You only asked for a bed,' said Collyer.

'Is all Mr. Underwood's furniture moved out?'

'He didn't have much left these last few years. He sold it piece by piece to pay for bare board and lodging. That's the way your church treats its faithful old servants nowadays. I wonder you couldn't wait, rather than rush in before the print of his old feet was cold on these floors.'

This was said with such quiet steady anger that Hugh was startled. He looked at Collyer earnestly. Collyer shifted his gaze and gave no response. He reeked of whisky.

'I came at the bishop's special request,' said Hugh. 'He wanted the church to be opened on Sunday.'

'Mr. Underwood could have done the service next Sunday and for many months yet. Why did you need to go tearing him out by the roots?' Collyer gave him a fierce, sullen stare.

Hugh began to like him.

'It's no doing of mine,' he said. 'We can't argue about it. I'm sorry if Mr. Underwood was put to any difficulty.'

Collyer looked at him scornfully and folded his arms.

'Difficulty,' he said, 'he'd plenty of that : left in his old age by the church he served all his days. I'm only a simple bloody sailor, but my service looks after its men, and my pension comes in every month. B' Chris', he said, 'we don't turn a man off when he's old and ill and his bones rotten with disease.'

They stared at each other. Collyer's anger burnt like a clear flame in the deathly silent house, with its smell of decay.

'You do the church a wrong to talk like that,' said Hugh. 'It is in every respect a finer service than the navy. As you are a friend of Mr. Underwood's, you ought to know that his pension is going to be a charge of two pounds a week on this living : that is, on my income.'

Collyer said nothing : but Hugh saw that his simple directness had made an impression.

'I shall go and look at the church,' he said. 'Did you get me anything to eat ?'

'You didn't ask for anything to eat,' said Collyer. 'But there's some bread and cheese here.'

Hugh left the house and crossed the tangled front garden. With senses slightly heightened he looked towards the church—a dark outline in the gloom with groups of elms surrounding it.

It was now the very hour of dusk when the grass turns grey, the hedgerows black, and the distant barks of dogs ring on the air. In the churchyard a tense silence had fallen.

Hugh saw the grass on the graves was too long for anything but a scythe. A couple of sheep had strayed in through a gap in the broken wall. As he approached he felt the church was sinking in a rising tide of decay. The long grass rose and lapped its sides. Dark green moss came to a higher level than his own eyes. The draining gutters were choked and filled with earth. Thick creepers

were dragging the fabric down and crumbling the mortar from the stones. On the north side two fissures in the wall were caused by a subsidence. Above the fissures the roof was strained and sinking, and slates had already fallen.

Hugh walked silently round the church, noting the damage. Already he was beginning to see it in his mind in terms of builders' estimates ; of mortgages ; of money to be raised ; of weeks of argument, pleading for funds, obstruction from every side : his will and strength against the forces of decay ; his spirit against the deadly inertia of matter, against the endless, mindless attack of decay and retrogression, that dragged buildings down in a wilderness of roots and creepers, turning form and order back into chaos and darkness, crumbling the Christian churches in every country week by week, thought by thought, stone by stone . . .

He turned in the leaden dusk to the church door and opened it. At once the rotting door curtain blew in his face, the door slammed behind him with a crash, and he stood in the darkness, breathing the very morphew of decay.

He saw the points of green mould faintly luminous like watching eyes in the silence. He smelt the damp stone, the decay of woodwork, fabrics, leather. He heard the overgrown ivy tapping at the windows as if to force an entry. Rustles of life and flutterings of wings in the roof told him the birds were already there. Voices and whisperings of despair began to assail him. The church was a wilderness already. Arthur had let the decay break in too far.

In the vestry he lit the lamp and found an empty pipe lying on the table ; it was very old, almost filled with a black carbon crust, with one side broken away : the mouth-piece was discoloured, jagged, bitten. At once he began to feel Arthur himself was there. In the empty cupboards where his vestments had hung were Arthur's thoughts and

feelings : in the chests, Arthur's prayers : and Arthur's slow despair and yielding. Phrases began to run in Hugh's head, hurried, anxious phrases ; the words of a letter he would write to the bishop, saying that the task was beyond him, the parish too far sunk in decay, he himself too old and tired for this new endeavour.

Later that night Hugh made an effort to look through the papers he had brought. But all the time the thought of Arthur Underwood distracted him and the figure of the old man hovered in the background of his thoughts, just beyond the circle of the lamplight.

Hugh sat on a small camp bed in the corner of the empty room, and spread his documents in the glow of the lamp on the bare-boarded floor. The last surveyor's certificate, fifteen years out of date ; the new estimate, including re-drainage and re-roofing ; four hundred pounds—to make the house merely sanitary and weatherproof ; the builder's preliminary report on the church, his own draft of a report to the churchwardens ; lists of local names for subscriptions ; suggestions for printers who might supply work free ; a letter from the diocesan secretary of finance concerning the parish quota. He felt his blood and strength ebbing away into an endless effort to create money and to conjure up money out of nothing.

Then there was the bishop's letter. He looked through the documents and spread it out to read again.

'Your predecessor Underwood was, as you may have heard, far advanced in age and in infirmities for which we cannot blame him. He had also of late years given way to the most deplorable intemperance, and in the grip of this failing he allowed the whole state of the church in the parish of Clere Crucis to fall into a state of grievous neglect.

'It is useless now to waste words on his shortcomings. The consequences of his neglect, however, we have to bear. I refer not only to the state of religion in this parish, but

more especially to the fabric of the church itself and the repair of the vicarage house—once a really valuable property.

‘I enclose a draft estimate which was recently made for the Diocesan Board in connection with the Clere Crucis vicarage and grounds, which you had better study in detail. The surveyor’s certificate, which should of course be renewed every five years, has been allowed to lapse completely. In the absence of any attempt at co-operation from Underwood the Dilapidations Board have been unable to do anything.

‘Turning to the parish itself, a fund is urgently needed for church repair. One of your first duties will be to inspire a *local* fund for this purpose. The parish of Clere Crucis must help itself in this respect. In fact, the contribution of Clere Crucis to the Diocesan quota has been almost non-existent for some years now.

‘The cause of the church has also, I am afraid, been *unwisely* served by your neighbour, Allistair. His misdirected zeal, and leanings towards ritualism, wholly unsuited to a simple congregation, have all but emptied his church and won him great personal enmity.’

Hugh put the letter down. He had been waiting for years to meet Allistair : some said he was the finest man in the diocese. When he first went to his parish, many years ago, he had been subjected to acts of violence. There had been stone-throwing. But they had left him alone since.

He turned back to the papers. The yellow lamplight fell on the confused pages of forms, figures, accounts, estimates, indentures. Hugh read on.

‘The governors of Queen Anne’s bounty are the central authority under the Ecclesiastical Dilapidations measure of 1923 to 1927. Theirs is the authority under which payments are collected for future repairs ordered upon surveyors’ certificates. In the case of a benefice not exceeding £300 per annum in annual value the Governors may make

a grant for dilapidations according to an agreed scheme : money may be lent for improvements and dilapidations in seven or ten years terms. Payments vary at the discretion of the Diocesan Dilapidation Board.'

The ways and means of his private life began to run through Hugh's head. Out of a nominal income of £350 he had to pay two pounds a week to Underwood's pension, renovate the vicarage, buy food and clothing for his children and educate them, pay the expenses of his wife's illness. It was fantastic. He would have to go cap in hand to Queen Anne's Bounty, plead for an education grant, postpone the doctor's bill—this was what his priesthood had come to. He stood up and swept the papers away with his foot. The burden was hopeless, crushing, absurd.

He opened the door, paced from one bare room to another. His feet rang on the boards, breaking the night silence of the empty vicarage. He saw his wife sleeping in her bed, and confused images filled his mind of the thread-bare, crowded life of his little home where every minute and every space was overcrowded. Now he was suddenly utterly alone, and he could look on the days and years of his life as if they were a story.

There had been hope once, and the fervours of boyhood, and age-long silences. God is indwelling and the path is up the breast of a hill where the whole hill-side is illuminated with a flood of clear light filling the air, blue and cold like upper ice. Prayer brings the soul close to God through Christ. There is an intense silence on the hill-side, and the grasses and rose-tangled hedges are motionless in the air. There are long hours of prayer and indwelling. The trees are filled with music ; something flies out of the prison bars and soars upwards into the light, until the radiance is more blinding than darkness, and the hours longer than a thousand years.

The light is lost, the road leads down into darkness, dry-

ness, loss, banishment, the endless struggle with material difficulties : raising money out of nothing ; studying investments, getting into debt ; arguing, sighing, weeping ; losing heart ; losing your temper.

Hugh leant his forehead in the dark against the peeling wallpaper : an elderly priest with a heart full of material cares, caught in the dead, meaningless gestures of a dead church. His thoughts and feelings of twenty-five years ago lay before him, without life : old hopes and fears ; fears long ago fulfilled ; hopes that no longer mattered ; suffering that no longer hurt, like dead and dried corpses of small forest animals, over which a child might weep.

Wind was filling the elms round the garden, and a sound like the roar of the distant sea welled up all through the house. The wainscot creaked, the key in the lock rattled, a door banged ; there were movements in every wall and ceiling.

Hugh could almost see Arthur Underwood. He could hear him walk, feel him breathe and sigh and moan in the empty rooms. The house was all his : its night sounds were the sounds of his despair. Night after night, year after year, he wandered from room to room with a candle in his shaking hand. The church clock struck one and two. Hugh followed and traced out his agony and long-drawn death in life. Soon he himself would feel as Arthur had felt. His body was old, and tired of its journey, his spirit exhausted. His wife and children pressed round him asking for strength and hope in the world that he could never give them. The difficulties of his life loaded him like chains. He sank on his knees and muttered : ‘ Where, oh where, have I missed the way ? ’

Intense darkness filled his soul, the darkness of the house, the darkness of years ; the darkness covering his own life : the dead darkness of a decaying church, and the horror of

a world from which God has turned away . . . broken cities of past times, and seething hordes in the darkness, torturing, lusting, destroying . . .

His thoughts drove him out of the house, and he walked for hours ; round him the trees and shadows weaving, threshing and whistling in the wind. The road shone white before him, rising towards high ground. He walked on, the mechanical rhythm of his own steps drugging him as he went. Gradually as the air grew grey with approaching dawn his thoughts became clearer.

It was early in the morning, and the dawn was trembling through a grey ground mist when he reached the village of Upper Crucis. He was impelled to look for his neighbour Allistair's church. He opened the door quietly and sat down at the back.

The church, shrouded at first in misty air, was very small, scarcely larger than a saint's chapel turning off the aisle of a cathedral. It was a minute gem of early Norman : white, simple, perfectly preserved. The interior walls showed the rough shapes of unhewn stones. A beam of cold morning light began to fall in through the east window, filling the church with a pure, frozen light like iced wine. In its rays the whitewash of the walls was soft and brilliant. The pew cushions were blue. A blue silk damask hung from the lectern and the altar. The altar was decorated with a simple mass of white chrysanthemums in a tall silver ewer. The eastern sun flashed on the silver and the flowers.

As Hugh waited, the weariness of his limbs vanished. A feeling of calmness began to flow over him like a deep river, as if there were a calmness in the air of the church itself. He sighed, filling his lungs with the freshets of morning air. As the light grew clearer and whiter, a nimbus of radiance shone all round the altar. To Hugh it seemed that the blue silk of the altar cloth, the white of the

flowers, the flash of the burnished silver became splendid with the very essence of their own colours ; so that he saw blue and white and silver for the first time. His body was filled with deep and trembling breaths. His heart beat with the clearness of the blue. The radiance of the white filled his lungs, and the chalice ran like silver fire in his veins and silver music in his ears. He found on the pew ledge in front of him a book of meditations, and, opening it, read the words :

‘ Then will he sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and Him, and show thee some of His secrets, the which man may not and cannot speak. Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of his love, far more than I can tell thee. For of that work that pertaineth only to God dare I not take upon me to speak to thee with my blabbering fleshly tongue.’

Presently Hugh saw that Allistair had come into the church, and had begun to celebrate the communion service. Except for a youthful server, he and Allistair were alone in the church. His eyes were drawn irresistibly to Allistair’s. The eyes were deep set, the face sensitive, intellectual. But it was the eyes that compelled Hugh. They were windows opening into unknown depths of strength and serenity, making the face calm, light, illuminated with peace. With the clear beams of the east sun round him, the priest seemed to Hugh to be one with the luminous light and the white walls of the church. Hugh saw that he lived in the strength and life of many hundreds of years : that the life of the building, and of its priests since Norman days, of its prayers and worship, shone in this man with renewed radiance, with light and fire, fresh and glittering from the fountain-head.

Hugh closed his eyes and still the light was poured into them, and the clear air shone through. The walls receded everywhere, the doors flew open, the roof melted away to

the emblazoned distances, to the scent of roses and the silver radiance of the sky.

He breathed and filled his heart with a trembling sigh ; for an instant that was longer than all his life or any human life, a piercing light struck him, utterly dissolving the prison of time, of sense, of selfhood.

There is music in the sky spaces, silence in the crash of the sea over rocks. Red ants are like modern soldiers creeping with steel casques and weapons of death. Man-killing tigers lie in the sun and purr like kittens. Some martyrs feel no pain when they are tortured. Men and women in public houses talk as angels do. Colours can be heard, and music seen. The smallest fly is too big for thought, and mystics have seen the universe smaller than a hazel nut. Criminals know secrets hidden from judges and bishops. Somewhere a cock crows at midnight : a drunk man forms prayers to a broken statue.

There are a thousand million men alive in the world now : and the world is many æons old. Each man that lives or has ever lived knows God and is known to God. All else is visible and divisible. Only God can be visible and invisible, divisible and indivisible : old scraps of liturgy, thaumaturgy, magic encrusted, potent. The farthest star and the smallest water-worm a turn of his eyebrow, a breath of his nostril ; every bird that cuts the air an immense world of light.

In the ocean depths, life : in the dust of the streets, life ; in the dead, life : in the dying, living. For ever in the ebb and flow, the flower and fall, the sense of the profoundest secret depths of peace. Human life is so brief in its length, so calm in the valleys of the waves, so peaceful after its tears. For an instant that was longer than all his fifty years of life Hugh saw the one whole and inseparable peace in which sorrow is peace, and pain is peace, and the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors is peace ; and every

desperate throb of life is a ring of light, a ripple from the central heart of life, that is all life—the unending, indivisible, unchanging peace.

When Hugh left the church he walked quickly away. He felt no wish to talk to Allistair. He took the road that was leading down the hill towards Clere Crucis again. Time resumed its usual flow and the age-long moments passed now as moments. The morning was grey and the light clouded and uncertain.

But still each grass that rustled in the wind, each leaf, each thorn, seemed more clear than usual. The road dropped towards the valley. He knew now that his task was within his strength, that he could rebuild the church and reinspire the parish. Through Allistair he had drawn power from the very source of life.

He saw his own life in a new harmony : and the life of Underwood, and the dim unquenchable spark that had still burned in his failure and in the ruins of his church. He knew that he could never lose again that aspect of a more veritable world that he had for a moment seen. He knew that he had travelled himself, as in a tunnel, farther than he had ever thought.

Hugh paused and smiled, and found he had reached the ruined tangle of the Clere Crucis churchyard. Leaning over the wall, he read on a falling tombstone, half hidden by moss and drooping chains of ivy, the words :

All year long upon the stage,
I dance and tumble and do rage
So furiously I scarcely see
The inner and eternal me.

The Young Against the Old

IT was certainly a marvellous beach that the boys had found for the picnic ; a good half-mile of clear, firm sand, and not a soul about.

Two ancient cars drew upon the turf at the top of the beach, and nine or ten people and several children, with various picnic baskets, descended.

‘This must be the place,’ said James. ‘There’s old Dan sunning himself on the sand : what shall I carry, Mother ?’

As they approached, Dan got up. He was an athletic-looking man in a black bathing dress, slightly built and brown all over from the sun : his hair was beginning to turn grey : so was the small moustache he had kept ever since the War. He looked like a captain or major living in retirement.

‘Hullo, Dan,’ said James, who was his brother. ‘Where are those kids of mine ?’

‘Oh,’ said Dan, ‘still messing about in the surf : they tired me out an hour ago. What a thing it is to be young.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Mother. ‘We can’t be young all the time. Middle age has its compensations.’

The sea was right out, and a quarter of a mile or more away they could see the two boys wrestling with each other in the shallow water : their shouts and laughter came faintly across the blazing sunlit sands.

‘It’s astounding how they keep on the go,’ said Dan. ‘They’ve been in and out of the water half a dozen times :

they've fought, and jumped, and wrestled, and they're still at it : I must say I admire it.'

James began bellowing for his sons to come and help find wood for a fire. By slow degrees, and with much horse-play, they approached. Both were brown from the sun—their fair hair showing bleached and almost colourless against their brown skin. Both were naked except for small red bathing shorts.

Rex was fifteen. Douglas twelve. Both were slim and speedy looking—like their Uncle Dan.

'Hullo, Dan, you old slacker,' said Rex. 'Pretty slack, aren't you : why didn't you stay down there with us ?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Dan. 'It was very nice up here.'

'You children can't keep Uncle Dan on the go all the time,' said their mother.

'Children !' said Rex. 'Call Douglas a child if you like, my good Mother. I shall be sixteen in September.'

'In sense and general behaviour I sometimes put you at about eight,' said his mother.

'In Latin, five would be nearer the mark,' said James. 'Rex, can you decline mensa yet ?'

'I can decline to do anything,' said Rex. 'And anyhow I don't have any truck with the dead languages. Can I have a cigarette, Dad ?'

'No.'

'Well, just one after lunch—you might as well let me, because I shall get it somewhere.'

'Don't show off, Rex.'

'All right, sorry—but we smoke at school, you know. Old Reggie caught me this last term.'

'Did he ?' said Dan. 'What happened, Rex ?'

'Oh, he just said I was a dam fool, and collared the packet, and smoked them himself : and he made me go for

a training run to remove the ill-effects : not a bad scheme really.'

'Do you do anything else besides smoke at school nowadays?' said Dan.

'Oh, yes,—off and on.'

'Do you play any games?'

'I'm rather good at marbles,' said Rex.

'Rex is turning into a runner,' his mother put in.

'Shut up,' said Rex. 'That's only silly.'

'What did he do?' said Dan.

'He won a race last term,' said Mother.

'Good man,' said Dan with interest. 'What was it?'

'Oh, nothing really,' said Rex. 'A thing they call the junior division mile.'

'Jolly good!' said Dan. 'That's the best news I've heard this week. Why didn't you tell me, Rex?'

'Oh, hell,' said Rex. 'You can hardly go and tell an ex-Olympic runner that you've just won a mile, under sixteen.'

'I'd no idea you knew *I* used to run,' said Dan.

'My dear old Dan,' said Rex. 'What do you take me for? If I've got it right, you were British mile champion for two years just before the War—and at the Olympic games a Finn beat you by a foot in the 1,500 metres.'

Dan nodded but he said nothing. He had been trying to make up that extra foot for twenty years.

'And everybody counted on you to win,' said Rex. 'What went wrong?'

'I could have won——' said Dan, making patterns in the sand with one finger. 'I swear to this day I could have won. I made a b. f. of myself.'

'What was it?' said Rex. 'Bad judgment?'

'I let him get away from me in the third quarter,' said Dan, 'by ten or fifteen yards. Then I failed to catch him, just by a foot.'

'It's that third quarter that counts,' said Rex. 'It's a question of even speed. That's how Jack Lovelock did his four seven.'

Dan nodded.

'That's the secret of the four-minute mile, if you ask *me*,' said Rex. 'I bet somebody gets there soon.'

'What did you do for your junior mile?' said Dan.

'Oh, nothing—four fifty-nine—but it's only a grass track and I daresay it's been measured all wrong.'

'That's good,' said Dan. 'I never ran a mile as fast as that at your age.'

'Oh, well,' said Rex, 'since then.' He said *then* as if he had been talking about the dark ages. 'All times have improved so much: people can run much faster nowadays.'

'I suppose they can,' said Dan.

'Rather,' said Rex. 'Think; since your day the mile record has gone from four twelve down to four six. What was the best time you ever did for the mile actually, Dan?'

'Well, I think, it was four nineteen—the second year I won the championship.'

'There you are,' said Rex. 'You see they do four twelve two or three times every year now. My idea is this: I am going to get my mile down to four thirty during the next three years.'

'By the time you are nineteen,' said Dan.

'Yes,' said Rex. 'You see the great thing is not to overdo it when you are in your teens. I shan't aim for anything better, till I'm over twenty.'

'But, Rex—you won't be doing four thirty when you are only nineteen.'

'Why not?' said Rex. 'You didn't get a chance like we have nowadays. We get proper coaching right from the start. Barstow, who coaches at school, says he could train me down to four fifty or four forty-five now if he

chose to, but it wouldn't be a good plan : there's nothing in it, really.'

'I doubt it,' said Dan. 'I don't believe you could run a mile in four fifty at your age. I should like to see you, anyhow. I wonder if *I* could run a mile in four fifty nowadays,' he added thoughtfully.

'Of course you couldn't,' said Rex. 'You must be over forty by now.'

'Damn you, Rex,' said Dan in anger. 'I bet I could still beat you at a mile, anyhow. You seem to think it's all too easy. You talk of four thirty and four twenty as if you could do it without any trouble at all.' Dan felt annoyed. Rex was a fine boy and a handsome boy, but his assumption that he was in all respects an improvement on his father's and uncle's generation was not always agreeable.

'What's that?' said James, joining in. 'Are you offering to run young Rex off his legs? I wish you would, Dan. It might take him down a peg.'

'I've a good mind to try,' said Dan. He started trotting up and down on the firm sand, with a springy step, flexing his legs as he went. 'I don't feel too bad,' he said. 'I've a good mind to have a shot.'

'Go on, Rex,' said James. 'You race Dan over to the end of the beach and back, and see if he doesn't beat you easily.'

Rex looked self-conscious.

'No,' he said, 'what's the point? It sounds a bit silly.'

The other grown-ups joined in.

'Go on, Rex,' they all said. 'Show us how you can run.'

'Go on, Rex,' said Douglas. 'You're funking it.'

'It must be just about half a mile over to those rocks,' said James. 'It's a jolly good idea.'

'Wait a minute,' said Douglas. 'I've got my bike here.'

I can measure out half a mile on my cyclometer and then put a mark, and they can run round it and back again.'

'Good idea,' said Dan. 'And you can take the times, James. Rex says he can run a mile in four fifty : I bet he can't.'

'Of course he can't,' said James. 'He thinks it's all too easy.'

'Dan, do take care,' said Mother. 'Remember you aren't used to this sort of thing.'

'I shan't hurt,' said Dan. 'I'll stop if I'm feeling the strain too much. I'll just go for a pipe opener.'

He set off at a brisk trot, and everyone watched him.

'He'll be all right,' said James. 'He's as hard as nails. He has been walking miles every day these holidays : and he plays squash and rackets regularly in London.'

After a few minutes Douglas rode back on his bicycle. He pointed to a boulder that he had dragged into position at the far end of the beach.

'It's exactly half a mile up to there,' he said, 'from this line. The sand's good and firm all the way.'

The party now gathered at the starting point—nine or ten grown-ups and several young children. Douglas marked the starting line on the sand.

Dan walked slowly back, breathing deeply as he came.

'All right,' he said. 'I'm ready.'

'I'm ready,' said Rex, 'if you really want to.'

They stood behind the starting line, both brown-skinned and almost bare : Dan in his black bathing dress and Rex in red shorts. Dan stood two or three inches taller than Rex, and he looked more solid all over.

Everybody watched in silence.

James pulled out his watch and waited for it to reach the exact beginning of a minute.

'Crikes,' said Douglas, 'this is quite exciting.'

A few seconds later they were off to a cheer. For the

first hundred yards or so they kept even, then the lead went to Rex.

'Well run, Rex,' shouted Douglas.

The onlookers could now clearly see the difference in the runners. Dan's movements looked perfectly controlled and practised—his hips and shoulders travelled in a smooth straight line. There was a machine-like polish in his stride.

By comparison Rex was too loose and springy: his arms and elbows showed too much, but he ran so lightly and easily, that he almost seemed to blow along like thistle-down in front of Dan.

Soon Rex began to draw away; instead of being close on his heels, Dan was five yards behind—then ten.

'Well run, Rex. Well run, Rex,' cried the children shrilly, jumping about. The grown-ups looked on in silence.

By the time the turn came Dan was fifteen yards behind.

'Good for Rex,' shouted Douglas. 'He's winning easily.'

'Shut up, you little ass,' said James. 'The race hasn't begun yet: Dan knows how to judge speed.'

Half a mile away, now, they turned the boulder and began the homeward journey. The blue air was cloudless all round, the wide empty sands were dazzling to the eye. The runners looked small and doll-like in the distance.

'Rex started off much too fast,' said James. 'Dan'll come up on him now.'

In the meanwhile Dan had been having a very bad time. Directly he started he found the pace uncomfortable: his legs felt stiff and heavy, and he would dearly have liked to have set a slower speed. In a hundred yards he gave up trying to get the lead, and began to follow Rex.

He'll soon slack off, Dan thought; but to his dismay Rex seemed to keep up the speed without effort. After the

first quarter, Dan, feeling puffed and tired already, had begun to let him go.

As they approached the half-mile mark, the beach sloped up slightly, and a fresh breeze, coming round the far point, met them head on. Dan found it harder and harder work and saw Rex leaving him at every stride. He cursed himself for having started.

As Rex turned the boulder Dan called out to him. 'All right, Rex. I'll have to stop,' but the wind carried his words back and away. At least Rex never seemed to hear them. Dan laboured on after him.

Then as soon as he turned the mark, and had the wind behind him and felt the slight downhill slope, Dan began to feel much better. His muscles were warming up—quite suddenly he began to get back some of his old suppleness and joy of movement in running: his stride lengthened out powerfully and rhythmically. With each step, he felt coming back to him again the glorious timing and rhythm that it had taken him years of practice to perfect. Without noticing the violent pumping of his heart and lungs, he began to close up on the boy in front.

'This is great,' he said to himself. 'There's life in the old dog yet: I've still got something in me.'

Before they were half-way back to the finish Dan had caught Rex, and was running at his shoulder, stride for stride.

Now both grown-ups and children broke into loud excited cheering. James's eyes glistened with old memories as he saw his brother pulling a race out of the fire once again.

'Come on, Dan. Come on, Dan,' he bellowed.

'Rex—Rex—Rex—' yelled Douglas beside him.

To Dan's surprise Rex held off his challenge. He felt the boy was tiring and weakening: the beautiful lightness was leaving his action. He could tell from his breathing

that he was having a bad time—yet Rex refused to let him pass. He found strength from somewhere to answer every increase in speed. Dan realized that he was up against a runner who'd fight him every inch of the way to the tape: his respect for Rex went up. He saw he was going to have the very devil of a race.

'I will beat him,' he said to himself. 'I'll show him.'

They were now about three hundred yards from the finish. They heard the little knot of people shouting at them. As the noise came to Dan's ears he forgot Rex and the bare empty stretch of sand. He saw himself coming round the last bend of a black ash track, with the green turf on his left: on his right an immense bank of yelling people: the roar of a huge excited crowd like thunder in his ears. He forgot the frenzied beating of his heart, the red-hot pain in his calves and thighs.

All he saw, a single stride in front of him, was the figure of the Finnish runner, whom he had dreamed of catching for twenty years. He felt his opponent stagger and weaken as he came up to his shoulder. He saw the tape stretched out only fifty yards in front.

With a wonderful sprint, still perfect in style, Dan came clean away from Rex, and crossed the line a good five yards in front.

James clapped him on the shoulder.

'Well run, Dan. Well run,' said James, grasping his hand. 'The time was just about four fifty.'

Suddenly Dan slipped down on to the sand and lay motionless. As they looked at him, they saw his face and lips had turned a bluish colour.

Rex was the first to speak.

'Gosh,' said Rex. 'He's passed out.'

In the evening sunlight Dan lay without pillows flat on

his back in bed. This was the only position in which he could breathe at all comfortably.

The local doctor turned from the bed and looked at James ; then addressed them both.

He said : ' I suppose I had better be absolutely frank.'

' Carry on,' said James, with a grave face. ' Go straight ahead.'

' Well, it's your heart,' he said to Dan, ' you've damaged yourself pretty badly, but it doesn't mean you are knocked right out. You've strained it—just as you might strain a thigh or calf muscle. It's a thing which can get all right with great care and rest : you'll have to go very slow—very slow indeed for some years.'

The two brothers nodded.

' You must take care about violent exercise at forty and past,' said the doctor. ' It's worth it every time to watch your step. I didn't quite gather how this happened. You were running a race, weren't you ?'

James explained.

' Why on earth didn't you let the boy win ?'

' I don't know,' said Dan. ' It was silly of me : I got excited.'

' Oh, well,' said the doctor. ' I know it cheers us up to think we can beat the youngsters still ; but it's not worth it. You'll have to take a week or so in bed, for a start. I'd better look in and see you to-morrow, and I think I'll drop a line to your own doctor in London.'

After he had gone Dan lay still : they had pushed his bed up to the window. He could hear the boys shouting and laughing in the garden directly underneath.

' Bad luck on old Dan,' he heard Douglas say. ' He's mucked up his heart or something.'

' Rotten,' said Rex. ' I feel it's all my fault too : I eased up so as to give him a race—If I'd left him standing he would probably have been—all right. But I didn't like to.'

Old Hard

ABOUT twenty miles from Bristol, where the last slopes of the Cotswolds look over the flats bordering the Severn estuary, there is a disused railway cutting. The lines and sleepers have been taken up for many years : grass and thorn bushes grow among the stones of the track.

On a summer evening a man dressed in blue trousers and a rough jersey with a roll collar was walking along this cutting. One side of the cutting lay in deep blue shadow, while the other was still alive with evening sunlight and gorse in bloom. The sailor looked carefully at each bank as he came along. Presently he saw in front of him a small black hut half-way up the side of the cutting, and he climbed up to it.

As he came round the hut to a small flat clearing, he found there was someone already there. The sailor drew back at once, not showing himself, but watching.

It was an old, frail man he saw, bearded, shaky in his movements as he laid out his things around him. He was settling down for the night. The sailor was close enough to see the pale smoke-blue yellow-rimmed eyes of old age, and the ruined mouth working as he muttered to himself. The old man went on making his slow, hesitating arrangements, talking in an undertone all the time.

'O Lord,' the sailor heard him whisper, 'make me to know mine end and the number of my days. I have trodden the wine-press alone.' And after a pause he said

out loud, 'Though man should live to fourscore years, then is his strength but labour and sorrow.'

'What's this?' thought the sailor. 'Some psalm-singing old cod? What's his lay?'

For some time he stood and watched. The muttering went on, and presently it seemed to change to cursing.

'Why can't you show me the way inside?' the old man said. 'Walking round all these bloody years—where's the way in—tell me that?' He was working himself up to a shout.

At that moment he looked up and saw the sailor looking at him round the corner of the hut. He stopped his cursing and jiggling and sat down with a sigh. He stared down silently and fixedly.

The sailor came into the clearing, then sat down, loosened his boots, and began to take one or two packages from his pockets and lay them round him. As he did so they both watched each other under their eyebrows. It was the old man who broke the silence at length.

'Well,' he said, 'going to spend the night here?'

'Yes,' said the sailor. 'Any objections?'

The old man seemed to pull himself together and his voice grew firmer. 'No, I've got no objections.'

'Some years since I struck this spot,' said the sailor. 'I wondered if I was going to find it. I've got a billy-can here to boil some water for a cup of tea; and I've got the tea; but what about the water?'

'Wait,' said the old man. 'What do you say to this?' He got up slowly and went to the hut. From inside he took an old overcoat and drew from the pocket a large bottle. He handed it over and the sailor read the label at arm's length. The cork had been pulled and replaced, and the bottle was about three-quarters full.

'Brandy?' said the sailor at length. 'Is this the real stuff? Liqueur? Cognac?'

'It's very fine,' said the old man. 'It cost me seventeen and a kick, and I found it in a village inn, where they had no right to have such stuff. It's a drink for lords.'

He sat on the ground again, slowly and stiffly.

'Look here,' said the sailor. 'Are you telling me you paid seven half-dollars for this, or do you mean that's what you *didn't* pay for it?'

'Go on,' said the old man in a listless voice. 'Drink up!'

The sailor pulled the cork and sniffed it suspiciously.

'Yes,' he said, 'that's the goods.'

Then he put the neck of the bottle to his mouth and took a deep gulp.

'Mary Ann!' he said, gasping. 'Mother's milk! Grand!' he jerked out between his gasps.

He took another drink and handed the bottle back.

'Put it on the ground between us,' said the old man.

'That's great,' said the sailor. 'My God, it is! Do you mean you really bought that!'

The old man motioned him to take some more. 'Take another one,' he said. 'You're a young chap, full of blood; you need it.'

'Not so much of the young chap,' said the sailor. 'I'm a damned sight nearer forty than thirty.'

'Just in the pride of life,' said the old man. 'Everything open to you. You've got your health and strength and the world with it; that's the point.'

'What do you mean?'

'You'll know what I mean one day; when you begin to lose it; when your friends begin to go, and things you've taken years to build up break down again.'

He took a pull at the bottle.

'Rollicking all done,' he said. 'Your joke's gone stale.'

Men talking a new language. I'm alone now, yet I don't die. What the hell's the use of that?' He took another pull at the bottle. 'Every time I lie down,' he said, 'I hope I shall never get up. Every time I wake up and find I'm still alive, I curse because I'm not dead.'

He passed the bottle over to the sailor, who took a long pull.

'By gosh, it's good!' he said, and gave a long, contented sigh.

The old man took the bottle back and drank again. He went on talking, holding the bottle up in the air.

'Sometimes I kick the ground,' he said, 'and knock it with my head.'

The sailor stared at him, then took the bottle from him and drank deeply again. He put the bottle down and they fell to eyeing each other in silence.

It was now about seven o'clock. Not a cloud had been seen all day, and to the west the shining waters of the Severn estuary merged with the liquid golden light of the sun, as it sank. The faintest touch of chill was creeping into the air. It came up from the glinting waters of the estuary, touching their cheeks with freshness, and bringing a hint of salt and damp to their nostrils.

'So you're making for Bristol?' said the old man.

The sailor began to speak but stopped. 'What the hell are you talking about now?' he said. 'Who said anything about Bristol?'

'Well, I was only working things out a bit. You're not long off a boat, are you?'

'No.'

'And if you're walking anywhere from London or Southampton, you wouldn't have got here.'

The sailor said nothing.

'Well, I suppose you've been walking down from Liverpool; and you're making for Bristol.'

‘ Yes.’

‘ And at Bristol I expect you’re going to look round for someone for a while ?’

The sailor glared at him. ‘ Don’t ask questions,’ he said, ‘ or you might get a knock on the nut.’

‘ Don’t take offence,’ said the old man. ‘ Nothing to be offended at. I go alone so much, I get talking ; that’s all. It’s plain to me you know the way round here, or you wouldn’t have come slap to this hut and, if you know the West as well as that, I only thought you would be visiting someone along in Bristol. Now aren’t I right ?’

‘ Well, since you ask,’ said the sailor, ‘ and to give you a polite answer, mind your own bloody business. I should.’ Wish I’d never mucked in with the old doodle, he thought. Why can’t he shut up ?

‘ A man like you doesn’t run round the country looking for the end of a rainbow,’ the old man went on, making him writhe with impatience. ‘ Think I’m an old fool, don’t you ? Now listen to me for a moment. When I see you three weeks off a boat, making straight for Bristol, *Trimmer Wylie*, I ask myself what it’s all about.’

In an instant Wylie was at his throat, throttling him and shaking his head backwards and forwards.

‘ You say that,’ he said, ‘ and I’ll wring your bloody neck a yard long.’

He loosened his grip and gave the old man room to breathe, but still held him.

‘ You go on if you like,’ the old man said in a shaking voice. ‘ I shan’t mind if you do me in. But I advise you not to ; because you’ll never know, then, what I’ve got to tell you.’

Wylie let him go. ‘ Who the hell are you ?’ he said. ‘ I don’t know you.’

‘ Don’t you get worried,’ said the old man. ‘ I’m a friend of yours.’

Wylie stared at him. Then in a second he was wringing his hand and putting an arm round his shoulders.

‘By Jeeze !’ he said. ‘Old Hard ! What a fool I am. Put it there !’

‘That’s right, Wylie,’ said the old man, smiling. ‘Alexander Hard himself. It does me good to see you. It makes me feel younger already.’

They went on pumping each other’s hands, both feeling a bit on with the brandy by now.

‘Forgive my being rough with you,’ said Wylie. ‘But who could have known you this way, beard and all. And you were so clever, too. You gave me a scare. Three weeks off a boat and making for Bristol ! You’re right ; but as far as anyone else is concerned, I’m gone for ever. All that’s known about Trimmer Wylie is that he got a boat to South America ; and he got mixed up in a row there and very likely got knifed. Anyway, he’s never been seen again.’

‘But why ?’ cried Hard, ‘what’s the advantage ? Trimmer Wylie was a name that carried some weight, and there was more use in it than danger.’

They looked at each other and felt the drink warming their hearts. The sun was setting lower and filled the whole air with a soft, brandy-coloured glow. They made themselves comfortable against the sheltered side of the black tarred hut and began to drink again. Wylie took out a packet of cold meat and bread, and made a meal. The old man refused food altogether.

‘It must be ten years since I saw you,’ he said. ‘I heard about you for a few years from that London lot, then you just disappeared. It does me good to see you again, Wylie. It brings things back again. What are you thinking of doing now ?’

‘I’m going to marry and settle down.’

‘Have you made your fortune ?’

‘No, but I’m just going to.’

The old man paused, waiting for him to speak. Wylie took a pull at the bottle.

‘Look here, Hard,’ he said, ‘you’re just the chap I want. You can still do a bit, I suppose?’

‘I might.’

‘You might find a place for some jewellery, precious stones; things like that?’

The old man nodded. ‘I’m not quite dead yet,’ he said. ‘Where are they?’

‘Well,’ said Wylie. ‘Listen, and I’ll tell you.’

‘When I was in London, I got in with a queer crowd round Tottenham Court Road; that part of the world; and in the house I lived in there was all kinds of trade thriving. Dope was one of the best lines they had. There were two or three girls living up on the top floor. There were a few young lads who made a special job of knocking suitcases off cars, and there was a chap called Bernstingl who’s a first-class man on anything to do with jewels. He knew where everything was that was worth anything in London.’

‘I knew him at one time,’ said Hard. ‘We’ve done a bit of trade together.’

‘Well, I hope you kept your end up,’ said Wylie. ‘He was a proper Yid, and a swine.’

‘I managed,’ said old Hard. ‘I heard about you from him too sometimes.’

Wylie nodded. ‘It’s good to see you like this,’ he said. ‘Give me that bottle. Well, I used to take a boat from time to time, and I used to go back and work in with these chaps again and, being anxious to improve myself, I learned a lot.’

He chuckled.

‘There was only one thing against it; that chap Bernstingl liked to regard himself as a kind of boss, and if it comes to working for a boss, there are plenty of safe jobs.

I meant to stay a year or two to learn what I could ; then come back down this way and pick up with you again. I always liked you. I thought one day I might fit in pretty well with you, and you might give me a leg up on your side.' He looked at Hard, and Hard gripped his hands ; they shook hands for some moments in silence.

'Did you ?' said Hard, with a new eagerness in his voice. 'Say that and you make me feel I have a life to live yet. I always looked on you as a sort of son. I've always been watching for you to turn up again some day.'

The bottle passed.

'I had some guts in me too when I was young,' said Hard, 'and I looked to see you again. And now I see you, I'll tell you what I feel.'

'That's all right,' said Wylie, and he nodded.

'Well, one day this chap Bernstingl wanted me to go on some special job ; some well-known actress who'd got a necklace in a friend's house. Bernstingl had planted a girl in the house, as a maid. All I had to do was to slip in one night, take the jewel box from the arranged place and pick out the necklace. That was all right. Only things began to take a funny turn. I had a curious feeling, so I beat it. I did the famous vanishing act.'

Hard nodded.

'I had a feeling,' said Wylie. 'I get them. If I didn't trust my own feelings, I shouldn't come through as well as I do. About two days after that, Bernstingl got himself into a mess. They knew all about our little lot. But I had already hopped it. And I had the prize picking. It was worth thousands.'

'What did you do ?'

'What did I do ? I kept my head, of course. I was on a boat for South America two days later. My seaman's papers were all in order—they always are—Trimmer Wylie, that's all I've been for the last four years. But now

I thought was the time to come home and live on my earnings. Now things will have died down.'

It was now dark, and Wylie turned and looked seriously into the old man's face. 'Look here,' he said. 'What I'm after is this. If you had a necklace like that now, would you still be able to do anything with it?'

Hard had a good gulp of brandy and laughed aloud.

'Wylie,' he said, and he laughed and cried at the same time. 'I praise God for this night. I've got a life to live yet, I see. I thought I was broken down and alone. Let me have those diamonds, and we'll work together on the old scale. I'll place a stone here and a stone there slowly. I said you'd come to Bristol to look for someone, and you've met the one man in the world you were looking for; that's me.'

Wylie nodded. 'That's true,' he said. 'You take some beating at your end of the game; I can trust you.'

'Where is the necklace?' said Hard.

'We're damned near it now,' said Wylie, 'and we're going to get it to-night. Give it an hour or two till the moon's up. But what the hell's been happening to you? Why the tramp rig-out? What's gone wrong? What's happened to the pawn-shop and your family?'

'My wife's dead,' said Hard.

'And what about the shop?'

'Well, things went wrong, and I had to leave that place quick and get away. Then, every time I had an address and started up, they were after me. So what could I do? I had to keep on the move if I wanted to do any trade, and I've been keeping on the move ever since. That's how I work it. I meet people all over the place, you see. When they want the red stuff, quick and ready, I give it them, and I take what they've got. But it's not much good. Just a pound here and a pound there. What's that to me? And I've been lonely. I'm too old for this sort of thing.'

He shook his head and sighed deeply.

'I don't fear death, Wylie,' he said. He smote on the ground with his stick. 'I knock on death's door and it never opens to me. In my old age I've become a byword and a thing of shame. You get these thoughts when you're old and deserted.'

Wylie nodded his head slowly as old Hard rambled on.

'Well,' he said, 'the brandy's nearly gone. Let's finish it up. There's a lot in what you say. These last few years I've been feeling that way myself. I'm going to marry and settle down if you can fix things up. It's all up to you. I might get a village pub somewhere, and you could live near by—I'd take care of you and look after you.'

Then the old man rose up in the darkness and, drunk as he was, fell on his knees and kept thanking God for giving him such joy and calling him back from a living grave of sorrow and bringing Wylie to comfort him.

Wylie laughed contentedly as he lay on his back on the grass.

'Go it !' he said, as the old man went on. 'I bet God arranged it all for you,' and he laughed again.

Presently they both fell asleep.

An hour or two later the pebbled margin of the Severn estuary crunched beneath their feet. A brilliant moon was now high in the sky and the water stretched silver and black before them.

'This is the place,' said Wylie. 'Walk carefully, it's rotten everywhere.'

They set foot cautiously on an old disused wooden pier that ran out into the water. At its far end, and lying some hundred yards or so out, was a battered hulk of a boat, lying careened on a sandbank. The moon shone over the tangled rigging and splintered gunwale and the water glittered as the current rippled round the hulk.

They picked their way cautiously along the wooden jetty, trying the wooden planks with their feet.

'That's it,' said Wylie. 'If we came here in daylight, there's no knowing who might not see us. That old boat's lying on a sandbank. Just behind it there's dry sand at low tide. I've only got to go out there and get the tin case out of the boat. It's as safe there as your own private bank deposit. I know the chap who owns her.'

The black silent current slipped by their feet. It ran swiftly beneath them through the wooden piers, curling and bubbling straight out into the channel beyond.

'It's a hellish tide,' said Wylie. 'I never knew it run so fast.'

They stared at the water.

'I'll tell you what it is,' he said. 'This sand's shifted or something. I waded out before. That's deep water now ; and it's running like hell.'

'Doesn't look too safe to me,' said Hard.

'I shall have to swim for it,' said Wylie.

For a little while they argued. Both agreed it was going to be a dangerous job with the strong current. But Wylie, still inflamed by the brandy, insisted on going. He took off his clothes and lowered himself into the water.

'It's hellish strong,' he called out. A moment later he had disappeared into the darkness.

The tide was running along shore, moving from the wreck towards the jetty, so that Wylie was swimming almost dead against it. But the current also bore strongly outwards, off the shore. It coiled and sucked round the piers of the jetty and at its far end a silent swirl of black water raced like a smooth stream out and out into the darkness.

Hard saw that Wylie ought to swim, straight from the wreck back towards the shore, otherwise the outwards current would catch him when he was tired and sweep him

past the end of the jetty away into the darkness. He waited, pacing backwards and forwards many times, and staring at the water. At last he heard a faint call from the darkness. Wylie was coming back.

‘Make for the shore,’ shouted Hard in desperation. ‘Don’t make for this end of the jetty.’

He waited and waited. No answering call came. He went to the end of the jetty, straining to see into the darkness.

At last he saw the white gleam of Wylie’s face and shoulders in the path of moonlit water about twenty or thirty yards off. He knew at once the exhausted efforts of a weak swimmer. Inch by inch Wylie came nearer. Then the current held him ; held him as firmly as if he had been tied with ropes. He was so near the jetty now that Hard could see his face in the darkness.

‘Can you do it?’ he shouted.

Wylie made no answer. His face was set and desperate. He had no strength to speak to Hard but only to fight the current. He came within twenty yards of the jetty, then he seemed to stay fixed, struggling there in silence, unable to gain another hand’s breadth.

‘Let yourself go,’ shouted Hard. ‘Get back to the boat.’ But at that moment the off-shore current took him. Suddenly Wylie began to move outwards past the end of the jetty. He tried to shout now. But only a gurgling, stifled cry came to Hard. Instantly Hard plunged into the black waters himself. He swam frantically this way and that, calling. But only the current raced by him silent and eddying, carrying him far out into midstream. Very soon he was exhausted. He swam out into the darkness with dull despair ; then, as if he were falling asleep, long waves of drowsiness overcame him and carried him away.

Later Hard awoke to find his face pressed against stones and wet sand. He walked, staggering. Rosy light filled the air and a dawn wind began running along the grasses.

Presently he saw Wylie lying on the beach just clear of the water. His face was grey-blue. Hard saw that he had been drowned some hours ago. His hand still gripped the chain of diamonds.

Hard picked them up, looked at them without interest, and flung them aside. Then he stared at the sodden, dishonoured body of his friend lying at his feet.

‘Wylie,’ he said, ‘Wylie.’

Then he began to run across the beach, stumbling as he went. He ran a few yards, then cast himself down on the grass that came almost to the water’s edge. He pressed his lips and mouth into the broken sandy earth and the yellow shoots and knots of grass.

‘Let me in,’ he moaned to the earth. And then in a voice that rose to a wail, ‘Let me in. Let me in. Let me in.’

May-Day Celebration

IT would be about now they would be coming, Mabel thought, and her heart beat somewhat faster. Thomas's face was all about her, wherever she turned; changing, changing from the boy with black hair and violent ways to the elderly man with the patient look; the waiting look; and the eyes deeper and deeper set with something in them of failure, and something in them of sticking to it.

Now she saw the red and white cheeks he used to have in his 'teens; now the grey face with heavy lines, and the stubble turning grey, and the shaggy eyebrows—and his eyes, which looked tired.

She heard the band now in the distance—the marchers were coming into the gardens. The crowd grew more dense every moment, and tremors of excitement shuddered through it, like gusts of wind in high corn. Mabel was carried sideways against her will over towards the platforms and the banners. A dense crowd was waiting there for the marchers and the speakers.

There were two platforms under the trees at the corner of the gardens. Round them the red banners were stretched. Overhead clouds were racing in a stormy sky, and the branches threshing and weaving in the wind.

Mabel found herself carried in the crowd into the arms of an old friend. The two women greeted each other.

'It's a good muster,' said Mabel. 'The numbers are very good.'

'Who's going to speak? Is your husband speaking?' Mabel shook her head.

'He's going to start it off,' she said. 'He's taking things a bit easy. This fellow Hardy's going to speak.'

The crowd was massed solid round the platforms now, and policemen's helmets seemed to float everywhere among the heads. And beyond the crowd she could see the heads and shoulders of mounted policemen gliding about. Mabel knew there were almost as many policemen as there were demonstrators and marchers. There always were at a big meeting.

There came a wavering cheer, taken up uncertainly here and there: and the marchers began to file past the platforms. On each side of them marched a rank of policemen. Mabel saw first the bobbies' red faces, purple and red with the full blood of health—and their red, fleshy necks and their upright carriage; each man of them carrying his twelve and fourteen stone like a boy athlete. She saw beef as they went by: and roasting fires. She saw steaks sizzling in grills and frying-pans. She saw gravy, and crusty chunks of bread and butter and foaming pints of beer and stout.

Then she saw the marchers; and she was watching pale, ill faces, grey and yellowish: she saw the dragging feet and ragged clothes. Here and there a man squared his shoulders and stuck his jaw out. In every face she saw sadness and old despair: she saw the drawn lines that she had seen so often, and the patient, stern look of the men who were brave. She saw rain-soaked street corners, and men leaning motionless against street posts with the rain drifting over the cobble-stones. The word *hunger* transfixed her like a spear, a pain that ached in her own body. Hunger marchers, she thought—men who marched under the banner of Hunger. They were hungry: and they marched because there was nothing else for them to do.

Leading a section, her Thomas passed, looking steadfastly

ahead. She pushed her way with purpose now towards the platforms. Thomas mounted the platform and held up his hand for silence. A hush fell.

For a moment or two he looked about him at the marchers. What were his feelings? Mabel knew he was not thinking of himself, nor of her, nor of anything but of them. As he waited and looked from one side to the other a low mutter of recognition began to arise; it was a rough growl of friendship that never rose to a cheer: something more friendly than a cheer. Thomas's grave deeply lined face looked round on the crowd, and he held up a strong, square hand.

'Comrades,' said Thomas, with slow Lancashire emphasis, 'you know me well. You know something of what I have done for you in these thirty years. I wish it were more,' he suddenly cried, 'by God I wish it were more.'

A sudden silence spread now.

'I'm not come here to speak for myself,' Thomas went on more calmly. 'I want to present to you Mark Hardy. He has been to Russia. Once he talked with Lenin himself. He is going to speak of our plans for the coming year.'

Hardy stood up. He was a man of about thirty-five—over six feet. His face was thin and handsome, with deep-set eyes. His hair was black and untidy. He wore a black coat and trousers and a red shirt open at the throat.

Before speaking he suddenly flung off his coat—and held his two arms towards the crowd. The murmur of talk round the platform died away. He began to speak at once swiftly and in loud, clear tones that carried far and compelled the attention.

'Friends,' he said, 'comrades—fellow-workers. During the last five years we have passed through a century of experience in our long struggle: events have moved: and we have made a tremendous advance towards the inevitable

downfall of capitalist misrule, and the building up of the workers' united and world-wide front.

'In this five years we have seen every capitalist country sucked far down in the economic maelstrom. We have seen their foundations splitting and cracking. We have seen the feverish and insane efforts of Nazi and Fascist reactionaries in their despairing effort to shore them up.'

Mabel's mind began to wander : now she had seen the marchers and heard Thomas speak, she began to edge away towards the back of the crowd.

Presently a burst of applause called her mind back to the speaker. Hardy was saying :

'We are asked this year to celebrate King George's Jubilee. You know as well as I do that all this Empire hullabaloo in the lickspittle press is propaganda : cold-blooded propaganda, aimed to divert peoples' eyes from the sickening state of present affairs.

'What have we in truth to celebrate ? First that after twenty-five years of the present reign we accept that millions of men in every capitalist country continue in permanent unemployment. A glorious achievement indeed ! Millions of workers condemned to a standard of life that would be despised by primitive savages. Secondly, we celebrate that since 1926 Trade Unions have been placed in a weaker position than they have occupied since the days of Castlereagh, and the Six Acts. Another great capitalist victory ! Thirdly, that England continues to exploit by bloodshed, force, and cruelty the Asiatic nations. Fourthly, that insane quarrels over the ill-gotten Imperialist gains among the nations lead us to the very brink of another horrible war, to which the workers will once again be driven : a war which brings to the workers nothing but torture, degradation, horror. And the next war will carry every fiendish device of slaying and torture into the workers' own homes among their women and children.'

Hardy poured all this out in a torrent of clear and unhesitating speech. Suddenly he paused and looked round. Then he went on with slow measured emphasis :

‘Stop it : stop it before it is too late. Remember Invergordon. Think of the power of the massed will of the people, the same needs, the same enemies in every country. There is no hope for you in nationalism. . . .’

While he was speaking the sky darkened : clouds and gusty rain came spinning through the air. The trees swayed, and men tightened their collars round their throats.

‘Let’s go,’ said Mabel to Beth. ‘Let’s get back. I’d like to have some tea ready when Thomas comes in. He’ll need some warming up.’

They slowly edged their way out of the crowd. When they reached its distant scattered fringe, they turned round and looked back. The outer groups of people were talking together : many were breaking off and going away as the rain came on. From here the voice of Hardy could still be faintly heard.

‘This form of state will go : be assured of it : *war* will go . . .’

Nearer in round the platform the crowd pressed silent, unmoving. Mabel looked back at the platform, and saw Hardy using his arms as he spoke, though his voice no longer reached her : and she saw Thomas sitting beside him : and the crowd packed round them.

The platform seemed like a heart or core of life, sending its own pulse through the silent, waiting crowd that pressed round to drain life from it. Her mind became filled with the image : she saw it as a brazier of coals in the dark, and men pressing round it, with the light gleaming on their hands and faces and clothes : she saw it as the pay office at the mills when she was a girl, with scores of men struggling round to draw their money. She saw it as a multitude of

flowing, changing pictures, with light breaking through the clouds. She saw it as a stone sending silent ripples across the surface of a pond.

Both women were silent as the 'bus took them away from the parks and shopping streets to the grime-covered parts of the town beyond the two railway stations, where there were factories and warehouses and poor men's homes.

Mabel led the way through the dark arches which carried one of the stations above the streets and houses. They came out into a street of small houses, which lay for ever under the shadow of the enormous viaduct. Their walls were crusted with sooty deposit, so thick that it fell away at the touch of a hand. The air was filled with smoke, white, grey, and brown. And the little houses shook to the unending clamour of the trains overhead.

Mabel led the way up a bare boarded passage and uncarpeted stairs: the walls of the passage were thick with railway grime. She had two rooms. When they got inside, Beth looked round at the linoleum, worn and polished, and at the bareness of everything. She was used to rooms in which beds and tables and upholstered chairs jostled against each other.

'We've got another room here,' said Mabel. 'This is only the sitting-room.'

She hung her mackintosh and hat on the door: she stooped down and put a penny in the gas-meter and lit a small gas-ring for the kettle. They settled themselves to talk. They sat with their knees apart and their hands resting in the outspread laps. Mabel and Beth had led hard lives; but time had brought their bodies a roundness which gave a placid dignity to all they said and did.

'It's a grubby place, this,' Mabel said. She began to put out cups and plates. 'I hope you'll overlook my not spreading a cloth: it'd only be black by the end of tea. The blacks get in even with the windows shut.'

As she spoke a long goods train rumbled past, filling the room with clanking.

'I don't like living in Railway Street,' she went on. 'It ain't exactly my idea of a country cottage with nice roses to smell. But Thomas has got to find a place for his little printing press. It's what they call a platen. We can put it down in the basement on a stone floor here. It's not every street they'd let you have a printing press.'

'Does he print the *Worker's Clarion* on it?' said Beth.

'No; it wouldn't take that,' said Mabel. 'That's got much too big an affair—which is all to the good. But they want him to issue a lot of small pamphlets all the time.'

She opened a cupboard door and showed, instead of cups and saucers, piles of papers and pamphlets. A cascade of papers came sliding out on the floor: they began to fall from the shelves, manuscripts, printed sheets, blank paper, all confused together.

'What do you think of that for a larder?' said Mabel.

Beth shook her head.

'Well,' she said, after a long silence, 'you would have him.'

Mabel pushed the papers back into the cupboard, moved another pile from a wooden chair, and sat down.

'Don't think I meant that for a complaint against Thomas, or the way we live,' she said. 'You're right. I would have him—and perhaps my people were doing right in trying to stop me. I was only nineteen. But I've never lived to regret it. I was quite right, Beth, young as I was. There are some things the young ones know. He's a good husband and a good man: and I say that after forty years of married life. What more can a woman say than that? How many can say that much?'

Beth nodded.

'Forty years, is it? We're getting old. I can remember

it all so clear, too : as if it was only last year. It seems funny.'

They both fell to thinking of other days and times, far-off scenes, when they were young slim girls in white muslin who ran with flying feet ; who were caught by the waist on summer nights.

Mabel began to put out a loaf and butter on the bare table top.

'You'll stay and have a bite, won't you?' she said. 'We don't live very high : but there's some bread and butter and jam : the butter's as cheap nowadays as the marge.'

'Unless you have the fivepenny marge,' said Beth.

Mabel went on talking as she set out the tea with slow, quiet movements.

'Mind you,' she said, 'my married life hasn't been all honey and jujubes. I'm not complaining. Why should I? But when a man lives for something beyond the ordinary things of life, home can't be his be-all and end-all.'

Beth nodded.

'That's it,' she said.

Mabel paused with a plate in her hand. 'But take yourself, too,' she said. 'It cuts all ways. Your Arthur's been a good steady worker always. But you haven't been too happy with him.'

Beth nodded again.

'To all outward appearance,' Beth said, slowly and decidedly, 'Arthur looks like a 'usband to be proud of. But there it is. I got my crying over early in my married life. I did plenty of it then. He's a bully, that's the trouble : and he's never thought for anyone but himself. He's selfish to the bone. The first ten years of my marriage were all babies and black eyes.'

'There have been times when I've felt it hard, too,' said Mabel. 'I've never had what I should call a home. Never

in all these forty years. I've had to see my young ones go hungry and cold, when they were little. And I've never been able to give them a farthing to help them now they're older. We never know where we may be from one week to the next. Years ago I used to cry, too, when Thomas's views and meetings kept getting him the sack from good jobs. Many's the time I've said to him, "What's the use of going on?" Then every time he got a new job I used to think to myself, "Now I'll have a proper home." But just as we was getting things together something always went bust. We've lived in fourteen different towns, let alone all the rooms: they're more than I can remember.'

'But he's settled in a good job now, isn't he?' said Beth. 'He's been there for a year or two.'

'Yes, we're really better off now than we've ever been yet. I'm really beginning to hope now that I'm going to get a home together. We'll be out of this pig-sty in a year. Thomas is beginning to take it easier now. He doesn't do so much—not all day and every day, like he used to.'

'Well, he's getting on in years,' said Beth.

'Yes, he says he feels he isn't in the forefront any more: he looks to leave things to the younger men. But he can still earn good money. He always could. He's a foreman compositor now on the *Morning News*—working on the advertisements. It's a good job. I'm beginning to think we'll settle down yet, Beth: I'll be asking you to see me in a nice little place one of these days, in a little peace and comfort.'

Beth nodded.

'I'm sure I need it,' said Mabel. 'The kettle's on the boil now. I'll make tea. If he's late, I can make some fresh.'

'Is that the fourpenny,' said Beth, 'from the Stores round the corner?'

'It's the threepence-halfpenny. Tell me what you think

of it. The only thing I wonder is whether he'll ever be happy if he gives it up. His one grumble has always been 'e's never been able to do enough for the *cause*. He's said that every day for the last twenty years, I should think.'

'What did you think of that fellow's speech this afternoon?' asked Beth.

Mabel sat silent for a little while.

'He seems a nice enough man,' she said at length.

'Yes, but what about all that he was talking about?'

'I don't know quite what to make of it,' said Mabel. 'And I've heard enough speeches in my time. He always talks that sort of thing. He means it when he says it. But I don't quite trust it somehow. What's he got to do with it all? He's a chap with a lot of money behind him. In Thomas's young days it was a fight against the *owners*: men understood what they were making for—and knew who was against them. Thomas spoke to the men about their own towns and factories and homes, and what they'd better do next week: not about the whole of this world and kingdom come. I sometimes think speech-makers like him get so full of the new plans in front of them and all to that, they forget what these poor fellows want is just food and dry clothes.'

'But he's an important man, isn't he?' said Beth. 'He's been an M.P., hasn't he? He'll be somebody one of these days.'

'Yes, I daresay he'll be someone,' said Mabel, 'on one side or the other. But it can't mean the same to him as it did to my Thomas when he was a young man. Yet he pushes forward and takes the limelight—and Thomas takes a back seat.'

'Well,' said Beth, 'you oughtn't to mind that: only a moment ago you were saying you'd be thankful if only he would drop out of things a bit and keep a steady job for once.'

‘Yes,’ said Mabel, ‘but sometimes I feel—seeing all the work he’s done—giving his whole life to it—he deserves something a bit more out of it.’

‘You persuade him to give it up,’ said Beth, ‘and have a little peace and quiet for once in your life. I saw a little house out our way in Welcome’s Fields a week back. You could have got it on the money he’s making now. Let him spend it on you and his home for once.’

Mabel drew breath and compressed her lips : then she let it out as a slow, thoughtful sigh.

‘We’ll see,’ she said. ‘We’ll see what happens.’

‘It’s time you had your way for once,’ said Beth. ‘You take my advice.’

‘Here he is,’ Mabel said.

They heard his footsteps in the passage, then on the bare boards of the stairs.

Thomas came in and greeted his wife and Beth a little absently. He sat down on a chair with a grunt. He was dressed in a dark serge suit with a muffler at his neck. His grey hair was closely cut and his face, once full of fire and expression, had grown dour and set and stubborn.

‘I’m getting old,’ he said.

‘That’s just what we’ve been saying,’ said Beth. ‘We’re all getting old.’

‘I’ll just have time for some tea,’ said Thomas, ‘then I want to get down to the paper. I shan’t be back till we’ve put her to bed. I’ll be back about one. Then I shall have a full day on to-morrow, till late again. I had to work it that way so as to get off this afternoon.’

‘You’ll be worn-out,’ said Mabel.

‘It won’t be the first time,’ said Thomas.

Beth said : ‘You ought to think of your health a bit more at your age.’

‘I’ve got better things to think of,’ he said.

‘Not for Mabel.’

Thomas ignored her answer. Presently she said good-bye and went.

'I wanted to get downstairs to-night,' Thomas said. 'We want another thousand of those Invergordon pamphlets. That's been doing good work. But I can't manage it now—it's too late. Then they're asking me to do Hardy's speech later on. My Vanguard Press is getting well known.'

'What did you think of that speech of Hardy's?' said Mabel. 'I only heard the first part.'

'It was good,' said Thomas. 'My job nowadays is to go and print what better men say. I sometimes think I've never really done anything worth while for our cause.'

'Don't be silly. Isn't it anything to have given your whole life to it?'

'I dunno . . .' Thomas began : but stopped.

Mabel started up.

There was a loud knock at the street door. They heard it pushed open, and the tread of two or three men in the passage.

'They're coming up here,' said Thomas. 'Hardy said he might come round.'

There was a loud knock at the door.

'Come in,' said Thomas. He went to the door and opened it.

When he did so a police constable stepped into the room : behind him a plain-clothes detective.

They stared at Thomas for a moment, seeming to dwarf him by their height and heavy bulk.

'Well,' said Thomas, after a bit, 'any trouble?'

The detective stepped forward.

'There's no need for me to ask if you're Thomas Devlin,' he said, 'because I know you by sight.'

'Yes, I'm Thomas Devlin.'

'I'm afraid, Mr. Devlin, I've got a warrant here for your arrest—and a search warrant, too.'

'What for? I'm an honest man. There must be some mistake.'

'No mistake,' said the detective. 'You work a small hand press down in the basement here. Whoever's at the back of you, the imprint's yours.'

Thomas nodded.

'And you've been issuing a lot of very foolish pamphlets lately. There's one of my men downstairs just found a pile of these Invergordon leaflets—with your imprint on them. I've got to arrest you under the new Act. There's the warrant.'

There was a pause.

'Well,' said Thomas, 'do you want me to come with you now?'

'Yes,' said the detective.

'Can't you give me time to make a few arrangements first?'

'I must ask you to come at once, please. We don't want a crowd of people round here. And I must search this room before we go, too. I'm under orders to confiscate all the printed matter I find here.'

Mabel opened the cupboard door and showed the stores of pamphlets. In a surprisingly short time they had searched the room and made a clean sweep.

Thomas began to make rapid arrangements with Mabel.

'We're going to the Central Police Station,' he said. 'Will you tell them what's happened at the paper at once? Go and see them yourself. Then come along and we'll see what we can arrange about bail.'

'I wouldn't count on bail, Mr. Devlin,' said the detective. 'The authorities at headquarters aren't playing. I'm afraid this is a serious business for you.'

'I'll come, anyhow,' said Mabel.

Before going, Thomas kissed her and held her in his arms.

'It'll be all right,' he said.

'Good-bye,' said Mabel. 'I'll be along directly.'

The door closed : and she was alone.

She stood silent for a long time, thinking and seeing nothing.

Then she slowly walked to the window and pulled the curtains. How grimy they were. Then she sat down beside the table which still carried the remains of tea. Many pictures of her broken and tattered life passed before her. She saw her hopes of the future torn in ragged dirty pieces, fluttering away. She knew now that she would never have a home : that from now on she need never hope for a home. The pictures of the little house she had begun to see changed to pictures of rooms in worse and worse streets : to fierce poverty, bare boards, and fireless grates, to comfortless old age.

Yet she felt calm and almost joyful. She had seen the look in Thomas's eyes. She knew he was living through the proudest and happiest moments of his whole life. She fell to thinking of the red and white cheeks, the wild black hair, he used to have. And gradually her heart grew light.

For a long time she sat silent and still until the penny in the gas was used up and the fire flickered out into cold, lifeless grey. Then she rose and put on her mackintosh to go out again. It was still wet from the afternoon's rain.

Busting Him One

ZED was the very chap for the game and he caught on as soon as Arthur mentioned it: not that it was a put-up job.

Zachariah his real name was: Zachariah Claydon. His old dad worked up in the Potteries, where they went in for religion in those days: and they called him Zachariah, because the Bible said the Lord was displeased with Zachariah's father; or for some such reason. They always were a funny lot in the Potteries.

The other kids found Zachariah too much of a mouthful so they called him Zak or Zed: but Zed was the name that stuck. He always was a fast worker—and handy with his fists.

Arthur and Zed were walking to work. It was a wonderful morning, and Arthur sighed. The morning made him feel glad, but it made him feel sorry too. The light and freshness of the air made him feel glad he was alive: then the work looked like a bad dream, and he could hardly believe it was real.

'Gawd's truth,' he said to Zed, 'what a day! Air like champagne—only it's free. And what a factory, fancy having to go and spend the day in there.'

Zed nodded.

'That chap Boulder,' said Arthur, 'is a bloody swine. I can't make out how they get like that. I can't make out how they always get hold of chaps like that for works managers. Where do they dig them up?'

'It's human nature,' said Zed. 'Some like bullying. That's all it is. There's always some likes bullying other people. Look at the kids playing in the street.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Arthur, 'only we ain't kids: not by a long chalk. We're grown men with wives and kids of our own. We ought to be able to combine together against bullies. Why the hell can't we?'

'You never will now,' said Zed. 'Since the General Strike things have been worse than ever. Don't you see what a clever idea this making of a permanent unemployed class of two million is? It's just to cut the bloody hamstrings of those that are in work.'

'Do you mean you think it's been done on purpose?'

'I don't say it was done on purpose in the first instance,' said Zed. 'These things happen. But see for yourself the use that's been made of it these last ten years. It's the same in every factory nowadays. They press and squeeze further every week, and you can do nothing but squeal. You can't help yourself. That's why the bosses want to keep those two million unemployed.'

They came to the works, where the steady stream of men, women, and boys were pouring in through the red brick pillars and iron gates. The factory wall fell across the sunlight with a cold blue morning shadow. There was still some time to spare, and Zed and Arthur went on talking together in low voices. The gatekeeper eyed them from his little wooden hut.

'First it's the travelling line,' said Arthur, 'then it's Bedaux. They're always up to something to make your job worse.'

His voice grew angrier.

'No sitting down is Boulder's latest little wheeze. There's a good many of those packing machines in my room, and others, too, where the machine minders can take an easy on the end of a packing-case and still be on

their job. But he won't ever let the girls sit down. He had one of them in tears over it yesterday. Surely to cripes we're meant to sit down, aren't we, or we wouldn't have been given bums to sit on?'

Zed laughed.

'It's a bit too thick,' said Arthur. 'By God, it would do me good to bust him one in the face, or even to see him busted.'

'Perhaps it may happen,' said Zed. He grinned, showing his white teeth, and held up a square, brown fist in the air, as hard as a piece of teak. 'So long, Arthur,' he said, 'see you dinner-time.'

There was trouble from the start that morning.

When Arthur reached the packing rooms, he found silence in place of the usual roar and rattle of the shafting. There was trouble in the central plant and no power coming through to the whole of his layout. He found the electricians had been on the job all night.

The sunlight came pouring in through the windows, making pools of light on the pitted concrete floor. The girls and men stood about in their overalls talking in quiet voices. From time to time a boy went by with a trolley load of castings or scrap, which rattled and echoed through the empty machine shops.

Arthur looked about. Somewhere he could hear Boulder's voice—talking loudly and angrily. Boulder was always talking. He was telling the packing machine girls to get to their places in the line and not to idle about, even though their machines weren't running.

'What the hell——?' thought Arthur.

Arthur was a maintenance engineer. He had a lathe in almost constant use, remaking, re-turning, regrinding, re-edging a number of the cutting and punching tools which shaped and stamped the tins as they went through.

There were dozens of different patterns, and several sizes were needed on each machine, according to the thickness of the material and variations in speed and exact effect that was needed. This part of his work was highly skilled, and he had to know all the machines and all their tricks and habits backwards. It was his extra grasp of the complete work that all the machines in his shop were handling that had got him out of the line five years before : just as somewhere in an orchestra there's one man who knows the whole score well enough to conduct a performance.

At length, quarter of an hour late, the power came through : the shafting rattled briskly into action, and one by one the machines came to life, each moaning, roaring, or crashing with its own note. At once the whole wing which had seemed empty before was filled with uproar of noise, and every man and girl was caught up in the roaring flood, hands and eyes riveted to the machine on which they were working.

After production had been in full swing for twenty minutes, one of the machines in Arthur's layout jammed with a sudden crash. He ran to it and saw at once what had happened. A worn eccentric drive and cam had allowed one of the movements to fall a fraction behind the cycle of the machine. The travelling line of metal containers became gradually late, until the die-stamp that was supposed to fall inside the containers began catching them on the edge and smashing them out flat. In a few moments the machine was jammed by chewed-up metal.

The girl of nineteen who was minding the machine began to clear the twisted metal away. Arthur gave her arm a slap.

'Take it away,' he said, 'she's not disconnected yet. Suppose she starts off again. What'll your mother say to me, if I take you home without a hand?'

The girl laughed and rubbed her slapped arm.

'Some of you girls!' said Arthur. 'You'll turn my hair grey.'

He disconnected the power from the machine.

'I ought to put a new rod and cam in here,' he said. 'I could do it in ten minutes.'

As he spoke he found the works manager bending over him. Boulder was talking even before he turned round.

'Too many needless stoppages,' Boulder was saying. 'What the hell are you supposed to do but keep these machines running? Why don't you start up again instead of hanging about?'

Arthur pointed out the trouble.

'She'd only be jamming again,' he said.

'Why didn't you get that seen to last night?'

'I had two men on their machines working overtime two nights ago,' said Arthur. 'I can't keep them every night.'

'Oh,' said Boulder, 'there are plenty of men about this town who'll work without clock-watching. If that's the trouble we'll sack a few.'

Arthur felt a stifled rage. He began to clench his fists automatically. Boulder had introduced a costing system, by which overtime could only be charged against tonnage actually produced. On the books work on the machines out of hours did not exist. It only existed in default.

Arthur's anger nearly overcame him. He saw the faces and eyes of the other men turned towards him with sullen curiosity. One day Boulder would get it. Arthur or one of the other men would bust him.

'Get her started up,' said Boulder. 'And if the tins don't follow close enough make the girl keep them closed up with her hand. That's what she's there for.'

Arthur started the machine up and stared at its racing pinions and arms, at its whirling central movement and its

eccentric cross movements, and the regular thudding of the die-stamp. His anger left him feeling slightly weak.

'Look here, my girl,' he said, 'you'd better not keep the containers closed up with your hand. It isn't safe. I can't help what he says. This machine's going to do funny things to-day.'

Arthur was quite right. In another twenty minutes the machine jammed again with a sudden rending shock. The spinning leather belt went looping and curling round the overhead shafting and became entangled with the belt of the next machine.

There were loud shouts and running feet. In a moment the power was disconnected from the central shafting, and the machines died away into silence, with twenty different groans. The men and girls stood back from their places and looked at each other.

Arthur saw that the worn rod and cam that had caused the trouble in the first place were now twisted completely out of shape. It was a matter of some pride to Arthur that he could produce a new part from his store ready made.

The whole line was now thrown out of work for ten minutes while his spare part was fitted. Boulder abused Arthur as he was working : rated and threatened him as a schoolmaster threatens a small boy.

Once more the other men looked on in sullen silence. They shared Arthur's feelings. The same hatred was working behind each face ; there wasn't a man there, from the boys of nineteen and twenty to the grey-headed impassive fathers of families, who was not aching to give Boulder a good thrashing, who would not have gladly given a week's wages to have plugged an iron-hard fist into his pudgy face.

When the machines were started up again Boulder still stayed in the packing-room. They had lost twenty minutes on production time since the morning had begun. He

stood behind each machine in turn, finding fault with the men working on it.

At the far end of the line was a machine recently imported from the Continent, known as the Kreder Vertical. It took the place of four previous machines, doing the work of the four faster and better, and taking up less space even than one of them. It twisted the paper covers for the wrapping. It divided them into four strips, each printed in four colours, and fed them to the packing machines at a sufficient speed to keep pace with the line of travelling containers. The working parts of the Kreder upright travelled more quickly than the eye could follow and it had improved production speed by four per cent.

As Boulder passed down the forest of rattling machines he saw a man sitting on a packing-case beside the Kreder Vertical: he was watching it intently and occasionally put his hand out to make an adjustment to a control while the machine was running.

'Get up!' Boulder began shouting to him: but his voice was lost in the roar, and the man made no move. Others near him turned to look at him, and back at Boulder.

'That man sitting by the Kreder, get up!' yelled Boulder. Arthur from the end of the line glanced up and saw that something was happening. He saw that the man by the Kreder was Zed. He stepped away from his lathe and began to walk towards the Kreder.

'Come on,' said Boulder to Zed, 'up you get. I've said often enough I'm not going to have this lounging about at the machines. You can't work sitting down.'

Zed turned round without getting up and looked at him for a long moment.

'Nuts to you,' he shouted above the roar of the machines. Everybody at the nearby machines was staring. Arthur stood close by, and something inside him began to laugh.

'Stand up,' shouted Boulder, 'and get out of here.'

Zed made no movement.

'You're sacked,' yelled Boulder at him. 'Get out of here at once.'

'Sacked be damned,' said Zed.

For a moment they stared at each other, the machines roaring round them. Then Boulder caught hold of Zed by the shoulders and dragged him off the box.

'Now then,' said Zed, 'hands off, if you please.'

Zed tried to shake him off, and Boulder tried to hustle Zed down the aisle between the machines. Every face was turned towards them, watching them through the machines, round the machines, over the top of the machines.

Zed shook Boulder off, and gave him a light tap on the chest that sent him walking backwards off his balance. Then quick as thought Zed brought his right across and smashed it into Boulder's face with all the strength in him. Zed's fist was big and solid and hard as weathered teak. He weighed twelve and a half stone, all bone and muscle, and he knew how to hit.

Boulder went spinning back, crashed into the safety fending round one of the machines, and went right over inside it. There was a loud yell of alarm from a dozen men. Zed was hauling him back almost before he had landed. The power was shut off. The machines stopped with their various dying noises and a silence fell.

Zed helped Boulder to his feet. He was unhurt except that he was bleeding freely from the mouth where Zed's fist had cut his lip and loosened a couple of teeth : but for a second he had been within an inch of being killed or horribly maimed in the machines.

The men and girls left their machines and stood round looking at him. He was pale green and his legs were trembling.

Zed held him by the arm.

'You can't sack me,' said Zed. 'I'm not employed by

you. I'm sent in by the Kreder Company to give that new machine servicing. And I can sit down to my work without your leave.'

Boulder spoke thickly and uncertainly through his torn lip.

'I'll get you sacked for this. I'll have you up for assault.'

'No fear,' said Zed. 'You started on me first. Here are my witnesses. Forty of them.'

'Forty of them,' he said again, and the crowd round them pressed a bit closer.

Boulder looked at them and began to speak. Someone began to boo : and suddenly the whole gang of them were booing and cat-calling till the noise rang and echoed through the empty shops ; then with the boos remarks were shouted.

'Wipe him again, Zed !' said a voice.

'Pity he wasn't minced up,' shouted someone else. The remarks became filthy and obscene. They pressed round Boulder closer and closer, booing and yelling like a set of savages, every man giving way to his pent-up hatred and contempt of Boulder and of the whole firm. They attacked him with brutal indecencies and with threats of wild savage punishments.

Suddenly they stopped : and acting by one common impulse that arose from the strength of their feeling they walked out of the machine rooms, out of the factory, and back to their own homes for the rest of the day.

Boulder stood alone among the silent mountainous machines. They had frightened him badly. There was nothing he could do.

The Stoker

MR. CARSTOCK, who ran the public-house, liked to tell his friends that he was a man without illusions. It was common sense and a strong grasp of practical tangible affairs that he would have you especially recognize and admire in him.

'A pint pot'll hold a pint o' liquor and no more,' was one of his maxims, if he thought anyone was straining a point or wandering from the road of actuality. And by the same symbol he would strive to convey some rather vaguely formulated ideas that life was a matter of working and sleeping, enjoying and enduring, and then returning to the dust: and that to worry your head over anything more abstruse was to try and extract more than the pint from the pot.

Being so sure of this, he could observe absolutely without reflection as he sprawled over his bar. He could watch through the pleasant haze of smoke and the soothing babel of voices, and to him each man was no more nor less elusive than a pint pot.

Tom Farleigh, then, was just the same as his youth had given promise. A strapping lad, Tom: back from three years at sea—stoking, that's what they called the game, brawnier than ever. That blue jersey with its rough roll of collar showed up Tom's bulk, a good solid fourteen stone: you'd like to see him stripped.

Even Mr. Carstock's unimaginative mind had some picture of Tom, huge and glistening and ferocious, with

rivers of sweat channelling down the coal-dust on his back.

No wonder the other men had come in to-night to give Tom a send-off; even that scrawny little bit of sorrel who never came near the place, except for bottled beer on Sunday—Cecil Lough; and, my God! what a name. He could never think of that Cecil, without laughing.

It was just the same as ten years before, when all this lot had been boys together: it was Tom Farleigh this and Tom Farleigh the other, and those boys had to kow-tow to him, whether they liked it or not. Here they were, at it again.

'Your turn, Joe,' shouted Tom, giving the order himself. 'Make it another six bitters, Mr. Carstock; that's the stuff to give 'em.

'Girls?' Tom was saying. 'Girls? I should say so. I could tell you.'

Everyone waited for him to go on.

'Oh, I could tell you,' he said. 'Those mulattoes. I should say they *were* mulattoes.'

Roars of laughter came from everyone.

'You always was one for the women,' a voice suggested.

'Oh, I could tell you a lot now,' Tom went on, looking round as they hung on his words.

'Remember that Sue Parkinson, though? But I tell you what,' said Tom. 'There's someone 'ere as don't hold with such goings on. 'E'll go and tell the bloody parson as I'm rude.'

Heavy and suety laughter rolled again round the clogged atmosphere.

Everyone laughed except Mr. Carstock, who seldom saw cause to be amused. But his impassive gaze followed the other jeering faces towards the target of the joke. That boy Tom was a bit of a bully. Mr. Carstock had observed, in the past, that he gave young Lough hell's own time. Not his affair, though.

'That's right,' said Lough, as soon as he had a chance of being heard. 'I'm taking down every word you say, Tom : and it's my turn for a round, I think.'

'Well, make mine a double one, see?'

'Go on, Tom,' someone begged. 'You was tellin' us _____,

'Well, I *could* tell you,' said Tom. 'I could make you *hungry*. But are you sure I ain't shocking you, Mr. Lough?'

'That's all right, ol' man,' said Lough. 'I'm—I'm married now.'

Tom laughed, all alone, in a high falsetto. Mr. Carstock's detachment grew more marked.

'Married !' croaked Tom. 'Oh, mother dear ! Cissie's married !'

Lough blushed. Slowly and obtrusively he felt the hateful heat creeping upwards.

No one had called him Cissie since Tom had left the village. If only he had not come ; he was a fish out of water. He might have guessed Farleigh was the same swine he always had been.

And it was a bit thick : they weren't kids now. No good getting annoyed, though—but he'd damn well answer up.

'Yes, I *am* married,' he said. 'Why not ? I happen to be able to support a family.'

'Here's to marriage !'

Lough drank and one or two others did, but Tom stared at them in rebuking scorn.

'Well, I'll be——,' he said. 'That's one toast I never will booze to. Marriage—the same dish o' cold mutton every blurry night.' He waited, and insisted on their obedient laughter. 'Not likely. That's what Cissie likes. The sa'—hic—colmurrin.'

Lough stood up.

‘All right, Tom,’ he said, ‘sorry we don’t agree. Well, I must be off. Have another one, Tom.’

‘There you are,’ said Tom. ‘He’s got to go home to bed or his missus’ll give him a caning. That’s it, mates, eh?’

Mr. Carstock’s impassive sight recorded that Lough laughed with the others. At the first possible moment, however, he made his voice heard.

‘Well, good-bye, Tom, good luck.’ He offered his hand awkwardly.

‘Good-bye, Cis—you want to grow a bit fatter. Come off the mutton. Look ’ere.’ He compared their two fore-arms as he shook hands.

‘Well, cheero, Tom,’ said Lough again. Pulling the door to behind him, Lough passed abruptly out of Mr. Carstock’s range of observation.

He plunged thankfully into the darkness. Why the hell had he let himself in for this? What humiliation! He shouted out a stream of bad language. It was as if he was expelling all the coarseness from himself—getting rid of it before he got home. To think that his marriage, his home, should have been dragged into this sort of talk. He hit out at the darkness.

‘I’m not so bloody strait-laced,’ he said out loud, ‘but ordinary decency—my God, he’s low: he’s a brute!’

‘He’s no conception: he’s got no further than being a schoolboy. I’ve got a better place in the world than he has: he’s got no idea what work like mine means. If only I could show him. Yes, I suppose, I meant to show him when I went there to-night. What a hope! He’s too thick. But why the hell shouldn’t he realize?’

But of these reflections Mr. Carstock, of course, knew nothing, and supposed nothing. He saw that Farleigh had baited Lough; that was the sort of chap he was. The incident was closed as far as he was concerned, when, half

an hour later, he pushed the swaying Tom and his friends out into the night.

'You all right, Tom? See you some day. Good night. Good night, ol' man. Good night all. Good night all.'

Mr. Carstock returned to the empty bar and turned the pint pots up over a bucket, according to his method. Nothing was left in any of them.

Mr. Carstock had noted that Tom was reeling all round the place. But Tom's impression was that the place was reeling all round him. Now the road rose up like a steep hill before his eyes—now it dropped away beneath his feet. At moments the grass bank at the side of the way would suddenly change its position and come between his boots.

The evening swam in one confused composite film shot before his eyes. Laughing faces, the side of the pot, 'Go on, Tom, you're a one, Tom; you don't get no better, Tom; you're the real cheese and no mistake; oh, yes, I'm the Tom; real cheese Tom, I am, and don't you forget it.

'Now how the hell did I come to be leaning up against this gate, thought I was walking along the road?

'My God, yes, girls. I could tell you chaps. But they're gone now. No chaps with you now, ol' man. You'd 'a' made 'em sit up, eh? He's a man that Tom—up to all their games, 'e is. Fine fellow, a man, 'e is.'

Girls, yes, he thought he could do with a girl now, right here. They don't come so frequent, do they, not for all you tell 'em, never when you most want 'em, that's what it is. You set out on the spree deliberate and that seems to take the edge off it like. If there was a girl here now, one with some flesh on her, now, mind you, flesh, that's it, flesh. I'd take her like this and she'd say:

'Oo said you could do that?'

And I'd close 'er mouth now like this, like this. And my hand—

‘ Oh, Tom ! ’

He clenched his fist and shut his eyes. A slight groan escaped him.

‘ Ah, that Sue Parkinson. Dear God, man, wasn’t it in this very field—and just such a summer night as this’n ? Summer, that was the time for girls ; nature’s own time.’

The warm and odorous air of the July night inflamed him still further. It was heavy with dim memories ; the scent of her in the evening ; the sudden gleam in the dark of her skin unsheathed. So sharp was the stab of lust that pierced his body, it brought with it an emotional effect on his intoxicated mind. His heart beat violently—his head throbbed and his eyes filled with tears.

‘ Poor Tom—all alone now—all alone—longing—longing—oh, hell ! ’

Something like an ecstasy of anguish passed, leaving a heavy and despondent reaction. He swung away from the gate. His lurching annoyed him now, and troubled him. He was a forlorn, lonely figure, staggering on. And he was feeling sick. His thoughts were no longer mixed : he was feeling sick : he, the fine fellow who could drink the others asleep—feeling foully sick on five pints of swipes, or was it six ? What a blasted fool he was not to go home and have his dinner properly.

And he’d upset the old girl, too : she’d have worried about him. Why hadn’t he gone home ? He would have come out, and had a few drinks, and gone home to his supper as neat and clean as a whistle, and the old girl would have been as pleased as one o’clock.

‘ And that was the life, too. Having someone to look after you. Why did he laugh at that Cissie Lough being married ? Damn it, you knew you wished you could do as much ; that was it, he’s stole a march on you. He’s doing better than you, for all he’s a puny little rat and your talk of mulattoes—foul bitches that they are. And

he knows it, too. And, oh God ! am I going to spew on that swipes of stuff, honest beer never made a man feel like this : not drunk, just sick.

'But what girl 'ud want to marry you ? All you can do is to shovel coal into a furnace away at sea most of the time. Besides, what 'ave you ever got to say to the marrying sort ? They want a little rat, not a man, it's not fair, though. Oh ! I do feel sick.

'Gone to my legs now, it has : if only I could keep walking straight without these jolts, it's enough to make a man sick. What's the matter with me, though ? I can't be drunk on that, it's the empty stomach that does it. If only I could get it up I'd feel better then. Come on now, get yourself home. You'll be all right. What'll the old girl be doing ? Will she 'ave sat up for me ? I suppose she will. I 'ope to God she'll 'ave gone to bed, especially if you're going to be sick.

'Hold up now, Tom : do you remember the first time you was aboard, staggering about like this, and feeling like this ; it was like this, though. Shut your eyes and you might be there. And you got to go back to it to-morrer. He's got the laugh of you, your little spree's over, my lad. Oh, hell, it ain't fair, though, that bloody little worm of a Cissie should have everything : he can stay on shore and have his girl, and he's no such worm, neither ; you can't do it, that's what it is. Wonder if I sat down for a bit would I feel better ?

'I'd almost sooner have a pain than this : it's enough to get a man down. Oh, hell, why can't I have some o' the things ? A man oughtn't to feel as sick as this—like a fist screwing up your guts or summat.'

As Tom lurched home through the dusk, the nausea gradually overcame all the other thoughts and feelings. His memory of the dark country road that he had travelled often as a boy triumphed all unconsciously over the drugged

fuddlement of his mind. His steps brought him to the white gate, that glowed softly in the summer darkness, led him round the flagged path past the front door ; his feet rather than his brain knew the front door would be locked and the back door left on the latch for him.

Unaware almost of how he arrived there, he found himself sitting on the low horsehair sofa in the cottage room staring at his legs, which were thrust stiffly out in front of him. The strain on the back of his knees aroused him gradually to realize that he had arrived.

He looked round. Well, the old girl had cleared off to bed. That was a comfort. There'd be no asking questions, whether he'd had a good time and that, as much as to say, 'Tom, why didn't you come home ? Tom, I've been waiting, waiting ; I did think you'd spend the last night with me, Tom. Tom ?'

'Well, so he did mean, only those chaps at the pub there, and why should she worry over him so, he was all right ? A man liked to go with men ; that was only natural he should say good-bye to his friends. She saw plenty of him mornings—and he'd helped in the garden, hadn't he ?

'He'd done his best, hadn't he ? She didn't expect him to bring home money, did she ? It was little enough time a chap got ashore ; what the hell fun was there in life if you couldn't enjoy yourself a bit, then ? Am I going to be sick, I wonder ? Praise God, she is tucked up safe in bed and not waiting to see you come in, bloody drunk.'

He fell into a profound stupefied silence, abstracting himself from all signs and feelings of life in an endeavour to escape from his nausea.

But he was violently startled out of it by hearing the floorboards creak overhead and then the wire mattress make a 'ping' familiar from earliest years as his mother got into bed.

'Blast her, then ! She *had* been waiting up for him to come in, then : waiting upstairs with the light out, so that he shouldn't know. Why should he be nagged at with her waiting up for him ? Oh ! he hated to think of the old girl sitting up there alone in the dark waiting to hear him come in, and not liking to let him know it. Oh, blast and hell, why should she make herself unhappy on his account ? He didn't want her to, he only wanted to make her happy, and acted for it. If she wanted to wait up for him, why wouldn't she do it down in the sitting-room ? It was only reasonable, that. And when the hell had he ever told her he didn't want to be waited up for ? She oughtn't to have done that, it put him in the wrong.'

His eye now wandered round the room, and the table she had left invitingly spread for him put him further in the wrong. And the food placed carefully in the grate balanced on a wooden log to keep it hot, that put him in the wrong, too. And the kettle left puffing away on the trivet put him in the wrong, and most of all the thick tumbler standing on the table with a double dose of whisky in it. She must have been round to the pub herself and got that for him, and he'd never come in to take it. Oh, hell !

Tom took the food from the fire and looked at it. He felt too sick to touch it now. He would have liked to have eaten it just to thank her, but he could tell her he'd had some up at the pub. But that whisky : she'd got that for him, and she'd like to think he'd drunk it ; besides, it might just settle his stomach.

He picked up the kettle and poured a good deal of warm water on the floor and a few drops into the glass. He sniffed at the tepid draught and swallowed it in one shuddering gulp.

Instantly he knew he was going to be sick. He dropped the glass, knocked over a chair, flung open the back door

with enough violence to crash it against the picture-studded wall, and rushed into the garden.

In a few minutes he came back feeling very much happier ; a load had been lifted from his spirits as well as his stomach. Well, that's over, now we can get along to bed and sleep it off. He looked round the room and laughed. What a hurry he'd been in, quite comic, wasn't it ? ' You'd better pick up that chair against she sees it in the morning. Ooopsee—that's it ; you are shaky, though, ol' man, get along to bed now : and go up softly so as she won't hear you, she's likely gone off to sleep. Well, her troubles are over for the day and yours, too ; you got to go back to your job to-morrer, though, blast it ! '

He crept up the stairs ; but she was not asleep : she had heard everything, and it was more than she could endure in silence any longer. She must speak to him.

As Tom fumbled about the sitting-room her door opened a crack, and she called :

' Tom ? '

' Wot ? '

' You're all right ? '

' All right ? Woddier mean, all right ? '

' I only wanted to know. '

Why couldn't she have gone to sleep, thought Tom ; can't she let it alone and go to sleep ?

' Are you coming up to bed now ? '

' Give us 'arf a minute. '

' I think I'd come to bed now. '

' Well, you go to sleep, I'm just coming. '

She shut the door and Tom heard her get back to bed. Why the hell should he go to bed before he wanted ? He'd got to go back to his ship, to-morrow ; couldn't he do what he wanted, for a bit ?

However, he stumbled up the stairs, and without undressing flung himself on the bed. He felt precious shaky, and

he'd undress in a minute. Just think what it meant, though, back to that bleeding game to-morrow ; no sooner off than at it again.

Why couldn't he stay at home and lead a decent life, though ? He couldn't be going to be sick again, could he ? He closed his eyes and lay quite still. Preternaturally still.

The bed ploughed on and on in the darkness. It rose and fell in long swoops like a ship. He flung a hand to his forehead to steady his head. He groaned. Suddenly he was asleep.

Tom took his large, red, sullen face in his hands and supported his head with a gesture of hopelessness on the kitchen table. Would the old girl see it ?

She peered round at him from the stove.

'Come along, dear,' she said briskly, 'your breakfast'll get all cold.'

'I don't seem to feel I've got the 'cart for it,' said Tom dejectedly.

'Go along now, you naughty boy,' she said. 'Don't let me hear another word ; eat it up.'

Tom glanced at it : the eggs were still sizzling and the fried ham was cut in thick, browned slices. He had had no supper the night before : he felt empty. 'Yes,' he thought, 'I want it.'

He chewed slowly, and his mother, peering again over her shoulder at him, saw that his mind was not on the enjoyment of his food as it ought to have been. He caught her anxious glance, but she shot it past his head and pretended she had been scanning the morning.

'Going to rain, eh ?'

'I dunno,' said Tom, 'and I doan care.'

A weight of grey and dreary clouds rolled across the sky and across his mind. He felt hopeless. Let it rain.

What did it matter to him, cooped up in the bowels of a

stinking machine for weeks on end? What difference whether it was wet or fine, if he never saw the sun? What difference to him if there never was a sun? It wasn't fair: it wasn't a life at all. Work, rotten grub, sleep, work like hell, rotten grub, sleep. Why should he have to live like that? It fair broke a man, that, it got you down.

'Oh, Gawd!' sighed Tom hopelessly.

Why couldn't the old girl say something! Couldn't she see how he was feeling?

He sighed again and bent down to lace up his boots.

'You mustn't be so down, dear,' she said, 'just because your holiday is over. We've all got to work.'

'You don't know,' he broke out, 'you don't know wot it is. It's easy to talk: it isn't a life at all: it isn't fair. I can't stick it.'

Tom found she had come quite close to him; as he bent down he found her hand on his head. She had taken the chair near him.

'Is it so very bad?' she said.

'It fair breaks my 'eart,' he moaned. 'It breaks my 'eart. You got no idea. Never seein' the sun from day in to day out; working till your back's broke. We never get up on deck. It isn't fair, it isn't a man's life at all. I tell you I can't stick it. I can't go back. I can't, mother. Why can't I get something decent to do?'

He never noticed in the excitement of his outburst that somehow she had put his head on her knee. He was kneeling on the floor before her chair, his lump of a head resting on her lap. She gently stroked his hair.

'Poor boy,' she said, 'you mustn't worry over it so. You mustn't.'

'Last voyage,' he went on in a calmer voice, 'I kept a calendar in my bunk. I marked all the days as I got on deck and saw the air. Four it was, the 'ole voyage. Four. It ain't right. A man oughtn't to live like that.'

'You'll be back 'ere again in no time,' his mother said.

'Sometimes,' said Tom, 'I feel I could chuck the 'ole thing: wot's the use of being alive? It ain't worth it.'

His mother was silent for a long time.

'You've been thinking, dear,' she said, 'that's the trouble. Where'd I be if I was always thinking, and worrying?'

'I shall 'ave to start in a minute,' said Tom. 'Can't I not go?'

'Of course you must go. You've signed on for the trip. But I'll tell you what, Tom. Why don't you try and get a job in the docks at Avonmouth? Make inquiries afore you go on board.'

'I 'ave done.'

'Well, I will, too. There's Mr. Carstock's brother's got a good job in some big warehouse there. Likely he'd know of something. We'll find you something in time, Tom. But we've all got to begin at the bottom. Jobs need waiting for, but you've got to go on with what you've got. It's no good giving up.'

'No.'

'You'll promise me you'll go aboard like you've signed on to?'

'Yes.'

'That's right,' she said more cheerfully.

Tom raised his head and got up. He felt a bit better now.

'Talking of jobs,' he said. 'What's that Cissie Lough doing? He's married and all that.'

'Well, he's got his own special line, you see.'

'Wot?'

'Well, carpentering and that; he took up with carpentering first, and then he got employed by a firm of decorators. It's for hand-carving?'

'Wot 'and-carving?'

'Well, in woodwork; Mrs. Parkinson—that's Sue's

mother—is caretaker up at Mr. Newall's. She showed me some woodwork he'd done in the dining-room. Wonderful it was, all leaves and fruit, done in wood—like real.'

'Wot does 'e get paid?'

'Well, I 'eard someone say he could get as much as five and six pounds a week when the work was there.'

Tom scratched his head and thought. 'Wosser time?'

'It's on the half-hour. You'd better be starting, it's a good hour's walk.'

Ten minutes later he was striding up the road. It was a chilly morning for summer. He was cold and unhappy. He was rather humiliated: his mother had soothed him, comforted him, put some of the fight back into him. But he felt his manhood had suffered: she had soothed him like a little boy, just as she used to years ago.

That was what he felt: childish. Miserable like a child, unable to battle with the world and make it give him the things he wanted. He could only turn to his old mother and play the whining child. He was no good. What use were his muscles, his swank, the other men flattering? He was only a helpless, crying child. Oh, hell! And to think of those weeks and weeks in the ship. He was beaten, that was it, beaten. The guts were gone out of him. He was up against it; the world was too strong for him. He'd never get his girl and his home and all the things a man ought to have. That was what made a man a man, surely. Living a man's life completely. Not shovelling coals into a furnace—with nothing in life but work and sleep.

Why, Lough was more of a man than he was: he'd got his home and his things round: he could do something. Pretty fool he'd made of himself poking fun at Lough last night. Lough had the laugh of him all the time. How he must have sneered up his sleeve.

Tom was so engrossed in these thoughts he never saw a

figure approaching. It was Lough stepping it out briskly to his morning's work.

Lough had caught sight of Tom, and he was dreading the encounter. What beastly thing was he going to say this time? He felt like a child with that sort of man. Farleigh put him in the position of a snivelling little boy again, told him to his face he was a nincompoop, laughed at his thin wrists. Farleigh despised him; thought he was only half a man.

Last night in the pub he had sat it out, and pretended it was all a joke, but he felt humiliated and beaten. He felt that the world was too strong for him. These were things he would not stand up against. They were all symbolized in Farleigh.

Lough felt ridiculously nervous as he drew near. Suddenly Tom looked up and saw him.

'Morning, Tom,' said Lough.

'Ullo, Cissie,' said Tom. Jealousy swept over him, and his own dissatisfaction was sharpened acutely: instantly a sneer came into his voice.

'Off to his little woodcarving,' he said, 'do it pretty, mind!' He wasn't going to be laughed at.

'That's it,' shouted the discomfited Lough genially, 'and you do your stoking pretty, too!'

The shaft went right home: that was it, then, Tom thought: Lough knew that was all he was fit for: back to your shovelling, you damned slave. His cup of misery was full. He trudged gloomily on, brooding on every stride.

Mr. Carstock, who looked out of his window at that moment for a breath of early morning air, noted the meeting. That Tom Farleigh always was a bully, and he had to be cock of his own little walk.

That was the pint in that particular pot.

If You Can't be Good, be Cautious

AN old Lycett lorry came lumberingly into a garage near the Great West Road. This was a ramshackle place with a draughty concrete yard, corrugated-iron roofs, and doors hanging by a hinge. It was much used by lorry drivers as a port of call for a chat.

'Hullo, Tom,' said the garage hand to the driver of the lorry. 'You haven't been this way lately.'

'Hullo,' said Tom. 'Cheerio, everyone. I'll have six gallons of the usual, please, and perhaps Bessie will give me a cup of tea if I promise her a kiss.'

Presently Tom, sitting in the cab of his lorry and stirring his tea with a pencil, shouted: 'Did you hear about that young fellow who works for our crowd—Bob Curtain? Curt, we all call him. He's been up before the magistrates to-day.'

'No, go on,' said the garage hand. 'What for—speeding?'

'I don't know,' said Tom. 'It wasn't anything to do with driving. He's a bit of a lad.'

At that moment a second Lycett lorry swung into the filling station, rather too fast, scattering a heap of gravel and a couple of buckets. It pulled up with a jerk, almost striking the tailboard of Tom's lorry. It was Curt.

'Hullo, young fellow,' said Tom. 'How did you get on to-day? So they didn't put you in quod?'

Curt got out of his lorry and glared at him without answering. He began to lounge round the yard with his hands in his pockets.

'No,' he said at length. 'Nor are they likely to.'

'Well,' said Tom. 'What was it all about? What was the trouble?'

'Nothing. All a lot of rot. Just those blasted bobbies trying to put me wrong.'

'But what was the charge?' said Tom. 'If it isn't a rude answer. If you don't mind my asking.'

'No, I don't mind,' said Curt. 'Why should I? It was carrying a gun without a licence, if you want to know.'

Tom pushed his cap off his forehead, and shook his head. 'Well, you're a funny one,' said the garage hand. 'What on earth do you want with a gun?'

'No harm in it,' said Curt. 'I'm just interested in fire-arms, that's all.'

'What did the magistrate say?'

'Oh, a lot of stuff. He tried to make the most of it. Anybody'd have thought I'd committed a crime. A lot of talk about getting into bad company. I didn't listen to half of it.'

'Well, it's all right, isn't it?' said Tom. 'He let you off scot-free?'

'No, he didn't. I was bound over. I've got to go and report every bloody month.'

'Well, there's no great harm in that.'

'Yes, there is,' said Curt. 'That's just the swine of it. Didn't I tell you I'd got a better job?'

'I do remember something. What was it?'

'It was up in Manchester, that's what it was, driving a taxi for a chap I know. It was a good opening. Now this has mucked everything up. I can't take it.'

Curt went on mouching round the yard with his hands

in his pockets. 'Damn fools,' he said. 'Damned swines. I tell you what it is, Tom. Those swines of police : once they've got their hands on you, they mean to get you. They mean to put you wrong. I'd like to get hold of that fool of a magistrate.'

'Well,' said Tom. 'I'm sorry. Still, if you can't be good, be cautious. That's what I always tell my kids. "Be good if you can, and if you can't, be cautious!"'

A silence followed this.

'Sorry,' said Tom self-consciously. 'It ain't often I go chucking these pearls of wisdom round. Where are you for to-night, Curt? Bristol?'

'Taunton,' said Curt. 'I've got a load of petrol—hundreds of gallons. Some muck the boss has got hold of cheap.'

'I'm on that game, too. I've got to go and pick my load up, then I'll be getting along.'

'Right,' said Curt. 'We're meeting at the usual place later on. That fellow Sid's coming.'

'I'll be there,' said Tom. 'Cheer up, you'll be all right.'

Curt nodded. He cranked up his lorry and moved off but, after driving for a few minutes, decided to wait on the Great West Road for Tom to catch him up. He wanted to unburden himself.

It was now the brown dusk of an October twilight. Lights began to gleam in the evening. A brooding silence fell, and was shattered, and fell again as an occasional lorry crashed by on the first stage of a long night journey.

The river's vaporous breath swirled up from Kew, from Gunnersbury, from Brentford. It coiled round the lamps and across the tattered half-made roads and dying fields. Curt shuddered. He felt the raw edge of the mist against his skin. Its looming shapes hung before him, filling his mind with vague fears of the police, of the bosses, and the power they held over his whole life.

Presently he found a man in a mackintosh was looking up into the cab of the lorry, and asking for a lift.

'Get up if you like,' said Curt, rousing himself. 'She's not exactly one of those super luxury coaches, still, she gets along somehow. Where do you want to go to?'

'Oh, west,' said the other.

Curt laughed. 'West?' he said. 'That seems a bit uncertain. I mean, do you want to go to Bath or Cardiff or Salisbury? They're all west from here. Where are you aiming for?'

'Where are you going?' said the stranger.

'Oh, me; I'm going down past Bristol; but I'm meeting one or two pals half-way, and we might find something to do.'

He found the stranger staring at him.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'We have to do something to amuse ourselves. A lot of chaps, who drive lorries, don't get home for a week or more together, so we arrange meeting-places on the road.'

'What for?'

'Oh, just for a bit of a talk; you get to feel a bit cut off when you live and sleep on one of these barrows for days together. The married men feel it most, and this night driving, too, it works on you. Of course, the bosses try to stop our meeting, but then they do so many things against the Act all the time, what the hell can they expect?'

'Do they?' said the stranger. 'What sort of things? You mean they keep you on too long hours?'

'Yes, of course I do,' said Curt angrily. 'You aren't on their side, are you? Because if you are you can get a lift off somebody else, see? I'll pull up right away.'

He began to slow down.

'All right, mate. That's all right,' the stranger said hastily. 'It isn't my trade, you see. I was only asking.'

'Well, I'm telling you. How would you like to drive

fifty-seven hours, on a stretch, with only three hours off the whole time? That's what happened to a London man last week. I knew him slightly; the chap lived round Dalston way. Then he crashed, and got killed. At the inquest it came out that he'd been driving for fifty-seven hours without sleep. He leaves a wife and kiddies. He was quite a young chap, not much older than me. How would you like that?

The stranger made no answer.

'Bit thick isn't it?' said Curt. 'Bit bloody thick, isn't it? By God, it makes me see red. They're all the same, all these bosses. To hell with them! An extra quid's worth more to them than a man's happiness, or a man's life. And the police are simply there to back them up. That's what I say. Throat-cutting would be a damn sight too good for them.'

The stranger still made no answer.

It was now quite dark. They rushed along in that narrow and lonely world that closes round night drivers. They sped through an endless silent tunnel—a cave of darkness. The yellow light of the headlamps flashed on the ribbed walls and roofs to this side and that as deep banks and hedges streamed past. Trees, remote and still, stood for an instant before them, their leaves showing faint and dusty in the light. Then they vanished. The headlamps bored and bored through the darkness of the tunnel. Occasionally a fast-moving car slipped quietly by them.

The stranger watched Curt as his talk ran on and on. He was a young man, twenty-three, or twenty-four at the most. He was good-looking, unshaved, unwashed, with black, oily smears on his forehead and face. His hair flew in the wind, and he lounged at ease behind his wheel, driving the lorry with reckless speed and skill. He talked ceaselessly, seeming to keep only half his attention on the yellow rings of light, and the wall of darkness ahead.

They scraped a corner, two wheels mounting a bank and tilting the lorry up at a sharp angle.

'All right, all right,' said Curt. 'Don't get windy. It's this blasted steering. You just ought to feel the back lash. I tighten up the ball joints after every journey. The worm-and-segment's not too good. Takes a bit of getting used to. Of course the boss got her cheap, and he's never spent a penny on repairs yet.'

'How are the brakes?' said the stranger.

'Brakes?' said Curt. 'They're comic. I oughtn't to take her out on the road like this at all, really. The hand brake acts on the back wheel, only it doesn't act. And I don't like using the foot-brake much; it puts too much strain on the rear gearbox bearing.'

'Why don't you drive slower?' said the stranger. 'Be more careful.'

'Hells bells,' said Curt. 'You couldn't drive much slower. Still, I expect you're wise. A pal of mine was telling me to be cautious only to-day. What he said to me was: "If you can't be good, be cautious." Don't you think that's a pretty good way of putting it?'

The stranger said nothing.

'Well,' said Curt, 'I think it is, especially when the police are such swine. They love to get it in for you.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Because they are,' said Curt angrily.

'I'll tell you what's been happening to me.' And he drew the lorry up at the side of the road and looked intently down the long moonlit stretch in front of him.

'Or perhaps I won't tell you,' he said. 'I'm afraid I'll have to put you off here—I've got to meet some friends of mine.'

As the stranger was getting down, another lorry lumbered by, and Tom leaned out of the cab and waved to Curt.

'Look here,' said Curt, 'we're getting near Savernake.'

This is all Lord Harleigh's Estate round here ; if you care to wait a bit, you'll get another lift. Sorry I can't take you any farther.'

'That's all right,' said the other man. 'I shall do fine.'

'So long,' said Curt. 'Good luck, old man.'

He let in his clutch, and with many jolts the transmission took up the load and the lorry started forward. In a mile or two he swung off into a side lane and nosed cautiously along. It was little more than a soft, grassy track. The trees of a thick wood bordered it on each side—their branches scraping and slapping the lorry as it passed. Then his headlights picked out a dark, bulky shape under the boughs, and he pulled up. As his eyes became accustomed to the clouded moonlight, he saw there were two other lorries waiting for him

'Hullo,' said Curt. 'Cheerio, Tom. Hullo, Sid. How's things?'

Sid was on the road from Bristol up to London. He had brought a friend with him, a butcher's assistant from Bristol, who wanted a night out. Curt promised to take the butcher back to Bristol by the morning.

'Who was it that you were talking to when I passed?' said Tom.

'Oh, just a chap I'd given a lift to,' said Curt.

'You're a fool to go picking up with people,' said Sid.

'As long as you didn't start blabbing to him——'

'Of course not,' said Curt. 'What do you take me for? I think I shall turn round right away,' he went on. 'Might as well get it done.'

Sid nodded.

'How's she starting up nowadays?' he asked.

'Not too bad. It takes two of us most mornings. When I swing her alone, it leaves me feeling as if I hadn't the guts left to pull the skin off a rice pudding.'

Tom laughed.

'Blow the top off a glass of beer, you mean,' he said.

'When I'm too weak for that, I'll give you the beer,' said Curt. After a lot of manœuvring he backed his lorry round.

'Aren't you chaps going to turn?' he said, getting down.

'Why?' said Sid. 'Plenty of time later. Are you getting windy?'

Sid was a country chap by birth—yet he looked more of a townie than either of the others. His hair was black, and smoothed back, and he wore a bright-coloured jumper, and a ring on his signet finger.

They spoke all the time in low voices, saying as little as they could. Presently they fell silent.

'Well,' said Curt. 'Shall we start?'

'Might as well,' said Sid. 'Rouse up, Tom.'

'Not me, Sid,' said Tom, who was sitting with his feet up in the cab of his lorry. 'I'm not in this. I've got a wife and two kids at home.'

'Come on,' said Sid. 'It's only a bit of sport.'

'Not me,' said Tom. 'You'd better buck up. It'll be daylight soon.'

Curt left Tom in his lorry, and walked off with the others in the darkness. His heart was beating.

'What's the idea?' he whispered to Sid. 'Same as last time?'

'Yes,' said Sid. 'That, and a bit more. Don't talk. There's the torch; keep by me, I know this place like a book.'

Sid moved so quickly and quietly in the dense darkness under the trees it was hard to keep track of him. Curt could feel the other fellow, the butcher, somewhere close by, though he couldn't see him.

Suddenly Sid crouched down.

'Wait,' he said. He touched Curt's arm. 'Quick, you fool.'

Curt knew what to do. He shone the electric torch full on the branches of the tree about him. In the sudden glare, it seemed that the whole tree was as full of roosting pheasants as a hen-house. They showed up black and flustered in the sudden light.

Sid at once fired into the tree point-blank with a sawn-off sporting gun. There was an immense crash of noise, which filled the whole night with repeated echoings : wings beat and branches rustled.

Curt felt a touch on his arm.

'I've got two,' said Sid. 'Quick, we'd better move away from here.'

After a little while they stopped and Sid gave Curt the dead birds.

'This is a good place,' said Sid. 'Let's try again.'

'That shooting will bring along every keeper in the place,' said Curt. 'That's enough for one night. I always said it was a damn-fool way.'

'Don't get milky,' said Sid. 'Put the light on.'

Another tree was silhouetted : the gun crashed again. They got another bird.

'Christ !' said Sid. 'There's someone coming.' They lay stock-still. Curt could feel his heart in the roots of his tongue. The footsteps were coming nearer.

A voice called. Sid whispered : 'They're coming this way.'

Suddenly there was a light in the trees, and the voices were right on top of them.

'Run !' said Sid.

Curt found himself at once alone, running over the broken ground in pitch darkness. There were loud shouts and lights just behind, and he hurled the two birds away as he ran. He plunged into brambles, which slashed his face and his clothes.

He fought with the clinging brambles frenziedly, as if

they had been hands in the darkness holding him. He felt they nearly had him now. He'd put himself in their hands this time. What was going to happen?

Then he was clear of the brambles and running on open grass skirting the side of the wood. He saw sheep starting up in the darkness across a field. Then he found he was no longer being followed. He lay for a while in the deepest shadow, till the distant voices and movements died right away.

After wandering in the woods for another half-hour, he found his way to the lorries. The others were still missing.

'You're a damn fool,' Tom said, when he told him what had happened. 'Why can't you keep out of this sort of thing for a bit?'

They waited, Curt only anxious now to get away as quickly as possible. Presently they heard voices.

The clouds were clearing and the moonlight grew brighter every moment. They saw Sid and the other man coming towards them dragging a heavy burden.

'What the hell——' said Tom.

It was the carcase of a newly killed last season's lamb. Tom took a look at it and went to the handle of his lorry.

'When it comes to sheep-stealing,' he said, 'I'm going.'

'Don't be in such a hurry,' said Sid. 'What d'you think I brought a butcher with me for? You stay and have a joint off it, Tom.'

'Not me,' said Tom.

'Look here,' said Sid to Curt. 'You're going to take this bloke back to Bristol, aren't you? He knows just where to sell this bit of mutton.'

'I'll get you retail prices for it,' said the butcher.

'Right,' said Sid. 'We'll just sling it on Curt's lorry.'

'All right,' said Curt, watching them, but his heart sank.

'Don't you take it,' said Tom.

'Shut your mouth,' said Sid. 'He'll take it.'

'All right,' said Curt. 'Let's move off. I've had enough for one night.'

'It's easy,' said Sid. 'We'll do it again.' He spoke with perfect assurance.

Curt started up his lorry. But as the engine fired and banged into life in the night silence, they heard the sound of another car. All listened, looking at each other without speaking. 'It's only a car passing in the distance,' Curt thought. But what if it were something else—someone who'd got wind of them? The sound was coming nearer, then he saw headlights flash. In another moment a car bumped slowly into view along the rough lane.

'Christ!' said Sid. 'That's a police car—a Morris.'

Curt leaped into the driving seat of his lorry, raced the engine, and let in the clutch. His was the only one of the three lorries which faced the way of escape: and he had the stolen sheep.

As the car approached his lorry jerked forward. In the glare of his headlights Curt saw the man who had travelled with him, and he could see now that he had plain-clothesman written all over him.

'The swine,' he said to himself.

In another moment he was clanging up the broken lane. The lorry lurched from one side to the other as he struck deep ruts and pits. He held on to the steering-wheel with all his strength, letting the engine gather power. He could feel the dangerous give of the steering-gear as the front wheels took shock after shock.

After a few minutes of this rough work, he turned out into the main road. He was on a long, straight stretch, dipping and rising in the moonlight. With the accelerator jammed against the footboards he was soon doing fifty down the slopes. Then he saw the headlights of another

car rising and dipping behind him. He was being chased. Soon he knew the car behind was coming up quickly. The headlights began to lighten the road all round him. His lorry was making noise enough for a traction engine. He crashed and thundered down the hills. Every bolt in the old Lycett banged and rattled. The wheel kicked violently in his hands, he could hardly hold it. He was only waiting for something to go.

The deep shadows of the trees and banks tumbled by him, writhing as they went; streaming, interlacing, barring his way. The black silhouette of his own lorry hovered beside him. He felt the car drawing nearer: he felt hands closing in on him. Dark fears of punishment, imprisonment, bubbled up from his lowest level. What would they do with him?

He clutched the wheel more firmly. The other car was right on him. A side turning rushed towards him, and he wrenched his lorry round. It struck a bank, swayed at a sickening angle and then was on the road again. The turning was a narrow lane, climbing steeply.

He heard shouts behind him and knew that the other car had overshot the turning. He raced his engine in low gear climbing slowly. By the time he had reached the top of the hill he saw the lights coming after him again.

Then he was rushing, thirty forty, fifty miles an hour again, holding desperately to a narrow dropping road that overhung a deep valley. The road on his near side vanished into sheer emptiness.

The engine began to pop back in the carburettor. Curt knew there was plenty of petrol and he had cleaned the pipes and filters recently. An inlet valve must have burnt out or stuck. He muttered curses to himself.

Then he could see a flame through the floor-boards, where the clutch pedal came through. As he glanced

down, it was spreading. He opened the offside door in readiness. He tried the brakes, but they made no difference.

'I shall be dead before they get me,' he thought. 'I shall be dead in five minutes.'

He heard a loud metallic crash against the bottom of the crankcase. At the same instant he found the steering-wheel twisting loosely in his hands. 'The track rod's gone,' he thought. 'That's the end.'

His lorry leapt up the offside bank at fifty miles an hour ; it lurched off and rushed at the other edge. Curt tried to jump clear, and saw the clouds and stars beneath his feet. Then the lorry came over on top of him—a huge black hurtling mass . . .

At the same instant the Morris car with a dry skid and a scream of brakes drew up in his tracks. Two men flung the door open and began to climb out. For a second or so they watched in silence.

With crash after crash the lorry plunged down into the valley turning over and over. It came to rest, and instantly a column of red flame rose straight in the darkness as the petrol exploded into fire. Then it turned to smoke and fitful bursts of flame thirty and forty feet high.

'Good God,' said one of the policemen. 'That's the end of him.'

'Young fool, young fool.'

They began to stumble quickly down the hill in the darkness.

Curt watched them vanish. He was lying beside the hedge where he had been thrown as the lorry overturned. He found he was quite unhurt.

As the police officers vanished in the darkness, he began to walk quickly away.

'It was bad luck on Curt,' he began thinking to himself. 'But perhaps he's better dead. I'll be in Manchester to-

night. I'll be in Manchester to-night, and start on that new job.

After a few minutes' walking and running the flames were hidden by a shoulder of the hill and he slackened his pace.

'I'll get away with it all right,' he whispered. 'I shall always get away with it. Watch me!'

A Job at Staedtler's

MAISIE'S Walter came from Chipperfield. When Dad heard this he at once asked : 'Has he got a job at Staedtler's ?'

'No,' said Maisie. 'He's at a furniture-maker's. He's been working there ever since he was a boy.'

'Furniture-making ?' said dad. 'That ought to be fairly safe. People will always want furniture as long as they've got homes. Still, Staedtler's is the place : that's a fine firm to be in. And there's a lot of unemployment over at Chipperfield too.'

Maisie's Walter was a slow-moving fellow, and slow of speech. He was strong, and heavily built. He said very little, but what he said was sensible. He had a very red face and very blue eyes : and, now and again, one or two large lumpy spots appeared on his forehead. Walter was as good a centre-half as you could find anywhere outside League football. The Town team had been much interested in him, and would have signed him on but for his slight deafness.

As soon as Dad met Walter he formed a good opinion of him. Mother liked him, too : but she said : 'Well, I should have chosen a man with a bit more go in him at Maisie's age. Still, Walter's Maisie's choice and I am sure he's as good and steady a chap as you would wish. After all she's one of the quiet ones herself. He's kind to children, and he sticks to his job ; and when you've said that you've said a lot.'

Maisie and Walter were married on a bright Saturday afternoon in October, and both Mother and Dad showed everybody that they felt a very deep pleasure and satisfaction.

After the service at the church, a large party of people crowded into their little front room. More than once Dad went up to Walter and put his hand on his shoulder. Walter and Maisie stood together in the window and people could see them standing there from the street, through the lace curtains; Maisie still in her white dress, still holding her flowers, and Walter in a new dark blue serge suit, with a stiff collar.

Neither Walter nor Maisie said anything. They stood side by side, and smiled when people congratulated them. Mother bustled about the room, bubbling with excitement, talking to everyone at once, and offering drinks all round.

One of the guests of honour was Mr. Truslove—the old master from Walter's school—a small man neatly dressed in black, with white hair cut very close. He had a long talk with Dad. Before going Mr. Truslove made a short speech, and said that Walter was one of the best boys he had ever known, and Maisie was lucky to have him.

One or two of Maisie's relations remarked to each other, after he had finished speaking, that the luck was not all on one side.

About nine o'clock in the evening, Maisie and Walter took the train over to Chipperfield; they arrived at their new home, by tram, carrying Maisie's suitcase with them.

They had quite a large room at the top of a house—a corner-house, with a clear view up two streets. Maisie had chosen the room because it seemed bright and airy. Opening out of the bed-sitting-room was their own tiny kitchen. There was a gas stove in the kitchen and a sink out on the landing. They shared a lavatory two floors down with the other people in the house.

When Maisie opened the door and saw her new home finished and ready for the first time, she stood looking round it in silence. 'It's lovely,' she said at last, 'really, it's lovely.'

Walter began to help her off with her coat, and laid it at the foot of the large bed. Maisie took off her new hat, and looked at herself in the glass in the dressing-table, and patted the coils of fair hair over her ears.

'This dressing-table is lovely, too. I never knew you'd make everything as good as this. It's far better than Mum ever had.'

'I've been working at this suite for the whole year,' said Walter. 'I knew you were going to like it, Maisie. That's why I never let you see anything of it before I'd finished it. I wanted to keep it as a surprise.'

Walter had made every piece of the furniture himself. He had bought the wood at cost price through the furniture-makers where he worked.

Their room looked fresh, and clean, and shining. Maisie had chosen a plain wallpaper of cream, unlike the dark brown and red patterned wallpapers in her mother's house; and she had bought for the floor a plain blue linoleum, with a simple green and blue check round the border. Walter's furniture was made from the most expensive mahogany. It stood large and massive, and french-polished, gleaming from the walls like dark lustrous mirrors. There was a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a dressing-table with a mirror, and the double bed.

'It's all seasoned wood,' said Walter, 'and it's as well made as furniture ever was. Our foreman was up here the other day to see it; and he said if we were selling a suite like this through one of the big London shops, people would have to pay seventy or eighty pounds for it.'

Maisie nodded.

The next morning Walter brought Maisie her breakfast

in bed on a tray. 'You must have it in bed for a week,' he said. 'You're tired out after all the getting ready for the wedding, and keeping on your work too till the very last.'

'Anyone would think I was Lady Something, lying in bed for breakfast,' said Maisie.

Suddenly she put her arms round him. 'I feel quite frightened,' she said.

'What of?'

'We're too happy; I'm frightened something will happen.'

'In what way?' said Walter.

'You might go and lose your job.'

'That's not likely,' said Walter. 'We're a good firm; been going fifty years. Don't you worry, Maisie. You might as well take it easy now while you can,' he said. 'You may have hard enough work later on.'

'Why?' said Maisie.

'Oh, well,' said Walter. 'There's always hard work for married people. I shall have to work hard at my job; and you'll have to clean up and look after the children.'

'Perhaps we shan't have any children,' said Maisie. 'Plenty of people don't these days,' and she gave a little laugh.

'It's wrong to marry and not have children,' said Walter. 'That's one thing that's quite certain.'

So their married life started.

For the first six months Maisie and Walter were, in their quiet way, wonderfully happy. Sometimes Walter would come home to dinner in the middle of the day: sometimes Maisie would pack up enough for both of them and take it to Walter's factory: and they would eat it alone in the quiet workshop while Walter's mates were out. They decided that they would take it into the nearby square gardens every day in the summer.

Chipperfield is one of a string of several small towns, all

joined together. There are no smart streets nor showy shops. All the roads are cobbled ; a few red and green trams run through them on a single route ; but there is not much traffic of any kind. The town is made up of works and factories with straight streets of small houses round them, in brown, soot-sprinkled ranks—all very much like each other. At the corners are occasional pubs and muddled little grocers' shops.

On most days Maisie used to walk into the old Market Street—the only large shopping street in Chipperfield. There she found a draper's shop with a showy modern front, a blackened town hall, and a statue. Every day she saw hundreds of men standing up and down the street, doing nothing. They were very quiet. Sometimes one or two were speaking together : now and again a newspaper would be passed from hand to hand. For the most part they stood singly and in silence. She often saw old Mr. Truslove talking to one of them : he seemed to know many of them by name. And each man to whom he spoke showed a faint spark of answering life. Walter told her that Mr. Truslove was working every minute of his time in helping to get them jobs : collecting clothes and money for them, and arranging clubs and schemes of work.

All went very well with Maisie and Walter for about six months. Then there was a bombshell.

One warm April evening, Maisie was sitting by the window, sometimes sewing, sometimes just looking into the street; watching the children playing below. The yellow sunlight came slanting in, throwing bright patches on the blue and green oil-cloth. Gradually the dusk closed round her and she realized Walter was very late. She stood up and put her sewing away : she walked into the kitchen and lit the gas stove. She stood uncertainly in the dusk, wondering whether to begin putting out the things for supper. Then the door opened and Walter

came in. He hung his coat up and greeted her but all the time he kept his face turned away.

'What's the matter, Walter?' she said. 'Something's happened?'

Walter nodded.

'What?'

'It's bad news, Maisie,' he said. 'I never thought it possible.'

'Not your job?' said Maisie.

'Yes,' said Walter. 'I'm losing it.'

Maisie looked at him in silence. She felt her heart beating suddenly in her throat: she felt as if she had suddenly seen a sickening terror threaten her: she looked at Walter unable to speak. After a moment the fear went further off and she began to feel more calm.

'Don't worry,' she said, putting her arms round him. 'It'll be all right, you won't be out of a job long.'

'I wouldn't have thought it possible,' said Walter. 'It's not just *my* job—it's the whole firm; they're shutting up.'

They sat down facing each other across the kitchen table, forgetting all about their meal.

'But I thought they were so sound and safe,' said Maisie.

'So they were. Doing nicely: but now the whole firm's been bought over by some big London people, and the works at Chipperfield are going to be done away with.'

Maisie knitted her brow. 'That's not fair,' she said.

'You see, we're all out of jobs,' he explained. 'The whole of the factory is shutting up; just bought out—everybody's in the same boat.'

'I wish you could get a job in Staedtler's works,' said Maisie. 'That seems safe enough.'

'Ah,' said Walter. 'Everyone wants that. And jobs at Staedtler's are pretty hard to get. They're always safe: you need someone to push you in at Staedtler's. It's no good trying without.'

'Couldn't you get hold of Mr. Truslove to help you, Walter? He thinks so well of you.'

'He might help,' said Walter.

At first Maisie and Walter were very hopeful. Maisie simply could not think of Walter as an unemployed man. She could not connect him with the silent groups that hung about in the old Market Street day after day.

Very early every morning Walter would take out his bag of tools, visit every place on the outskirts of Chipperfield and the neighbouring towns, where he knew there was a bit of building going on, to see if they needed carpenters. He walked a good many miles each day.

Every day, at first, Maisie looked hopefully and questioningly at Walter, when he came in, and he told her where he had been and what had happened. After a week or two his answer was only a shake of the head and a sigh. Soon he had been out of work a month: then three months. The summer grew full and hot. A sweep of blue July sky hung over the grey cobbled streets and sooty box-like houses of Chipperfield. Once or twice Walter and Maisie ate their dinner in the square garden as they had planned during the winter. But behind the sky and the hot asphalt, and the children's shouts, and behind all the long summer months and hours, there was a deadly fear: their own married life with its joyful hopes seemed to have been taken and locked away from them.

In another month or two, by the end of the summer, things began to look really bad. As the winter came on, the work on the new building plots at the outskirts of the town grew less and less. Several of the foremen whom Walter had been visiting regularly turned nasty and told him to keep away.

One morning he said to Maisie: 'I'm not going out to-day, what's the use? My shoes are through. I only

wear them out walking round. There's nothing doing : so I might as well stay here.'

'Go on trying,' said Maisie. 'Keep it up till the end of this week.'

Walter sighed, and picked up his bag of tools, which he had been carrying round since the spring. He kissed her and went out. A grey fine rain was drifting over the cobbles. From the window she watched him standing at the gate, and realized that he did not know which way to go. She began to cry, and after he was out of sight would have given anything to have had him back again.

The grey drifting rain went on all day, and he came home soaked and utterly dejected.

'It's no good,' he said. 'They're stopping work everywhere. There's not a chance of a job.'

'It seems so silly,' said Maisie. 'So many people out of work, and yet so many people wanting houses. There's plenty of overcrowding in this town, and families living together in one room : and yet they stop work on building.'

Walter nodded. 'It's lack of the money to build with,' he said. 'And no one's got any money to buy houses when they build them.'

'If only you could get a job at Staedtler's,' said Maisie. 'They never put people off. They even seem to be going in for a larger staff, I've heard. Can't old Mr. Truslove do anything to get you into Staedtler's, Walter?'

They sat silent. Walter's massive furniture made looming shapes of shadow against the walls. It grew very quiet and dark in the room, and after a long time Walter's voice said in the darkness : 'Well, Maisie, it's no good going on thinking things.'

Mr. Truslove was very kind. He promised Walter to do his utmost. And he found Maisie a place as a daily with some people whom he knew : two miles away right

outside the town ; only work-people lived in the town. It was very hard work, keeping her on the go from eight o'clock till eight o'clock with Wednesday afternoon and Sunday free : but it brought in 10s. 6d. a week.

There was nothing for Walter to do now but to stay at home, tidy up the room, do the washing, and have a meal ready for Maisie when she came back from work. And so the winter months passed—Maisie in work and Walter out.

One evening—it was February now and Walter had been out of work for nearly a year—Mr. Truslove came in to see them. Maisie had just come back from her place. They sat on each side of him leaning forward, and listening intently. Mr. Truslove was white-haired and energetic—he spoke quickly, and gave them a long, rapid account of all he had been doing to find a way of getting Walter into Staedtler's. He had seen the Works Manager, one of the directors, the Staff Controller, and he had even been out to see one of the Mr. Staedtlers in his private house.

'We may work it in time yet,' he said. 'I'm going on trying for you, Walter. They say they only take men into their works on personal recommendation. They like to know about their family records, and just exactly who they are ; it's so important to get hold of the right type of man. But I've satisfied the Staff Controller about you, Walter. He's interested in your good record and he says you're just the type they are on the look-out for. I told him your dad was an ex-Army man, too.'

Walter nodded. 'I'm sure I thank you very much, sir,' he said. 'I've been a great trouble to you.'

'Not at all,' said the old schoolmaster. 'I do it because you've always been a sensible steady chap, Walter. You're worth the trouble : and it's worth my while trying to get you a place in a firm like Staedtler's.'

Maisie looked from Walter to Mr. Truslove and sighed.

'Isn't there any chance of your being able to do something soon?' she said.

'Well,' said Mr. Truslove. 'I've heard of something that may be useful to Walter right away. There's a big new block of flats going up, out beyond Staedtler's works. Walter ought to go after that at once.'

After he had gone and they were alone together, Maisie said: 'I wish he could do something now, Walter. Do go and get a job at those flats. It seems hopeless to go on like this—I'm so tired.'

She hid her face in her hands and burst out crying. When Walter tried to comfort her she pushed him away and sobbed uncontrollably. Later, still sniffing and dabbing her eyes with a rolled-up handkerchief, she said: 'Forgive me, Walter. I get so tired and I feel funny. My period's all late: I don't know what's been wrong with me the last week or so.'

Six times Walter went after the new job. At first they told him they would not be ready for the carpenters and inside fitters for weeks. Another time they told him he had come a day too late, and they had engaged all the men they needed the day before. Again he went and by good luck they wanted to take on an extra man that very day. Walter had his tools with him and started work right away.

Next week he persuaded Maisie to give up her place.

'Our bad times are over now,' he said. 'I felt sure I should get work in time. Now I am in with these people we shall be all right.'

'I'm glad it's building you're working on this time,' said Maisie. 'New houses seem needed so badly round here.'

It was at the end of March when Walter began work again. They felt even happier and more excited than they had felt eighteen months before, when they were first married. It was ten shillings a week less than Walter's old job, but that scarcely mattered. They took the 'bus into

the country on the fine April Sundays, and scented grass and flowers seemed to be springing with fresh hope and life. They sat silent and at peace, filled with contentment and happiness because Walter was at work again. The natural feelings and thoughts of their married life could flow freely once more. Maisie was able to bring flowers home, to take a new interest in their room ; to buy a few little things for it—to make plans and think again of the future home, which they would need when they had a family.

After Walter had been in his new job three or four months, Maisie realized that something was going wrong. He came home silent and moody. He never told her anything about his work or the men there. One Saturday evening she watched him, sitting sprawled in his chair, his head sunk on his chest, for twenty minutes or more without moving.

‘Buck up,’ she said. ‘Don’t sit moping like that ; you’re the same every night nowadays. Let’s take a walk ; or how about the pictures ?’

He shook his head.

‘Don’t feel like the pictures.’

‘What is it, Walter ?’ she said. ‘Is it something about your job ?’

‘No,’ said Walter. But after she had asked him a good many times he told her.

‘It’s hopeless,’ he said. ‘I’ve been trying to see the best of it, and not tell you : but I can’t go on.’

‘What’s the trouble ?’

‘All this cheap work. It’s not my style at all, not carpentering as I understand it. They get this machine paneling and screw it up all anyhow : and machine-made moulding glued on by the yard.’

‘Well,’ said Maisie. ‘If that’s what they want you to do, I should do it and not worry.’

'I can't help it,' said Walter. 'What's the sense of it? When you've had the training in first-class work I've had all these years, you can't suddenly go and start doing things the wrong way, all shoddy.'

'I should just do what they want.'

'Speed's all they think of,' said Walter. 'They're always round after you, driving you on, and if you're not up to time every minute you're complained of, and you lose your job. When I took that job on, Maisie, there was twelve carpenters working: and now there's only six. They've put off all the others, one by one, because they weren't fast enough, and they're keeping us that are left to do the work of two men each. Then the other chaps, who've lost their work, come calling us blacklegs for taking away their jobs.'

'But it is not your fault,' said Maisie.

'It is in a way,' said Walter. 'But what can I do? I was on from seven this morning till after seven to-night, working full speed the whole time, Maisie, and all this week I've been doing what two men was doing last week.'

'It's not fair,' said Maisie. 'They've no right to treat you like that.'

'There's no way out,' said Walter, 'and there's no one to help. They've got you just where they want you; you've got to go exactly their way or lose the job.'

Walter got up and began to walk about the room. She had never heard that anxious ring, almost a tremor, in his voice: she had never seen him so excited.

'And what's the sense of it?' he said, almost shouting. 'The work's not well done; it doesn't seem worth doing at all like that—all stuck together anyhow. Everything done cheap and the wood all unseasoned—it'll be breaking up in two or three years' time. What's the sense of it? It's all wrong.'

'I'm sorry,' said Maisie. 'Still, it's no good complain-

ing : you're lucky to have any job nowadays. You'll just have to stick it out, Walter. I expect it'll get better if only you stick to it.'

'I'll stick to it,' said Walter, 'if it'll stick to me. That's the point. I shall be the next to go.'

At once Maisie felt a sickening wave of terror, bringing back to her the moment when Walter first lost his job.

'Walter,' she said. 'You don't mean that really? You're such a good workman.'

'I might as well prepare you,' said Walter. 'All the other chaps left on now are pals of the foreman, or one of the bosses. That's what counts on this job ; not good work.'

'Oh,' said Maisie. 'Why can't Mr. Truslove do anything? If only he could get you that job in Staedtler's.'

The next Friday Walter brought his money back from the flats for the last time. He climbed the stairs wearily, and gave Maisie the news in a dull, leaden voice. He was out of work again.

Maisie turned white when Walter told her ; white and sick. It was worse now than it had been at first. She was more frightened. This time she had no feelings of calmness or hope. She looked at the blue and green oilcloth, which she had chosen so carefully—she looked at Walter's fine polished furniture.

The evening sun slanted into the room, and the bright sunlight broke up and danced in flashing points as tears filled her eyes. The room fell into pieces and vanished : and coloured circles, green and white and violet, raced away from her. The shouts of children came up from the streets below : from other places and times : from the time when she was a tiny child. The voices were distant, and dreamlike—but very loud and clear at the same time. She and Walter had fifty years more of life in front of them, she thought. She saw dirty rooms and streets. She

thought of bundles of rags, that cowered in doorways by night, and tottered, and moaned, and begged by daylight.

'Walter,' she cried. 'I can't stand it—I can't—I can't. What's going to happen to us?'

Walter stood and looked at her, his hands working nervously. His eyes filled with tears as they met hers.

'I'm sorry, Maisie,' he said. 'I'm no go, I'm afraid. I don't seem to be no use to you.'

Maisie dropped on to the bed and broke into a passion of crying.

'I'm thinking of our baby. We ought never to have started the baby—I knew it was wrong. People like us didn't never ought to have babies; never; never. Isn't there anything I can do to stop it?' She went on weeping uncontrollably. Walter stood by her. Once or twice he put out his hand, and rested it on her shoulder or head for a moment.

After a long time a knock came at the door. Walter opened it and the landlady, who lived in the basement of the house, handed him a letter. It was addressed to Walter in typewriting. He opened it and stared at it for some time, then he began to talk very quickly to Maisie.

'Look,' he said. 'Look! That'll show us not to give up hope. Look what's come—a letter from the Staff Controller at Staedtler's. It says they are interested in particulars they have heard of me from Mr. Truslove, and from my late employers. I'm to go for an interview to-morrow morning.'

By dinner-time the next day Walter was back home again, and they had engaged him.

'It seems too good to be true,' said Maisie. She laughed as she set the steaming dishes before him—and sat down herself. 'A job at Staedtler's. Well, that's one thing that will never go wrong.'

'You're right,' said Walter. 'It can't. All these build-

ing jobs are so risky and uncertain. Staedtler's is safe. This is a real job for life.'

Inside her Maisie felt the terror go right away to the very back of her mind. Warmth and sunlight filled her now, and pictures of family scenes with children and steady money coming in every week.

'I suppose you won't be working at carpentering at all now,' she said. 'Staedtler's make cycles and light cars, don't they?'

'Oh, that's a very small part of Staedtler's,' said Walter. 'They wouldn't have gone far on that. I shall be working in the main works, you see.'

'Well, what will you be making?' said Maisie.

'Didn't you know?' said Walter. Staedtler's is a munitions firm.'

We were Lovers too

WHEN Jacqueline kissed him she always shut her eyes. The lashes lay dark against her cheeks, giving just the faintest flutter as if her eyes might open. He watched the tremulous pulse in her neck, and the tumble of her dark hair as it fell on the ground ; the lovely black lustre curled against the leaf-mould, with ash-coloured twigs and dried ghost leaves clinging to it.

She put her bare arms round his neck ; one round his neck under his open shirt, the other across his back gently drawing him closer and closer till the warmth of her body flooded him through and through. His limbs felt soothed and weightless, as if they were tassels of weed borne out in a flowing pool. The leaves and twigs, interlacing high above his head, moved gently with whisper voices, and diamond points of sunlight came sparkling through the green silence under the boughs.

He watched the trembling pulse in her throat and in her temple, and the soft flood of colour that spread rose-like under the transparent shell of her skin.

Suddenly Jacqueline opened her eyes and looked at him.

‘You’re staring at me,’ she said. ‘Have you been staring at me all the time?’

Jacqueline sat up. She brushed the twigs and leaves from her lap, and began to comb her hair and powder her face.

‘There,’ she said. ‘That’s quite enough love-making.

We must go for a walk. Let's walk round the hill, and then climb up to watch the sunset before we go.'

They found their way out of the tangle of trees and bushes that covered the hill-side and, taking a soft path, of trodden mast and leaf mould, came into an open field on the side of the hill. Buttercups and long grass clustered round their ankles, and they gazed into the fresh, damp depths of the grass gemmed with flowers. The afternoon was now late and silent. Below their feet swayed the tree-tops and, beyond the nearer trees, the green and timbered landscape rolled away for mile upon mile in the golden evening light. Here and there the river flashed silver, and the spires and towers of the cathedral gleamed above the roofs of the town. The whole scene seemed to float in a golden, hazy light. Far off a train shrilled faintly and a plume of smoke threaded its line through the trees.

John looked at it anxiously.

'Do you know,' he said, 'that's the train I ought to have caught? I shan't get back till midnight now.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Jacqueline. 'Let's go right up to the top of the hill and forget all about it.'

They slowly climbed again through the trees and undergrowth, turning all the time to watch the sun as it sank. High up, they came upon the ruins of a tiny chapel lost and drowning in the verdure of the hill-side. They found a crumbling wall and buttress, an arch left hanging in the air, the stones locked and garlanded with green moss and creepers. A branching cable of ivy had wound through a single empty window, mingling its own traceries with the slender stone pilasters and trefoils.

They leant against the wall of this broken chantry facing westwards. The sun was falling now into a field of fire and flame. For a moment the whole sky seemed to be alive with jewels—rubies and rose diamonds. On every surface beside them, on grey stones, tree-trunks, on their

own faces, shone answering gleams of gold. And the tree-scape spreading beneath their feet took vague and billowing shapes in the glow of coral light.

'Do you realize,' said John, 'that this is one of the very peak moments of our life? These few weeks, these few days, we've reached the main point of being alive at all.'

The glowing sky turned a faint shade colder as he spoke, a tinge of grey creeping into all the shadows.

'The moment is when you find each other,' he said. 'Then you marry, and from then on it's a gradual fading all the time; the edge being dulled . . . the colours fading . . .'

'I can make nothing of middle-aged people,' he said. 'They seem to live on the level of stocks and shares and whiskies and sodas and indignant letters to *The Times*. But how can we ever sink to that?'

The light was fading faster and faster now. The jewels had vanished from the sky; the rosy light from the trees. The colour and the breeze grew cold. Soon nothing of the sun was left but a lilac stain and a few iron grey bars in the darkening air.

John suddenly began to see the night train journey before him. A lowering sadness fell in the air all about him, and a feeling of suppressed horror as the colour died from every leaf and blade of grass, turning from grey to still deeper shades. One or two swifts began silently darting, like black sprites, in the dusk.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's go.'

Jacqueline went on before him, and in a moment was lost to sight in the trees. Then as he turned to follow, he received a shock which made every nerve in his body recoil.

He saw that he was not alone; that for the last half-hour, as they had talked and kissed, they had been watched. Hidden in a corner of the broken building, on a pile of fallen stones, sat an old couple, unmoving, unspeaking.

Their clothes were as grey and colourless as the lichen in the dying light, their faces as lifeless horn or parchment ; and deep in their eyes was the only sign of sentience, the look of grey and sunken age, of weariness redoubled upon weariness.

Matted and uncombed hair fell from under their caps. The man's hands, grey-white as wind-parched bones, were clasped round his knees ; the woman, with bowed back and hands hidden in her sleeves, leant against him.

They sat huddled and derelict, like tattered rags bleached by a thousand suns and rains ; lifeless as cold ashes in an empty house, as white skulls of sheep on a mountain side. Yet their eyes still watched him, and a night whisper seemed to eddy on the air, words shrill as a bat-thin squeak blown trembling high and far off on the wind . . .

'We were lovers too.'

John turned. For a moment he actually felt the young blood as something hot and ruttish, running in his veins, before it turned cold. Then he fled from the place.

He Wanted a Pear Tree

THAT morning there was sunshine, the first pale sunshine of April, with dust dancing in its beams. Old James Riscoe went out into his minute garden, one of a row of yards in an East End backwater.

'Granny,' he called to his wife. 'Them crocuses have come out. Ten of 'em. There's three white, four purple, and three golden.'

'Come in,' called his wife, in a shrill voice from the kitchen. 'Come in and eat your breakfast. The crocuses'll wait.'

James looked round at the April sunshine, smiled to himself, and took a deep breath. 'My breakfast'll wait,' he called back. Four or five gardens away there was an old, bent pear tree, a last relic of days when this East End row had been an orchard. James saw that the pear tree, in the pale blue morning air, was beginning to shimmer with its first faint signs of budding. He turned and went into the dark little kitchen, still smiling.

'The garden's got going, Millie,' he said as he sipped his tea. 'Now we'll have flowers out all the time till October—please God. And I'll tell you what I've been thinking, Millie. This year I'm going to buy a pear tree myself; a real little pear tree, that we'll plant and watch grow.'

'Where's the money coming from?' said Millie. 'Won a football pool or something?'

'No,' said James, 'but we can save a penny here and a sixpence there. Easy.'

Millie laughed. She took a purse out of the kitchen drawer and shook out a sixpence or so and a few odd coppers.

'You're a silly old soft head,' she said, 'you really are. See. This has got to do us till next Friday, and I must put aside sixpence for your new boots. You just forget about your pear tree, and go out after breakfast and buy half a tin loaf from Mrs. Dyer's; and a quarter of tea and a half of the sixpenny margarine—then I think we may just about scrape through till Friday.'

James nodded and made a humorous grimace.

'All right,' he said, 'but you wait. I *will* have my pear tree, and I'll show you where I'll put him.'

The old couple went out into the garden. Both were frail and small. James was seventy, his wife a trifle younger. James's limbs were dried up and thin. His hair was white and clipped short, but under it his brown wrinkled face still had life and humour and quick changes of expression. They looked round at their garden, which alone among the row of sour and dirty backyards really was a garden. Even though there were no flowers out yet, save the ten crocus blossoms, the Riscoes' garden was glowing with a life and colour of its own.

Directly outside the back door there was a terrace, three or four bricks wide, shielded by a trellis-work from the rest of the garden. The bricks for the terrace had been coaxed and cajoled two or three at a time from various places, for James was old and unemployed. All the trellis-work was in the same way pieced together from small strips of wood—box lids split up, odds and ends found in the road. No money had been spent on it, only time and patience.

The rest of the garden, hardly more than twelve feet square, was a patchwork quilt of little beds and pathways. The pathways were fitted together from broken bricks, flat stones, oddments of coloured tiling, all worked into

a smooth and coloured mosaic. Round the beds ran stone edgings. These were made of brightly patterned and glazed tiles, of oyster shells, of pieces of coloured marble, all gathered from a hundred different places and pieced together over years with James's loving care.

At one point stood a small brown and white marble urn, one of James's most treasured finds ; at another there was a broken pinnacle in gothic style from a gate-post. In one corner where the sun never shone James had made a rockery from large stones washed blue and white. Moss and ferns grew in the crannies and the rockery was crowned, about as high as James's chest, with a broken fragment of white alabaster carved with an anchor.

James pointed to the very centre of the pattern and said to his wife :

'There you are, that's where I'm going to put my pear tree. And I'm going to make a new little raised bed for 'im with those bits of carved stone. Young Stevie's coming in this morning, and he'll like to help his old grandad do it.'

Millie still shook her head.

'We won't never have a pear tree,' she said.

'Oh, you always *were* a cheerful one,' said James.

He took a bag and set off to do the shopping, leaning on a stick as he went up the road.

The road was a dusty East End row, two dwarfed sooty lines of houses facing each other, with doors and windows opening straight on to the pavement. At the far end of the street there was a hoarding ; behind this there had been for the last ten years waste ground and rubbish tips.

To James's great surprise, he found three workmen attacking the road with picks. He stopped to look at them, noticing especially one fellow of about thirty with massive red arms and a bare chest. He sang as he worked in a whining, drawling voice pretending to be a crooner.

Presently he broke off, laughing at his own efforts, and the others laughed with him.

James smiled as he watched him, and then asked, 'What's on here, my lad?'

'New drain pipe,' said the fair man, without looking.

'New drain pipe? Who's ever putting drain pipes down in our road. I thought it had been forgotten once and for all.'

The man straightened his back, and looked at James. He had blue eyes in a red, cheerful face.

'Why,' said he, 'for the new flats of course. Ain't you heard about 'e?'

'Oh—the flats,' said James. 'On the waste ground here. Where the old piano warehouse used to be. Yes. I had heard. So they really are a'goin to build 'em at last.'

'Yes, Granpa. They're going to begin work right away. You take my tip and go and live in one. They're going to be O.K. I can tell you. Hot water laid on; wash-basins in the bedrooms. They'll make the Ritz 'Otel look like an old doss house.'

James smiled and shook his head.

'I've lived in my little house here since I was first married. Forty-five years ago. I used to work at the piano factory before it closed up. I'm too old to move now.'

'Don't you believe it,' said the other. 'They'll be pulling all the road down to put up a Woolworth's and a cinema. The whole street'll be changed in a couple of years.'

James shook his head and moved off; but his legs went suddenly weak and uncertain with dread. They seemed almost to give way and he stumbled over a mound of loose earth that the pipe-layers had thrown up. The fair man shot out a strong arm to steady him.

'Mind the old plates of meat,' he said.

James did his shopping, and when he returned home he found that his grandson, Stevie, had already arrived and was talking to his grandmother in the kitchen. The old Riscoes had only the two ground-floor rooms left out of their house nowadays. They kept to the ground floor because with that they kept the garden too.

‘Look, I’ve bought some sweets for you,’ said James.

‘Thanks, Grandad,’ said Stevie, dipping a dirty hand into the bag. ‘All sorts, is it? They’re all right.’ Stevie was ten years old. He wore a blue blazer and shorts with bare legs. He looked just like his father had looked at the same age, only the clothes were different. Stevie’s father had survived the war, but had died a slow death after it, shattered by his wounds.

‘The crocuses are up, sonny,’ said James, and they went out into the garden.

‘Bother, Grandad,’ said Stevie as he looked round. ‘I found ever such a good bit of blue and white tile for you. It might just a’gone in somewhere, and I’ve left it at home.’

‘All in good time, Stevie,’ said James. ‘If there’s one thing I ought to have learnt by now—it’s how to wait.’

‘What are you going to do with those spare bits of stone in this corner here?’ said Stevie. He began to examine them one by one. ‘Are you going to piece them into the path?’

‘No, sonny, I’ve got another notion for them. That’s just what I want you to help me with to-day.’

He explained his new idea to Stevie. He was going to take the spare stones and make a new very small raised bed in the middle of the central plot of earth.

They set to work, choosing out the stones with great care. There was a bit of moulding on three or four of them which almost joined; one was just right for turning a corner. After an hour it was finished to Stevie’s satisfaction.

'It'll do just for a start,' said James. 'But I'll have plenty more to go on with looking out for better bits of stone, and getting it all to work in exactly.'

'What flowers are we going to put in it. How about hyacinths?'

'No,' said James. 'We've only got three—and they're in pots indoors—and their fourth year, too.'

'What'd you like best of all to put there—if you could choose anything you liked in the world?' said Stevie.

'A tree. A real little tree which'd have blossoms and leaves,' said James. 'A pear tree.'

'Can you get one, Grandad?'

'Not yet. I will one of these days, though. You see if I don't. That's the height of my ambition nowadays, as they say. But I'll tell you what we'll do, Stevie. We'll collect all the bulbs of those little Spanish Irises. I've got seven. They'll make a nice show together and just fill up our new little bed.'

'Where are they!'

'In different parts, but I know exactly where they come up last year. We'll get 'em out.'

He pointed out the places, and six times he was right to an inch, but the seventh bulb was missing.

'Can't make it out, Stevie,' he said, scratching his head with earthy fingers. 'I don't make no mistakes about where my bulbs are. It must have got moved somehow.'

James went down on his knees and began to pass all the earth of the flower beds through his hands. Then Millie came out to join the search. Stevie went off to meet some other boys. He left both his grandparents on their hands and knees—methodically sifting the dark earth of the whole garden through their fingers, handful by handful.

Time was no great object to the old Riscoes. They knocked off for their midday meal. They went on with it slowly in the afternoon. They found the bulb by tea-time.

'Lucky we got it so quick,' said James. 'How on earth it got shifted I can't think.'

They talked the problem over as they lingered over their evening meal—bread and margarine and cheap red jam and tea made with condensed milk. They had made the tea extra strong. Making the tea extra strong was their one extravagance.

From that day on James found something to do in his garden every day; even if it was simply looking at his flowers, or watching the old pear tree gradually come into bud. He knew the silhouette of the pear tree and the intricate tracery of its twigs and branches, as well as he knew the pattern of stones in his footpaths.

Every day he was finding out about the prices of pear trees—dropping hints here, trying to get to know people who might find him one cheap. One week he managed to save up sixpence towards it, another week he had to spend it again.

However, every day this spring he was aware of a change in his road; a feeling of bustle and disturbance. It seemed to grow from the first day in the garden—the day when Stevie came, and the iris bulb was lost and found. The very next day the noise of pneumatic drills began on the waste ground. It came to them sometimes faintly, sometimes with a crashing roar as the wind changed.

Every morning old James passed the little group of pipe-layers now slowly working their trench along the road.

'Morning, Granpop,' the young red-faced foreman said every day, as James picked his way over the loose earth to see what they were doing. 'Wait till you see the new flats go up. That'll change the skyline for you, Granpop. Make Berkeley Square look like two penn'orth o' cheese.'

James would nod and smile at these jokes and stumble away filled with uneasiness. He bought one or two penny packets of seeds and raised them in minute greenhouses

formed by putting a broken sheet of glass over a box of earth ; out of each box he was able to transplant a few seedlings.

By the time the old pear tree was fully in blossom, the street excavations had nearly reached his house.

The pear tree blossoms fell. James's three daffodils came out and faded away. The rattle of the pneumatic drills changed to an immense iron clangour. Metallic echoes rang out over the waste land by day and night, and the steel framework of the flats began to rise against the sky. Then the work of pipe-laying came to a stop at a point fifty yards or so from the Riscoes' house, leaving a long raised weal down the road.

'Have you finished?' said James to the workmen ; he was thankful to see them go.

'Well,' said the young foreman, 'we finished just for the moment. It ain't decided yet where we've got to go with the pipes next.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, my old chum, it's like this. We're probably going to cross the road—come through this gap in the houses, see—and then work along the backyards, and get to the new flats that way.'

'Along the backyards—but you can't,' said James slowly.

'Yes ; just a matter of getting the landlords' O.K. We'll be seeing you round the back one day, Granpop.'

James made no answer. He could not speak. He muttered 'good-bye' and stumbled away. A sickening dread filled his mind, but he pushed it into the background and told Millie nothing about it. Next day the workmen had gone and the street seemed more itself again.

In May the wallflowers—four of them—came out in James's garden. All the little Spanish Irises blossomed and were over. A few bunches of phlox followed ; James's single sweet william, his two lupins and two foxgloves.

Everything in James's garden was counted in ones and twos. Presently his beds were a mass of summer green spangled here and there with blossoms. As the neighbouring plots grew more smelly and more dusty, his blossomed in the sunshine, nodded and freshened in the rain.

By now the steelwork of the flats had quite changed James's skyline. The old pear tree which formerly had stood out boldly in the middle distance was dwarfed and looked like a toy. The metallic crashing went on by day and night; brickwork began to go up between the steel girders. James's hollyhocks were rising too. The best moment of the whole year to James was when his two hollyhocks, red and white, raised their heads over the wall and showed themselves, looking larger and finer, every year to the neighbours. James knew that hollyhocks could grow as well as that only where there was a happily married couple.

One morning, as James was going up the street, he found that the pipe-laying gang had returned. The young foreman with the red face was still with them.

'Morning, Grandad,' he shouted. James nodded and smiled, but this time he would not speak. He hurried by. In the evening he noticed that the track of the pipes had switched to the right as the foreman had said it would, and was making for the gap in the houses.

Two days later the workmen disappeared from the street but he could hear their voices from his back garden. He sat for a long time on his verandah that evening, staring at his hollyhocks. They were just over the wall now.

'What is it, Dad?' said his wife, putting her chair beside his on the minute terrace. 'You sit there worrying your old head about something.'

'Nothing,' said James.

'If you could see how glum you look——'

'It's nothing,' said James.

The next day the voices of the pipe-layers were nearer. The next day after that, James going out into his garden in the evening looked round and felt as if he had been struck in the heart. He stared and stared. He felt such agony that he gave a long, half-stifled groan. The pear tree had gone.

He did not tell his wife. He left her to see it for herself. They looked at each other in silence.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'They can't hurt us. Don't be silly.'

James pushed it all away to the back of his mind. Two days later they had an invitation to spend the day with Stevie and his mother. It was seldom that they went out nowadays.

'Grandad, Gran'ma,' said Stevie when he saw them. 'How's the garden? I haven't seen it for weeks. Is them hollyhocks over the wall yet?'

James nodded. He launched into a long, careful description of his garden, telling Stevie about the red and white hollyhocks, the phlox, the one sweet william, giving him the most exact account of every blossom and every leaf.

'Tell you what, Grandad,' said Stevie. 'Friend of mine knows a bloke who might get us a rose tree quite cheap. That would be all right, eh?'

That night old Mr. and Mrs. Riscoe did not reach home again till eight o'clock. Dusk was just beginning to fall. James went straight out into his garden. He fell into a chair on the terrace and sat stricken. The whole thing had been reduced in a day to a heap of loose earth and stones. Drain-pipes were stacked up waiting to be laid. A deep trench came through, right where the hollyhocks had been; one was uprooted completely. The other had been snapped off half-way up. The gaping trench seemed to have swallowed up the whole garden. All that was left

round its edge was dust and rubbish. The stones of the pavement and edgings were all scattered, the flowers broken and stamped down and covered with mounds of earth.

Millie made him some tea but James could not touch it. He sat in the chair on the verandah, the one part of his garden that was left, staring at the wreckage. He sat till it was all half hidden by darkness and he could see only the grotesque mounds of earth looming up and, as it seemed, moving in the purple dusk.

'Stripped bare,' he muttered to himself, 'like an old dry tree in a gale. Stripped bare.'

Out of the torn-up earth and broken flowers, old pain came back to him, pain that he suffered long ago—the pain of his son's slow death after the war. The useless, job-less fag-end of his own life—bitter thoughts which he had buried in this plot of ground and hidden with his few flowers and his coloured stones. An hour went by and he dragged himself to bed—to see all night chaotic pictures of his ruined garden.

Next day, he got up at dawn and went out before the workmen came. He wandered about and sat for hours on a seat in Victoria Park, not speaking to a soul. When he got back that evening the trench in the garden was filled in. The pipes were laid, the workmen had moved on, but the garden was ruined—a muddy, trampled plot.

'I can never make it again,' he said to Millie. 'It's nothing to me now.'

For a few days James hardly spoke to his wife and never glanced at his garden. It was on the Saturday evening that a loud and unexpected knock came at the front door. At first he could not see who it was standing in the doorway; then he recognized the young red-faced workman. Unasked, the young man pushed past James and walked right through into the garden.

He put down a spade and a fork with a clang.

'Proper mess we made of it,' he said. 'I came in to help you put it all straight.'

James stared at him. He could not quite understand what he meant to do. 'Leave me alone,' he said. 'It ain't no good to me now. Just leave it alone.'

'Must a'taken you years to make,' said the young man. 'My old Dad used to like a garden, too.'

Without waiting for James, he set to work. Presently James began to join in, telling him exactly where a certain stone ought to go.

'We're in for a long job,' said the young man. 'I can see that.' He told them his name was George Townend.

On Sunday morning he came back again and worked the whole morning. During the week, James fell into listlessness and did nothing. Next Saturday and Sunday George Townend was back again—and did so much in the garden, that James began to add to the work again himself during the week. Then, on the following Saturday, George brought a clump of Michaelmas daisies with him. 'I know a gardener chap,' he explained. 'I get 'em cheap.' The next week he brought an armful of chrysanthemums.

'I never had any of these before,' said James.

'Never too late to start a new idea,' said George. 'They'll keep in flower right up till Christmas Day almost.'

'You can't ever put that pear tree back—that you cut down,' said James.

'It'd have fallen down soon,' answered George cheerfully. 'Take my word for it.'

George's visits became regular. In a week or two he became almost as interested in fitting together the mosaic of the pathway as James had ever been. One Saturday he and Stevie together spent an hour or more on their knees trying a new running pattern of blue and white, which they hid from old James. James agreed when he saw it that it

was a good new idea—and promised to finish it off by himself.

‘That’s the stuff,’ said George. ‘I’ll say good night and take the kid up to the bus stop. I want to talk to him.’

‘What about?’ said Stevie.

‘Wait and see, mate,’ said George. ‘I don’t want your grandad to hear. It’s a secret between us.’ He winked at James. But as he went he said to Stevie, ‘What d’you think your grandad would like most of all for his garden?’

A week or so later the two old people again went to spend the afternoon with Stevie and his mother, and again they did not come back till dusk was falling. James, remembering his last home-coming, went anxiously straight into his garden. He walked on to the minute terrace. Then he stopped, silent, staring.

In the middle bed that he and Stevie had made together in the early spring—the very centre of his garden—stood a small pear tree, just as he had always imagined it. The slender young tree was about eight feet high. In the gathering dusk he could see the pattern of its few thin twigs and branches and the half-dozen leaves which it still carried, though it was now October.

He stood staring at it, not moving or speaking. Then in the gloom he suddenly realized that he was not alone, that George Townsend was also in the garden, standing without moving, leaning on his spade, and looking from him to the pear tree. He found it hard to break the silence of the dusk.

‘George,’ he said at length. ‘Boy, why have you done this for me?’

‘I dunno,’ said George. ‘Nothing much in it. You see, my old Dad used to be fond of his garden, too. Sometimes I felt I didn’t take enough interest. It meant so much to him. He was taken last year.’

The darkness swallowed up his voice. But as he looked,

James saw his pear tree grow in the dusk and bear its soft spring-time blossom, which fell again to earth and was followed in turn by leaves and fruit. Then as he watched he saw the pear tree grow in size year by year—he saw the blossom grow thick, the branches heavy, and he saw that in all times and lands that young trees grow up and that old trees are cut down, that ancient buildings are levelled, and that new strange buildings take their place. He saw, too, that old men must lose the sons of their loins when they need them most. And yet that the world is full of good sons.

Young George Townend put on his coat, picked up his spade, touched James silently on the shoulder, by way of saying ‘good night,’ and he left the old man standing there, at peace in the brown dusk of his garden.

His Fortieth Birthday

DAVID RETFORD stood by his bedroom window in the doubtful sunshine of an early June morning. It was about seven o'clock. It looked as if it was going to be a cool grey day, neither wet nor fine.

He strolled over to his wife's bedside and smiled down at her. His blue eyes looked out of a face that was ageing yet still rather boyish. His fair hair was now going a little grey—so was his neat moustache. He was slightly built—rather too slightly built; with a little more bulk and height he might have been handsome.

'Don't forget,' he said to Isabel, who put her hands behind her head and looked up at him from the pillow, 'we're going down to Bill's school to-day. There are the sports, and then he's got into the final of this reading prize.'

'I know,' said Isabel. She sat up, swung her legs out of bed, stretched out her arms and yawned. 'I'm quite excited about it. I do hope he wins it. I wish he could.'

'Perhaps he will.'

'My trouble,' she said, throwing back her hair, 'is the usual trouble. What am I going to wear? Tell me.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said David. 'I leave it to you. You know I shall think you look nice, whatever you wear.'

She frowned. 'David, do try and take a little interest. If you took any real interest in me, you'd take the trouble to help me. Oh, all right, I know I'm simply boring you.'

'Of course you aren't boring me, sweetheart. And of course I take an interest in you.'

'Well, what am I to wear? I know you can't take any real interest. I always look frightful nowadays. I'm an old hag. How can I look nice!'

'But you do look nice.'

Isabel was now out of bed. She stood in front of the mirror in a crumpled nightgown, looking at her face and frowning. She also was fair and of slight build; and she also had not altered very greatly since her early twenties. However, her hair which had been blonde, or rather sandy, was now freely speckled with grey. Now it stood out untidily round her head. She had never been beautiful; but she had a wide mouth that was appealing, and a pair of grey eyes that told of quick and eager emotions, and made her whole face full of expression.

David stood behind his wife and smiled over her shoulder into the mirror.

'To *me* you look nice, darling,' he said.

'Oh, David, don't!' she said. 'You just irritate me. I look awful. Look at this hateful, hateful, wrinkle. I hate it. I loathe it. Go away, you beast. Oh, if only I had more money to look after myself. Look at my hair. It looks just like straw. I look an old hag. All the other parents at Bill's school will be so smart. Poor Bill, how awful his mother will look.'

'Now, sweetheart,' said David, putting his hands round her shoulders. 'You're just working yourself up. Don't get fussed. There's one thing which is perfectly certain, and it's this—we're going to see nobody but the parents of preparatory school boys and they'll all be our own age.'

'How awful! What a show of old hags!'

'Now cheer up. Don't be naughty. The sun's almost shining. And it's my birthday.'

'David!' said Isabel in a totally different and rather breathless voice, turning round and looking at him. 'Your birthday. And I've never kissed you or said "happy

returns" or anything. Let me take a good look at you now you're forty.'

She kissed him suddenly on the lips and strained him to her and said, 'You're the best husband any woman ever had, anywhere, at any time. I mean that. And now I'll give you my silly present.'

She gave him the present. It was a leather collar-box. The idea was to keep his stiff collars tidy in a corner of the sock drawer; there was never room to keep his things properly in separate places, and they were always being muddled up together.

'The present is splendid,' said David. 'Uncle Mark always used to have a collar box. It was green shagreen with his initials on. I always thought that to have a collar-box was the last word in grown-up opulence. Now I've got one.'

As he spoke, his mind went back to another June morning—exactly thirty years before—his tenth birthday morning. Uncle Mark was standing in a brocaded red silk dressing-gown shaving by an open window. There was a brilliant blue sky outside; the window was framed with creeper and the scent of June roses and the air of a country garden came in. On the floor against one wall was a row of perfectly polished shoes, boots, and hunting tops.

Uncle Mark talked about dogs and fishing and horses, treating him as if he were almost grown up already.

'We'll soon be making a man of you now, David, old boy,' said Uncle Mark. 'You're in your double figures now.'

By God, that was thirty years ago. Thirty years since that small boy, who was somehow still David, had heard those words, and breathed that gorgeous air and stared at that row of polished boots. He smiled to himself and went to shave in his own bathroom, drawing hot water from the geyser, and dodging from side to side as Isabel

came by to sponge her face and hands at the cold tap. The imagery of many years long past ran on and on in his mind.

At the breakfast table Isabel broke into his silence. 'You still haven't told me what to wear.'

'Well,' said David, 'what's wrong with your black coat and skirt?'

'It needs a silver fox to make it look anything.'

'Not in summer.'

'I'm sure it wouldn't be dressy enough. Everybody'll be in summer frocks and things.'

'You can't go wrong with that coat and skirt,' said David. 'That was the whole point of getting such an expensive one, wasn't it?'

Isabel shook her head and sighed.

'No,' she said. 'The coat and skirt is five years old. The skirt's been let down twice and taken up once.'

'Well, wear that new blue silk summer frock.'

'I don't like it a bit. It's cheap.'

'Well, I'm sure it'll be all right. It isn't such a fearfully smart affair after all.'

Isabel pouted gloomily and sighed. 'It's so easy for a man. That's what's always so unfair.'

David smiled and stood up.

'I'm afraid it's getting late,' he said. 'I must be running along to the office.'

'What?' she said. 'To-day? It's Saturday, and your birthday—surely you needn't go to-day?'

'I'm sorry,' said David. 'I really must go. There are one or two things that I've just got to see to.'

'Can't they wait till Monday?'

'No, they must go to-day—otherwise the customers will think they aren't getting attention.'

Isabel looked still more discontented and began arranging the salt-cellar and teaspoons mechanically in a row.

'David,' she said, 'I'm sure you're much too conscientious in your job. Why should you always be slaving for that beastly firm—and for such a miserable salary? They ought to pay you at least £1,500 a year. They're simply robbing you. Why don't you *make* them pay you more?'

'They think my £600 is pretty lavish,' he said. 'Besides, the job really doesn't run to more. The money simply isn't there to pay me more. I don't earn it.'

'I'm sure you do really,' said Isabel. 'You bet all the directors are taking three or four thousand. It's hopeless trying to get through on six hundred. If it wasn't for my extra £250 we simply couldn't do it. And that just gets swallowed up. Everything is getting so fearfully shabby. Do you know we haven't bought anything new for our home for years.'

'What about those sitting-room curtains?'

'I don't count those. They're only cheap common little cretonnes, just suburban. And do you know *all* the carpets are wearing out? What are we going to do about them?'

'My pants are hanging round me in festoons if it comes to that,' said David, laughing.

'I've mended them a million times.'

'Now look here,' said David. 'Stop grumbling and cheer up. I've got a piece of news. It might be good news. I've been keeping it absolutely under my own hat, as it's all been so vague.'

Isabel at once leaned forward eagerly, her eyes shining.

'Go on,' she said. 'What is it? Tell me all about it?'

'Well, there's a new job, all quite in the offing at present. It's some new business research bureau which is going to be run with the government grant—under the wing of the Home Office.'

'Why, David, it's just made for you. Are you going to be head of it? How much is it?'

'Well there's a job at £900—and for once I've got a little personal pull. Old Lord Trevethick has got his finger on it, and you know he's always been a good friend to me. He knew Uncle Mark very well. He thinks he can work it for me.'

'David,' said Isabel enthusiastically, 'it's lovely. Of course you'll get it and you'll get out of that beastly business job which you've always loathed. You oughtn't to be in business at all David.'

'Now, darling,' said David. 'Please—please don't get excited about it. You know what my luck's like.'

'But this time, David, you're going to be lucky. You know how psychic I am.'

David laughed and kissed her on the forehead and left for his office.

The office was quiet and not unpleasant on Saturday mornings. There was pale sunshine coming in, which made the old piece of carpet in his room look almost bright. He opened his post and dictated half a dozen letters. Then he was able to give some careful thought to a sheet of sales statistics and to make notes for a report he was going to write. All this was peaceful and in a way reassuring. He was doing his job. There were no telephone interruptions, no awful mistakes to look into, no sudden summonses from his chief.

After an hour's quiet work he heard the clocks striking eleven; he sat back in his chair and the office boy came in with a personal letter that had just come in by the mid-morning post. He saw on it the crest of a senior West End club—and he knew before he opened it that the letter came from Lord Trevethick. He felt a pulse beating in his throat. He opened it and read.

MY DEAR RETFORD,

I am sorry to give you disappointing news about the proposed new Research Bureau, but I have just heard that a man already in the Home Office has asked if he can apply.

He is a man with a distinguished record, well known to all the committee, and he is seeking a change of experience. Under the circumstances I think he's bound to be appointed.

Till this happened I had high hopes of your candidature.

David folded the letter up very slowly and carefully and put it in his pocket. One took this sort of thing very calmly at forty, he told himself. There'd be other chances for other jobs yet. After all he was only forty. Yet it was a nice little smack in the face for a birthday present. Damnation—why had he told Isabel?

At this moment the door opened and two younger men came in. One was Schofield. Schofield was the boss's nephew, and he was supposed to be learning the business. He was a big handsome fellow of about twenty-five or six. He had dark hair which was very sleekly oiled and brushed, and at the moment he was very smartly dressed for an afternoon in the country.

The other young man, Peters, was doing a five-pound-a-week job as a clerk. This morning they had come in simply to talk, and soon they were sitting on David's desk and arguing about communism and capitalism. Peters was strongly left wing and became very heated. Schofield poured suave and amused scorn on communists, capitalists, socialists, dictators, and bourgeois alike.

'Of course,' David heard him saying, 'old Retford here is an interesting case, and very typical. He is one of the old-fashioned bourgeois who are just getting squeezed out. His sort have owed their position and way of life to large private incomes for generations. When they have to face the world with nothing but their own abilities very few of them can really stand the pace. Retford here has a son at an expensive prep. school; he knows country people in

country houses ; and other people in town houses. But if only he'd make up his mind to go and live in the suburbs and do the suburban things and let his little boy talk with an accent, he'd be much happier. Wouldn't you, Retford !'

David laughed. He was giving the conversation just enough surface attention to be dimly aware of what was being said. Schofield was wonderfully self-assured.

'The real trouble with the whole of that class,' said Peters dogmatically, 'is that they won't fight. So many of them have the right point of view intellectually. But will they risk one atom of their social position to fight for what they really know to be right and true ? They simply won't fight. Why is it, Retford ?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Retford, 'I've fought a bit in my time, you know, Peters. I fought in a war once. That's how I got this arm of mine all messed up.'

'Yes,' said Peters. 'But then you were just doing what you were told. *That's* not what I mean by fighting.'

For a few minutes David lost the sense of their remarks completely. He heard the sound of their voices but he did not know what they were saying. There was a time, after he first came back from the front, when he used to see mutilated corpses in khaki lying on the pavements of London. They were so real and horrible he used to try and step over them, and hide his eyes from them.

The others went on talking. Presently a clock struck twelve and David stood up to go.

'Come and have a beer,' said Schofield.

'Yes, come on,' said Peters.

'No, thanks,' said David. 'I must get along.' He went off to the tube station.

'Do you think he was offended ?' said Schofield over the beer.

'Can't be helped,' said Peters. 'People have to face facts.'

At about half-past three David parked his car, among the cars of the other parents, in a field near to David's school. The field had been set aside especially for the purpose, and an attendant in a white coat and peaked cap gave them a ticket.

This was a touch of lavishness that was typical of Borland's School. There was a feeling of lavishness about the whole place. The main building was a large nineteenth-century house with a long irregular red-bricked and gabled front, built more or less in the Jacobean style. To this had been added the school's own small chapel, swimming-pool, gymnasium, and speech hall. The speech hall would be in use later on in the afternoon for the reading prize.

The buildings stood on a wooded hillside which sloped down to a small valley—a flat stretch of meadowland enclosed by woods all round. Here the playing-fields had been made. Borland had taken over the school from his father—and succeeded in thirty years in turning it from an ordinary preparatory school into one that was famous. He was a tall and rugged man with a mop of white hair and a loud voice. He was less like a schoolmaster than an old political warhorse, whom time had mellowed into geniality.

Everybody agreed that there was a touch of genius about Mr. Borland. David and Isabel had been thankful, after much searching, to find a school for Bill that seemed fairly free and easy, where they felt Bill would be happy. Yet it was not in any way open to the charge of being a crank school.

This middle course was Borland's particular skill. He appealed to parents with progressive ideas about education, but he appealed also to parents who would sooner have sacrificed their children to Moloch than have done anything unconventional. The only thing wrong with the school from the point of view of David and Isabel was that

they had never realized quite how expensive it was going to be till Bill was well settled into it.

They left the car and as they strolled down the hill and entered the crowded playing-field they felt slightly as if they were walking into a native village which they had found in the middle of a jungle.

As soon as they entered the arena David realized that Isabel would regret that she had not put on her coat and skirt. The sky was still grey and overcast. The crowd was tweed-clad, and everyone's clothes were most expensively unobtrusive. Isabel in her light-coloured coat and flowered frock was not quite right.

In the midst of the crowd they found Mr. Borland and shook him by the hand. He greeted them a little vaguely and was caught up at once by some other parents. A few minutes later Bill had seen them. He was fair, blue-eyed, and slight, like his father. He was now in his last year at Borland's.

'Hullo,' said Bill.

'Hullo, Bill,' they answered. They felt strangers to each other in the school surroundings.

'The sports will be over fairly soon,' said Bill. 'I'm an awful ass not to have got into any of the finals. I'm no good at sprints at all, but I *almost* got into the final of the half-mile.'

'Bad luck,' said David. 'Still, you had a good try.'

They walked towards the track that had been marked out on the grass with white pegs. Chairs were drawn up beside the finishing straight.

'The half-mile will be starting in a few minutes,' said Bill. 'Let's watch it.'

They sat down, the parents on chairs, Bill on the grass beside them.

'Why don't you sit on a chair?' said Isabel. 'There are plenty about.'

'No, I won't, thanks,' said Bill. 'People would see me.' David nodded and understood.

'But there's no rule against it, is there?' said Isabel.

'Of course not, Mother.'

'Well, you needn't worry so much what other people are going to think. Besides, the grass may be wet.'

'Dry as a chip, Mum,' said Bill. 'I'd sooner stop here.'

'Tell us about this reading prize that's coming after tea,' said David. 'Do you think you'll win it?'

'Shouldn't think so,' said Bill. 'It's rather silly, really.'

'But you've got into the final of that,' said his mother. 'That's good, isn't it?'

'Oh, I dunno,' said Bill, and tearing up a piece of grass, he began to chew it, and turned away from his parents.

'Oh, *Bill*,' said Isabel, 'don't be such a little oyster. Dad and I want to hear about it. We really do.'

Bill, making an effort, answered them, but kept the blade of grass between his teeth as he talked.

'Oh, well,' he said, 'it's like this. There's a boy here called Raymond Martin. Old Borland is a friend of his grandfather, Sir Philip Martin, and he's supposed to be a great Shakespearian actor or something. Anyhow, Sir Philip Martin's put up this prize for reading aloud. I just thought I'd go in. We had a sort of tryout two days ago, and they picked me and two other chaps to do it in public to-day, worse luck.'

'But, Bill,' said Isabel, 'how lovely. And how good of you to have been picked. Do you feel nervous?'

'Why should I feel nervous?' said Bill, between clenched teeth. 'I'm not going to be hurt.' He scowled at the grass.

'That's the right idea, old boy,' said David. 'Just do your best and hope for the best.'

'I expect you'll win,' said Isabel.

'No,' said Bill. 'Horsley is bound to win.'

‘Who is Horsley?’

‘Don’t be silly, Mum. You know Horsley. He’s captain of cricket—he won the quarter-mile yesterday and you’ll see him win the half in a few minutes. He’s jolly good at everything.’

At this moment a young master came along and said cheerfully, ‘Hullo, Bill. I’ve been looking for you all over the shop. Would you like to run in the final of the half-mile.’

Bill began to get on his feet but stopped on his knees and said, ‘Has anyone fallen out, then?’

‘Yes, Turner’s twisted his ankle in the high jump.’

‘Not much use, is it?’ said Bill.

‘Yes, run of course,’ said the young man. ‘Always go for things if you get the chance. Come along, I’m collecting the runners now.’

Bill got up. David could see a pulse beating in his neck. He knew just the curious weak feeling which Bill had suddenly begun to feel in his stomach. Bill turned round, made a grimace at his parents, and dashed off. Presently they saw the eight runners lined up at the start. All the boys wore white singlets and shorts and had bare legs. David watched Bill standing ready at one end of the line, while at the other was Horsley. Horsley was a brown-skinned boy with dark curly hair and an attractive smile. They all stood silent with intent serious faces. Then the pistol banged, and they were off.

It was two laps of the grass track and, as half a mile is a long race for boys under fourteen, they went round at a slow pace. Bill seemed to be running quite easily with the others.

Now they went away from the crowd over to the far side of the ground. David filled his lungs with a deep breath as he watched them running. The scene became suddenly a jewel-like cameo—held, as it seemed, minute and

far away in the dark brilliance of a lens. There was the wide stretch of green grass with the trees beyond, under the cool grey summer sky, and poised at a corner were the white-clothed runners. As David watched he seemed to see a glimpse of the whole course and purpose of these boys' lives ; and his vision seemed to take Bill and these other boys out of boyhood, to a time when they would be young men struggling with the problems of life ; and then men with wives and children of their own. And for a moment David hardly knew whether all his life, since the time when he had been at school himself, had not been a dream.

Then the boys came around again to the seats. He heard again the sound of their running feet, the murmur of the talking voices all around him. He let out his breath in a long sigh. Isabel whispered, 'Perhaps Bill will win after all.'

But as she said it Horsley moved up to the front and began to increase his pace. Soon the boys were tailing out, all struggling, and all losing ground to Horsley. Then Horsley came around into the finishing straight and broke the tape, running strongly and easily. The others struggled home, and Bill, desperately winded, finished last but one.

The parents clapped, the boys shouted, and then there was a general move towards the tea-tent. Bill went off to change his clothes. And after tea everyone strolled up to the school buildings and took their seats in the speech room, the parents in front, and the boys behind. It was a small hall, panelled in new oak, which held the whole school of about eighty boys and a hundred or more visitors. Mr. Borland, Sir Philip Martin, and the three boys who were competing in the reading prize took their places on the platform.

Mr. Borland made an introductory speech. All the time

David felt a mounting tension and nervousness, and wondered how Bill was feeling up on the platform. The three boys, who were now clothed in grey flannel suits, looked very solemn.

Bill had to read second and Horsley last ; the other boy led off. Three pieces had been chosen by Sir Philip, and each boy had to read the same three pieces in the same order. It was explained that they had been given no coaching or advice of any kind. The pieces were varied, and David thought well chosen for boys' voices.

The first passage came from the Elizabethan poet Ford, and it described a musical duel between a boy flute-player and a nightingale. There followed the story of David and Goliath from the Bible, beginning with the words 'And Saul armed David with his armour and put a helmet of brass upon his head.' Lastly came a breezy naval scene from Captain Marryat.

The first boy who read was rather wooden. He read well, but without any particular interest. Now came Bill's turn. He walked to the front of the platform, announced his passage, as the boys had been asked to do. His voice was slightly husky and he evidently felt very nervous.

However, as soon as he began to read his nervousness seemed to go and David saw, with a thrill of pleasure, a Bill whom he had never known before.

His voice was clear and musical. He soon put down the book and repeated Ford's lines by heart, fixing his eyes on the back of the room as if he could see there the images he was describing. There was nothing showy, no attempt at acting, yet he lost himself completely in what he was doing ; and his voice and spontaneous feeling for the poetry quickened an emotion in the lines that went far beyond their surface quaintness—an emotion that the poet had felt himself perhaps in writing these words, and that the boy now brought to life again.

A nightingale.
Nature's best skilled musician undertakes
The challenge, and for every several strain
The well-shaped youth could touch, she sang her own.
He could not run division with more art
Upon his quaking instrument, than she,
The nightingale, did with her various notes.

When Bill had finished the whole passage there was a silence ; then there was no clapping but a murmur of appreciation and pleasure among the parents. Isabel caught David's hand and gave it a squeeze. He heard a white-haired lady next saying, ' Charming, charming—that boy's an artist.'

Bill went on with David and Goliath ; and then the scene from Marryat, both of which David thought he did well. At the end he received a generous burst of applause.

Then it was Horsley's turn. He came to the front of the platform, and began the nightingale passage with perfect self-confidence. He read the verse well, but, David felt, without any of that unexpected inner emotion that Bill had found in the lines. David and Goliath, and the Marryat passage, he felt, were overdone by Horsley. The boy was clever and perfectly himself, but David thought he was a little cheap. He, too, received plenty of applause, especially from the other boys.

Now the elderly Sir Philip Martin got up to announce his verdict. It was some years since he had retired from acting. He was silver-haired and slightly senile. No sooner had he begun his speech than David had an uneasy feeling that he meant to award the prize to Horsley. He listened to Sir Philip's words, gritting his teeth and with a sinking heart.

' Now all three did very well,' said Sir Philip in his ageing voice, ' but the first boy, and I'm sure he will not mind my saying so, was a little lifeless and wooden. The second

boy,' he glanced down at his notes, '—the second boy, Retford his name is, read very nicely. I should like to congratulate you, Retford, on the very clear, smooth way in which you read, or rather recited the lines from Ford. But again I thought in the two other passages there was a little lack of feeling in Retford. He did not seem to find the stories very exciting. Supposing it was one of you boys who had killed Goliath, he would hardly have told us about it so calmly. I think he had not ever really seen that David was just a real boy—a little older than some of you.

'Therefore I think you will all agree with me that the prize ought to go to Horsley. He not only read well, but he read with feeling. He read as if these things really mattered to him. He read with eagerness, in fact with something of the very same spirit that helped him to win that half-mile so splendidly earlier this afternoon.'

At these words David groaned inwardly and while everybody was clapping a cold leaden weight descended on his heart.

'What a hopeless old idiotic fool,' Isabel whispered to him. 'He's so old he's gone childish.' And as they went out of the hall David heard the white-haired lady saying, 'Well, I don't really agree with Sir Philip. I, myself, should have given the prize to that second boy.'

When they were outside Isabel went to find Bill, but David went to speak to Borland, the headmaster. After standing in the crowd for some minutes he managed to isolate him.

'Well,' said David to Borland, 'I'm sorry Bill didn't pull off the prize. Bad luck, wasn't it?'

'Yes—yes,' said Borland. 'Still, he did very well, I thought. He read very nicely indeed. And he did quite well to run in the final of that race, too.'

David nodded. Mr. Borland was slightly preoccupied

in smiling and nodding to the other parents. 'Good-bye,' he kept saying, 'I hope you've enjoyed it.'

'About Bill——' said David. 'Don't you think it would be rather good for him to *win* sometimes? I mean he's always doing fairly well, coming in second and so on. I sometimes feel if he could once win it might start him being much more successful.'

'Possibly,' said Borland. 'But still I shouldn't worry about that, Mr. Retford. There's heaps of room in this world for people like Bill, isn't there? He's a bit quiet, but he's always trying. He's always trying hard. The world doesn't need brilliant people only.'

'I suppose not,' said David. 'And how about his school work? Any use his trying for a scholarship?'

'Well, there's no harm in trying,' said Mr. Borland. 'But——'

At this moment Horsley's mother and father came up, and with them old Sir Philip Martin. Borland turned to them, greeting Mr. and Mrs. Horsley heartily. Mrs. Horsley had on an immaculate black coat and skirt edged with braid. She wore a double silver fox fur. Horsley's father was six foot two and broad. He had a handsome florid face and he wore a red carnation in his buttonhole.

They began talking to Borland in loud cheerful voices.

'Well,' said Mr. Horsley, 'the kid hasn't done so badly to-day, has he? I must say this reading business is a new one on me. He told me he only went in for it on the spur of the moment—partly as a joke—just to see if he could do it——'

Horsley's father laughed. David hung about for a minute or two thinking Borland would introduce him as the father of the boy who had been second in the reading prize. But Borland was quite taken up with the Horsleys and Sir Philip. After a while it seemed undignified to wait any longer, so David went to find his family and to

say good-bye to Bill, and to try and cheer him up about the reading prize.

Oh, hell ! he thought. To hell with that thrice-damned and doddering old fool of an actor. Why should he have done this to Bill ? Why should he have given the prize to something that was showy and second best ? ‘Bad luck, Bill,’ he would have to say. ‘You did jolly well, old man—just keep on trying. That’s the idea ; keep on trying, that’s the thing that really matters in this life—keep on trying. It doesn’t really matter about the prizes. Just keep on trying.’

Five Marriages

I. Poor Man's Divorce

'MARRIAGE,' said Mrs. Jolliffe as she settled down for a chat, 'Marriage; that's a funny old game, ain't it? Funniest old game in the world. Adam and Eve started it in the garden of Heathen, and it's been going on ever since.'

She took a drink from her glass of stout and nodded.

'These Sultanas in Harems,' she said. '*That* ain't marriage; and I don't call it natural neither. And these Hollywood film stars and all their divorces. That's not what I mean by marriage; and I call it a bit nasty.'

'I don't say that I'm, in particular, a religious woman, though I did use to speak at Dad's chapel meetings—but what I mean by *marriage* is two people cleaving together man and wife, thirty or forty years—and seeing their children grow up. Yes, dearie, that's what I call natural.'

Mrs. Jolliffe smiled and sighed at the same time. She is a big handsome woman, sixty if she is a day; but she still enjoys life, her cheeks are pink and firm, her arms are red and round and strong. You'd say forty years of married life had done her no sort of harm.

'I've seen all my four girls grow up and get married,' she said. 'I never had a boy. And I wouldn't say one of those girls had had just a ordinary sort of marriage.'

'Take my Lottie—that's my first one. What's Lottie short for? Why, Charlotte of course! Yes, I know it's a old-fashioned sort of name. Lottie says to me herself

often : " Why do you want to give me a soppy name like that ? "—but as I tell her we did it to please my old Aunt, and she left us her brass bedsteddle, which I and my old man still sleep on.

' Well, my little Lottie—How I've prayed and cried over that child. Time when she had the croup I thought I should 'ave died meself. Then how we used to dress her up in pretty frocks, and give her toys and kid ourselves we weren't spoiling her. She was such a pretty child—dark she was, with black hair and long curling lashes and bright cheeks.

' She could be just as sweet as cherry-pie when she chose ; and sometimes be so aggravating I could have screamed. Then she'd put her arms round my neck again and kiss me.

" All right, Lottie," I'd say, " I can't help but forgive you, but I believe I ought to take a stick to you yet."

' And perhaps I ought to 'ave. Anyway, she grew up just as headstrong as they're made, and directly minute she was gone sixteen or seventeen she was after the boys—and not the good ones either.

' And the one I particularly mistrusted was young Jeff Anderson. He was a bad boy, always had been. Always in trouble.

' He'd been up before the magistrate when he was fourteen for stealing a bicycle.

' I can tell you I was full of care for her then, and often when she came home late I began to think funny things and wondered what would come of it.

' My old man used to storm at her, and she'd just look at him cool as brass and say nothing.

' I wasn't so much worried about the wrongs or rights of her goings on, but I couldn't bear to see her made unhappy, by that low-bred Jeff. He seemed to chuck his money around and he was a fine built fellow. But he had a scowl on 'im like a glumpot—and I never did care for a

glowering face. Many's the night I laid awake and cried over Lottie then—fearing the very worst.

'So it was almost a relief when she comes to me and tells me one night :

"Well, Mums, me and Jeff is going to get married."

"Oh, Lottie!" I said; and that's all I could say. And later I collected my wits and said :

"Has he got a job?"

"Yes," she said. "Driving a lorry."

"Sounds a bit uncertain—but perhaps he'll do well."

'So there I was making my preparations for Lottie to wed, and trying to think Jeff was just a nice ordinary boy and they was going to settle down and be happy. And all the time at the back of my mind I felt :

'I don't like him. He's going to make her unhappy. Why can't she be marrying some decent chap. But, my dear, what could I do?'

Mrs. Jolliffe shook her head and sighed.

'What can a mother do? What could I say to her that she'd 'ave heeded. So I just had to let things take their course. Then one day they slipped off and got married at a register office—and there it was; not a wedding dress, not a scrap of confetti nor nothing nice about it.

'Well, at first it seemed all right. They loved each in their way, and Jeff used to look at her as if he'd like to eat her. But that sort of thing can't last and in a year they was beginning to have rows—and real smash-up rows they were, too.

'Jeff used to come home drunk. He didn't seem to work much, and one day he got pinched and given six months for thieving a big lot of petrol along with some other chaps.

'Lottie came back to me, and I thought, "Well, that's the end of that marriage! Now I have to clear up the mess, and put things straight for her."

‘But no, I was wrong. It was only then I began to see what that marriage was really made of. Lottie wasn’t going to give in. There was never a word of complaint from her. “I’ll get a job,” she said, “and keep a home going for him.”

‘So she buckled to, and got a job, and when Jeff came out they made a new start.

‘But, bless you, if a chap’s wrong in one way he’s wrong in another. Lottie put up with his drunkenness, with his low company, with his getting pinched—but when it came to him going with another woman, she took it pretty hard.

‘It made her suffer to think she’d given up so much for him, and he went with some cheap two-penny bit. I thought she’d come home to me, but once again I was wrong.

‘She came to see me with Jeff; five years it was after they was first married. And she said to me just as cool as she might say “Pass the bread and butter”:

“Well, Mum, Jeff and I are going to get divorced. If he wants to go with this Rosie he’d better be quit of me.”

“Divorced!” I said. “Now, Lottie, let’s talk sense. Divorce ain’t for people like you. Divorces cost money—and you ain’t got any. Apart from that I don’t know the firstmost thing about getting divorced.”

“I’ve found out all about it, Ma,” she said. “It costs five pounds.”

“Five pounds,” I said, “but that’s wicked. You can get married for less than that. Besides, you ain’t got it—nor likely to have.”

“We’re going to save it,” says Lottie. “Jeff’s got a job—and I’m going to keep him straight and sober and look after him and help him save it.”

‘So for the next few months they settled down.

‘Jeff not having any money to spend, had to keep out of pubs, and that kept him out of low company: and the

girl he'd gone off with didn't seem to want him either without no money. And every week Lottie and he put a shilling or two in their divorce-box as they called it—till after several months they'd got the money—all earned honest too.

'Then one day Lottie turned up here at home.

"We've done it," she said. "We've got the money—and I've left him with it."

'And this time, poor girl, she really did break down. She put her head on her arms on my kitchen table and sobbed and sobbed. "Poor Lottie," I said—and I can see it as plain as a pikestaff now. It was a hot summer day—with the flies a-buzzing round. And I stood and stroked her hair.

'Then suddenly who should come in but Jeff.

"Oh, keep away from us," said Lottie.

'And Jeff said :

"Look here, Lottie ; look here, Ma. This seems mad—to throw all this money away. I been to a lawyer, and it'll take months yet. I don't want the ruddy divorce. I want Lottie to come away for a holiday with me and let's blue all this money. Come on, Lottie. I love you. I always shall."

'And the next minute they was clinging together and kissing, like they used to five years before.

'Then they went off to Margate and blued the divorce money. It was a second honeymoon, and when they came back they looked at each other like lovers. Next year their first child came : now they've got three.'

Mrs. Jolliffe drew a deep breath. Her large bosom swelled gently up and slowly sank again.

'Yes,' she said. 'That was the turning point in Lottie's marriage. They're still together.

'I don't say it's been all even going since then ; but if you see what I mean, *it makes a real marriage* : not a shining

ideal perhaps—but then, are there ideal people in this funny old world?

‘What I mean is—they were twenty-eight when they made a fresh start, not just kids. They’d fought together and they’d learnt some sense off each other that no one else would learn them. I won’t say Jeff is always on the straight now, but Lottie knows him. You see she knows just what is good and bad in him. She knows whatever happens, he’ll always come back to her. He’ll always think more of her, than of anybody else in this world. Nothing can part them now—not in this life.’

2. *Eva Commits Bigotry*

‘YES, dear,’ said Mrs. Jolliffe one evening, ‘I’d like to have a glass of stout with you. I’m much obliged. I don’t find as stout is too heating in this close weather. That’s what some folks say, but it seems to go cool enough down my gullet.’

‘I’ll just kick me shoes off and set in me stocking feet, it’ll be more comfortable.’

‘I’m just back from Greenwich, off a river-boat. I been to see my Eva—my second daughter, she is. It’s nice to see Eva with her four kids. She’s got a happy home now though it wasn’t always that way. Didn’t I never tell you about Eva?’

Mrs. Jolliffe took a sip out of the stout, and began :

‘Eva favours her dad in looks. She’s fair and she’s fat. I won’t say she’s not a good-looking woman either—though not to my taste so much as some.’

‘Eva was always a biddable child, and I never looked for no trouble with her when she grew up. When she was about twenty or so she was walking out with young Eddie Tasker. The Taskers are a nice steady lot, as always paid their way ; and we was most pleased with Eddie, though

I don't say he'd 'ave set *me* on fire as a girl. He was a bit of a Harry Longshanks as we used to say in the country.

'One day I says to Eddie :

" "When are you going to get married, Eddie?" and he said, "I don't know as Eva really means to have me after all."

'So I went to Eva and said to her, "Why don't you take and marry your Eddie? You can't keep a good chap on the dangle like this. 'Tain't fair."

'Eva twitched her shoulders and looked cross.

" "Let me alone," she said. "I ain't got to marry Eddie that I know of."

" "No," I said, "you ain't got to do anything that's for your own happiness, if you think it's clever not to. Have you got anything against Eddie?"

" "He's dull," she said.

" "Dull? Well," I said, "what do you expect him to be. The Marx brothers?"

'Well, after that Eva seemed to take a stubborn fit. And when those fair fat ones take a stubborn fit they're like donkeys.

'It was my belief that Eva was jealous of Lottie and her showy marriage with her Jeff. And Eva just wanted to show us she was as clever as Lottie. But that ain't no way to get married. You ought to marry a chap because you feel drawn to him for his own true self—not because of some silly fancy idea in your head.

'Presently Eva gets hold of another chap, Ronald Everett; where she picked him up I can't say. But certainly he was a showy piece and he quite took dad in.

'Ronald was six foot two and he had a handsome face and black wavy hair; he'd been in the Coldstream Guards and he talked like a gentleman.

'When Eva brought him to our little house I could see she felt quite ashamed of us.

"It's all very quaint," he says.

'And after he'd gone I says to Eva :

"What's he do for a living?"

"He's got a little money of his own," said Eva.

"Oh," I said, "he's living on his dad."

'Well, I argued to myself, if he's a gentleman he don't really mean no good by Eva—and if he wants to marry Eva, then he's pretending to be something which he isn't.

'Then, one day Eva disappeared, and we got a letter from her saying she'd gone off to marry Ronald Everett at Gretna Green.

'Yes, you may well smile. Of all the soft ideas! Thought they was play-acting, I suppose. P'r'aps they thought we was going to chase 'em in a post-shay, like on the pictures.

'Well, there they were, anyway: married. I didn't see much of Eva for a year or so. Then they came to London, and settled down quite near us. I asked Eva to come and see us and it seemed funny to me the way she always said she was too busy to come.

"Surely to goodness," I said, "your palace or castle or whatever you live in can look after itself for a day while you come and see your old Ma: or have you grown too tall for us nowadays?"

"Oh, Mum," says Eva, and I could see her eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Mum, it ain't that, I promise you."

"Jonnock?" I says.

"Yes, jonnock," she said.

'Well, by going on asking her I found out where the wind was blowing from. Eva had a place—yes, she was working to keep 'em both. And they lived in a single bed-sitting-room in a pretty poor street.

'Then six months later she had a baby—my very first grandchild it was—and the truth had to come out. They'd

got no money at all—so I had 'em to live with us, though it was a crowd.

'Then, dearie, I found out what sort of a fellow this Ronald was—and I never see such a lummocking great sammy-soft in all me days.

'Do you know he used to make his face up? He was as pale as a ghost really: and he used to spend hours staring in a glass and combing his hair and his little moustache. A hulking great chap of six foot two if you please.

'And then he used to lay in bed all day sometimes—all through a summer's day he'd lay in bed and see Eva and everyone of us go out to work.

"Get up, you great lazy-bones," I said to him one day. "Ain't you never heard of the ant and the slug-a-bed?"

"I'll be going out on business later on," he says in a haw-haw voice. "I must just shampoo my hair."

"You're a big shampoodle yourself," I told him.

'Then he has some cards printed with "Captain R. Everett—late Coldstream Guards" on 'em and "Racing Trainer and Turf Specialist" in the corner, and all it ever meant was he was runner to a street bookie and used to pick up a few bets in pubs for a pal of his.

'And while they was living with us Eva began to see Eddie Tasker again. He was still unmarried—and I could see he still loved Eva. So I thought I ought to talk to her.

"You look out, going about with Eddie Tasker," I said. "You're playing with fire."

"If Eddie's fire," said Eva, "I'm a salamandal."

'And she just laughed.

'Well, this went on for a year or so, with them living in my house. Then along came Eva's second baby. "It's no good," I said to her, "you'll have to clear out: there's room for one family in this house but not two."

'So poor Eva had to pack off, and they lived in a pretty poky sort of way in one room.

' I think she still loved Ronald in a way, though why she did you may well ask. His brain wasn't much good, so I suppose she thought she'd make the best of his body.

' But it was a strain on her slaving away as she did, and often I worried, and wondered what was to become of her later on.

' And then one day Ronald pops off—does the Johnny Scarper on her, just disappears ; the weeks went on into months, and I felt certain he'd met some other woman and kidded her with his fine stories—thinking life wasn't so blooming comfortable with Eva, not now she had two of his kids.

' Well, at first—this was a big shock for Eva, but at the end of a year she saw it was a good riddance and she was better off without him.

' Then she began to go out with Eddie Tasker again, and I thought, well it ain't right, and she's a married woman, but we mustn't be too hard on her. But she seemed so bold and brazen about it—and that I didn't like.

' " Life's spoiling her," I thought. " What a shame—stupid she always was, but I never should have thought she'd turn out bad."

' Then one evening I went round to see her and I thought I saw Eddie Tasker coming away. And then I saw a man's cap in her room and braces, and a razor on the wash-stand. Well, I thought, that is a bit thick. I'd 'ave thought better of Eddie. I'm not going to see my Eva behave like a common bed-switcher. So I began to talk, and I says :

' " Oh, Evy dearie, if only you'd taken my advice six years ago and married Eddie Tasker then."

' " That's all right, Ma," she says, " don't you worry."

' " But I must worry," I says.

' " Ah, no," she says. " I have taken your advice and I married Eddie Tasker at the register office yesterday morning."

"Eva!" I said. "Eva, you bad wicked girl. You can't do that. That's bigotry. You've committed a legal act of bigotry and you'll get put in gaol."

"No, I won't," she said. "You see, I never was married to Ronald. He spoofed me about it, you see—so I spoofed you. I wouldn't face up to it. So now I'm really and truly married to Eddie."

"Oh, Eva!" I said, and I hardly knew whether to be more shocked or pleased. To think she'd been living out of wedlock all these years.

'But then Eddie comes back, and I gave him as big a hug as if he'd been my own son.'

'So they've settled down and live as happy as you please now. She's got two of Eddie's kids as well now. And she's getting fatter. Why, she's almost as big as I am, though she's barely forty yet.'

3. *Trial by Jury*

MRS. JOLLIFFE let herself drop on to the bench in the private bar.

'Ah, dearie me,' she said, fanning herself with a folded-up paper. 'My old man's been telling me off all evening. So I told him if you want to sing a roarotorio you can do it alone by yourself. I won't listen. So here I am.'

'Ta, dear,' she said to the pot-boy as she took her stout.

'Still, you ought to be content with the husband you've got,' she went on.

'That's just what I've been saying to my daughter Lily. She's been grumbling about her Herbert. So I told her to count her blessings.'

'Yes, Lily's happily married really; but when she first took up with Herbert Johnson I said, "Don't you go marrying a boxer, Lily."

'He was only about nineteen when we first knew him—

and he was already a boxer ; mad on boxing he was. He just couldn't keep his two fists to himself.

" " See here, old gal," he said to me one night, " I make a lead with my left like this, and then you duck, and then I comes across with my right, and there you lay on the rory-o-more ; eight, nine, ten and out."

" " Out my way, you young shrimp," I said. " And if you try any of your boxing tricks on me I'll box you across my knee."

' He only weighed about nine stone to my twelve.

" " Oh, no, you don't," he says, and he dances about and chucks me twice under the chin and tickles me in the ribs, and I can't lay a hand on him.

' Still, Herbert Johnson was always a nice kid, a proper little cockney sparrow—and used to keep us in splits of laughter. My Lily always liked him especially and she's the same sort as he is, a little Jenny wisp of a thing, bright and chirpy, and always laughing about nothing.

" " I want to marry Herb," she said one day. " What do you and Dad think ?"

' " Marry, Herb," I said. " Don't you go and marry a boxer, Lily. You make him give up boxing and take a proper job, that'll show if he really loves you. He won't box himself nor you into a fortune. I'm sure of that."

' Well, in time Herb promised to give up his boxing if he could have Lily and I tell you I was really pleased. Both my elder girls had hooked off suddenly and I was dying to see one of my daughters a proper bride in a church.

' So a few months later we had a marriage—all done from my house—as nice and pretty as you would wish, with Lily in white satin and Herbert in a new blue suit. We kept up the party till six the next morning.

' Herb's father had a greengrocer shop, and he promised to take Herb into it. All was well for a bit, but it seems Herbert has boxing in his blood and can't keep his hands to

himself at all. One morning he had a little argument with his dad about six pounds of twopenny potatoes that Herb had let go for a penny a pound—and Herb ends by dotting his father in the eye.

“I can’t help it,” said Herb, “my fists just lace out by themselves.”

‘So old Mr. Johnson got cross and threw him out, and he said, “Herb, I’ll stock you up with a costermonger’s barrow to start you, and after that you can fend for yourself. If you don’t have a partner, you can’t hit him, so you’d best be on your own.”’

‘Well that didn’t last long because Herbert managed to pick a quarrel with a customer about some change, so he dotted the customer and the police cleared them both off and Herb lost his coster’s licence.

‘So he took to boxing again, and he was always dragging Lily around to see him fight or to some training camp : and he taught her to spar with him and she used to put on a sweater and dodge and duck and bob about like one of the best. You’d have laughed to see her at it.

‘But he never seemed to get anywhere though once or twice he was on the verge of big things. But he said he couldn’t never learn to pull his punches properly.

‘So then he took up with a cheap travelling booth that went traversing round the country like a circus. Well, this was steady pay but was no life for poor Lily. It was all right for Herb ; he’s the sort of chap that can sleep on a clothes line, but she had two miscarriages along of the racketing about, and presently Herb got himself into trouble once again.

‘This time he had a quarrel with the boss of the boxing booth and dotted *him* on the earhole. So his boss said :

“All right, young Herbert. I don’t pay boxers to box me—so you can hop it.”

‘Then his dad helped him again and stocked him up in

a little greengrocery shop of his own. And Herbert promised faithfully never to dot anyone again. And Lily, thanks to settling down in one place, managed to go her full time for a change, and had her first baby.

'A few weeks ago all seemed fine, and Herbert pops his head into my kitchen door one day and says :

"Hullo, Ma, how do you like my new tit-for-tat?" He always will bring out his blessed rhyming slang for me, because I never heard it before I got married and came to London, and it has me beat half the time.

"Your hat's all right," I said. "Made some money, have you?"

"Come and have a cup of Rosy Lea at our place," he said, "and we'll tell you."

'Well, he's bought this new hat and he's pleased as Punch simply because he's had a call to serve on a jury.

"You see," he said, "I'm a respected citizen now."

"I'd be careful how you go getting mixed up with the police," I said. "They'll put you in a cell soon as look at you."

"No fear, Ma," he says. "I'm on the side of the law this time."

'So the next week Lily and I go to the courts to see Herbert sit on a jury and to keep an eye on him for his own sake.

'And a very interesting case we heard too. It was all about a poor lad as lost three fingers of his right hand in a factory machine. His lawyers argued it's all the employer's fault, and their lawyers argue that it was the boy's own fault; that he'd been messing about, and that his hand wasn't half as bad as he made out, and that they'd offered him money, but he wanted altogether too much.

'It seemed to me that it was quite a nice little lot for our Herb to sort out, and I couldn't really tell you which of them I thought was right.

'Anyhow, it seems Herb thought he knew well enough. He said it was all the employer's fault, and he said give the kid a thousand quid for total loss of his best fist, for that's what it come to.

'Well, it seems Herbert got all the other chaps round to his way of thinking except one big fat man whom he couldn't make budge an inch. This chap says the boy only needs twenty pounds for a month or two's work lost : and he kept saying to Herb, "You've got to look at this from the point of view of the employer."

'Well, that makes Herb get his little rag out and he shouts :

"I'll tell you what you are : you're the very thing that's wrong with perishing England. It would be a fine country if it wasn't for blokes like you."

"You can't see the point," says Mr. Employer of Labour.

'Then Herbert lost his hair and puts him out for ten, though he was a fourteen-stone man.

'Well, we heard all this rampage from the court : and the jury couldn't give their verdict because this man was still unconscious. But the judge shouted old-garry-ho to Herbert and put him in the cells for a night to cool his head off, and we were pleased to get him home safe.

"You are a *fool*," said Lily. "Pity you didn't hit the judge too while you were at it."

"Oh, I know better than to slug a policeman," said Herbert, "specially one in a red flannel dressing-gown."

'But that's not the end. Ten days later we got a lawyer's letter saying this employer of labour that Herbert had coshed had had concussion and been in a nursing home—and they'd settle out of court for thirty pounds.

'So that's the end of his greengrocer's shop. He had to sell up—and then shell up. He's off hop-picking now, and

then he says he's got a job in some training-camp as a sparring partner.

'That's why Lily's so fed up with him—and you can't be surprised. Her home's gone again—just when they were getting started.

"But don't you grumble, I tell her. You've got him and he's got you and you love each other. You never quarrel or have any miseries with each other. He's always nice to you, and he's always perky. He's a scary-whift of a fellow—but I tell you, Lily, he's a jolly good husband as they go, as they go."

'Yes,' said Mrs. Jolliffe, finishing up her stout. 'That's what I told her : and now I must get back home, and see if my old Tom is still rampanting. So ta-bye, dearie.'

4. Jealousy

ONE evening Mrs. Jolliffe seemed unusually sad. Her face generally so round and jolly was puckered and full of care,

'Yes,' she said, 'it's my poor Maisie, my poor young Maisie. My youngest girl that is. Sometimes I get a real fit of the dumps thinking about her.'

'And she's been so silly. That's the worst part of it. She's brought it all on herself.

'I think it would do me good to tell you all about it, ducks,' said Mrs. Jolliffe. 'Just let me unloose myself a bit. This black dress catches me under the arms.

'In a way,' she went on, 'Maisie's the prettiest of all my gals ; pretty and soft as a peach, she was, at about eighteen. I can understand any man wanting to kiss and cuddle her.

'She had those pink and white cheeks like a child, and a little soft mouth. She was just a bit plump all over, and fashions or no fashions you can't tell me men don't like that.

'She had plenty of boys ; too many boys in a way. I don't know as it's good for a girl to have too many boys after her. Whenever Maisie went to a dance or party, the boys always stood round her, and if it wasn't young Stanley Hammond calling round home for her, then it was Bob Charlesworth.

"Well," I says to Dad, "I suppose we shall be losing our youngest soon. I wonder whether she is going to be Mrs. Charlesworth or Mrs. Hammond ; both sounds nice."

"I'm not so sure," he said. "Them spoilt little things like Maisie, that has too many boys, often takes a long time to marry. They get too cockered up to choose any man."

"Something in what you say," I tells him, "Maisie's fond of flirting, and that don't go with marriage."

'Once or twice I had a talk to Maisie. "You can't keep two or three boys on a string once you're married," I tell her. "You've got to pick a good man and stick to him."—"Rightyo, Mums," she says, "lend us a pin and I'll pick one." She wouldn't talk seriously at all.

"You laugh, my gal," I said, "laugh away.

"There was a girl that laughed so gay
She laughed her lovers all away."

'But Maisie went on for two or three years flirting around. Then she began to see for herself that some of her boy friends were getting married to other girls ; and men that meant things seriously wouldn't keep on courting her without it ever coming to a marriage.

'Bob Charlesworth was the one that I and her dad wanted her to have. He really was a splendid fellow, a bit older than Maisie. He was a quiet sort of fellow, not much of a talker, but a good steady chap. What's more, he earned good money. He was an electrical fitter and he was earning six pounds a week in a steady job.

‘Well, that’s a power of money, you know, and Bob was an orphan too. He came from a Barnardo’s Home. He was aching for a wife, and there was no one else for him to give his love, or his money, to.

“‘If you take and marry Bob Charlesworth,” I said to Maisie, “you’ll have the best husband of all of you four gals,” I said. “You’ll go up in the world, that’s what you’ll do.”—“Well, I suppose so,” she said, “I suppose I shall marry him.”

‘The other fellow as took her fancy was Stanley Hammond, and he wasn’t a bad chap either. He was better looking than Bob, in rather a dappified sort of way. He had a little moustache, and wavy hair, but he wasn’t half the man Bob Charlesworth was, and he wasn’t really earning enough money to marry anyone.

‘Well, in time Maisie really settled on Bob and they fixed a date, but, silly girl, even then she still seemed to hanker after Stanley. One night at the end of the street I saw her kissing him and I said to myself, “That’s naughty of Maisie, and it ain’t a straight thing to do. But least said soonest mended. It’ll be all right once she’s married.”

‘Bob knew that Maisie was still seeing Stanley and I could see he didn’t like it. For the first time since I’d ever known Bob Charlesworth I saw an ugly, glowering sort of look on his face. “Hullo,” I says to myself, “that’s good old jealousy, that is. Watch your step, Master Stanley.”

‘The wedding was lovely. Maisie looked a proper prize for any man to have and I think Bob Charlesworth was the happiest man alive, as he stood in my parlour window with Maisie beside him.

‘Stanley came to the wedding, too—I’d have steered clear if I’d have been him. When Maisie left he held her hand and looked into her eyes, and he hardly took any notice of Bob. I saw Bob give him that ugly look again,

but I thought, "don't you worry, Bob, she's yours now."

'Well, after they'd gone, my dear, I took my hubby by the arm and I had a bit of a cry. I must have looked a silly, but I couldn't help it. "All our girls are married now, Tom," I said, "and if this doesn't make a happy marriage I don't know what will."

'Bob took a week's holiday and he and Maisie went all the way up to Blackpool for a honeymoon, and they had a lovely time. When they weren't making love, they were going round the Big Wheel.

'Then they came back to London and settled down in a nice little flat. Bob had paid for everything, and there was nothing that wasn't new; and they went to the pictures as often as they wanted. I don't see what more a girl could ask for.

'Yet Maisie still seemed to want something more. I can't tell you what it was, but sometimes I'd see her turn her shoulder on Bob, pouting like a sulky little girl.

'A year or two went by and Maisie sometimes seemed to take a delight in teasing her man, and making a fuss of some other chap when he was there; and the trouble was Bob used to take it to heart.

'Once every week, it was on Thursday evening, Bob had to work on a late shift at his factory, and he wouldn't get back home till about ten o'clock.

'At first Maisie used to come round to us on Thursdays. Then one Thursday we found she was going out with this fellow Stanley Hammond. Then we found that Maisie used to go regularly with Stanley on Thursdays, and even ask him back to their flat. So I took Maisie and gave her a good talking to, and said she'd no right to. "Oh, you're as bad as Bob," she says, "I don't see why I should be lectured and fussed, there's nothing in it."—"You may say that," I told her, "but you're making Bob jealous,"

and she said : "Jealous ! that's silly. Things are different nowadays. Husbands have no call to be jealous about that sort of thing nowadays," so I thought, "Oh yes, *nowadays* I suppose we've suddenly changed human nature overnight." Still, Maisie had to know best.

'Then came their third wedding-day. Bob had planned to take Maisie out to the pictures and they were coming round to us afterwards, and if you please Maisie must ask that Stanley to come too.

'When they came round I saw they seemed to have had a bit of a tiff. Bob was looking thunder and Maisie was taking Stanley's arm.

'Bob came in with me to the kitchen and he tried to talk to me, but all he could say was : "If Maisie don't like me, she don't have to keep me." And I said : "Oh, don't talk like that, Bob." Then I went into the parlour with Bob and there was Maisie sitting on Stanley's knee. I was shamed to see her.

'Bob went up to Maisie and pulled her up by the arm. As he did so I could see she looked frightened, like a child that thinks it's really gone too far for once.

'Stanley stood up, and suddenly I saw Bob had got hold of the poker and he caught Stanley by the collar. I was scared out of my wits. There was murder in his face. Maisie screamed and I tried to catch hold of Bob's arm.

'Then Bob just dropped the poker on the floor and stood looking at Stanley, and Stanley had gone as pale as death.

'Then Bob turned away and went out of the room, and we heard the front door slam, and his footsteps going away. "Bob !" cried Maisie, and ran after him, but there wasn't a sign of him. Then she came back and burst out sobbing in my arms. "Oh, Mum," she said, "he's gone ! Will he ever come back ?"—"Of course he'll come back," I said. "You stay the night with me." And later on she

said: "Oh, Mum, I want him back! I don't want Stanley, I don't want Stanley. I only did it to tease Bob and make him jealous, and now he's gone. Will he ever come back, Mum? Will he ever come back?"

Mrs. Jolliffe stopped speaking and shook her head. She filled her chest with a long slow sigh.

'We never set eyes on Bob again. We've tried to trace him everywhere, and we've never found a sign of him. And Maisie's never stopped wanting him. She's never seen Stanley since that night. It was Bob she loved and Bob is all she can think of; and yet she went and drove him away.

'Well, that's the story, dear. Life seems to punish too hard sometimes. Maisie grew up overnight after that. She does a job now as a ward-maid in a Nursing Home.

'But what's that after you've been married, and well off? It was three years ago that happened, and she still says to me, time and again, "Do you think he'll ever come back?" And I say: "He may come back. Life's a funny thing, duckie. There's still time."'

5. It's Half What You Make It

'SOME girls think they're going to make famous marriages,' said Mrs. Jolliffe, 'and get knights in shining armour. But chaps can only act like flesh and blood, when you gets to live with them.

'So make the best of what you've got, I say. Three-penny ale is a very good drink if you can't come by a bottle of the best stout. And as I'm a bit short this week, I'm going to have a glass of mild ale and enjoy that. So cheerio, my dear.'

She took a sip and put her glass down, and remarked, 'Ah, well, there it is. We were talking about marriage the other night. I've told you the story of each of my

girls' marriages, but I can't say as there's any story about my *own* marriage. But I'll tell you about a girl that came from the very same village as I did, and got married just about the same time.

'Mary Hancock her name was—a tall strapping girl, as good as any you see nowadays, and not a bad looker neither.

'Trouble with Mary was she couldn't get along with her mother. I won't say whose fault it was. Often the young is over ready to set themselves against their elders : but sometimes the old are always becalling and naggy-ragging. And Mary's Ma was one to my mind as liked to keep up a ribble-rabble of fault-finding that gave you a' earache.

'And Mary was too quick with her back answers and her sulks. And half the whole trouble seemed to come from one day when Mrs. Hancock punished Mary for something she never done. Mary was about twelve at that time and Mrs. Hancock told her to get the washing in from the line, before she went out with some friends. Then Mrs. Hancock says :

"No, leave it be awhile—it ain't quite dry yet."

'Then a big storm of wind and rain come along and spoiled the blessed washing, and when Mary came back Mrs. Hancock called her a bad thoughtless girl not to do as she was bid, and told her to go into the woodshed and chop up a lot of wood as a punishment.

"'Tain't fair," said Mary, and she danced the tantrums round the garden ; and called her mother a name what no little girl should ever call her ma.

'So Mrs. Hancock pushed her into the woodshed and locked the door, and kept her in there for a couple of hours to go off the boil, as it were.

'But all the time Mary spent in that woodshed her juices were on the work like so much new wine, and she came out with a black devil of unforgiveness in her heart.

'After that Mary and her mother was always on the jingle-jangle, and old Mrs. Hancock got a face on her like a bite out of a sour apple; and Mary made that little black devil her own best friend.

'It was all silly, as you may say. And more's the pity. If Mary had been a bit more yielding, and if Mrs. Hancock had 'a tried to see things from Mary's point of view a bit more, they would have given each other love and happiness instead of pain.

'And as soon as Mary was turned eighteen she got herself engaged to George Farmer—the first chap as ever asked her. She didn't do it for love of him, because she hardly knew him, and as for marriage and what it meant, she'd hardly thought about it once in her life. She only thought if she was a married woman she'd be on a level with her mother, and she couldn't order her about no more.

'Mrs. Hancock didn't say much. For one thing she weren't a talker. For another thing there wasn't much to say. And yet Mrs. Hancock pained herself for thinking of Mary then, because she loved her really, and she knew she wasn't acting for her own best happiness. Once she tried to talk Mary out of it—but Mary only took it ill, and thought her mother was trying to thwart her once again. So Mrs. Hancock said no more.

'So Mary married George Farmer when she was eighteen—and he got a job on the railway same as my chap. And she came to live in London away from all her friends, and except for her George she was alone.

'And those first few years of married life went near to break Mary's heart. George was a good sort of man in his way, but older than she was and a strict dissenter—brought up in his father's chapel teaching. He wouldn't let Mary do this or that. He thought music halls were sinful—and he had a solemn stiff sort of nature all boxed in

on himself—and though he loved Mary in his way—he couldn't never seem to show her no outward sign of joy nor tenderness; and everything natural a young girl wanted to do he thought was wrong. And mind you, duckie, in those days a husband could keep a young wife on a tight string.

'So poor Mary found she'd exchanged for the worse. And often in the early days of her married life she'd cry her two eyes out—to think she was only nineteen, and tied to George for ever; and for no good reason.

'Yet you couldn't call George a bad husband. He never drank too much. He worked steady—and he never raised a hand to her.

'However there was no way out for her. She'd have sooner have died than tell her mother. So she went on from year to year, having babies like the rest of us. And she settled down into a sort of mumble-fumble frame of mind—half unhappy, thinking life had served her a dirty trick, and always hoping for something better to turn up.

'Well twelve or even fourteen years went along, and her children were getting big, when at last it was fixed up for old Mrs. Hancock to come and see Mary. They'd never set eyes on each other since Mary left home.

'But when she came it seemed they could no more talk to each other than strangers—and not so much, even.

"'It's a nice day," says Mrs. Hancock.

"'Yes," says Mary, "'it's finer than yesterday."

"'It med rain," says Mrs. Hancock, knitting away for dear life.

"'Perhaps it will," said Mary.

'And that's the daft sort of way those two used to talk, when inside of themselves they'd been dying to meet this ten years and more.

'This was during the time of the last war, and Mary got

herself a job in a munition factory. George was a bit too old to be called up, and he didn't like Mary doing this job—but what with the money being so good, and the work needed, it seemed wrong for her not to do it. So Mary had the first chance she'd had in years to get away from home a bit, and buy herself a few bits of decent clothes—and she wasn't too badly pleased with her looks neither.

'One day Mary was at her machine, and she was thinking about nothing in the world so much as a pair of them tall lace-up boots with high heels as used to be all the go then, when there was a terrible explosion, and half the world came on top of her. Or that's what it felt like. She couldn't see and the air was full of stink and smoke—and then down came some more of the roof.

'Presently the air cleared up a bit, and Mary had a look round—and what she clapped eyes on went into her heart like a knife. Two of the girls as worked next to her were lying dead and crushed on the floor. She stared at them, hardly believing what she saw.

'Then she found she was left alone. Everyone had cleared off. She tried to get out and found the way was blocked. The fallen girders had trapped her like a folded sheep at a sale. And there was fire—and it was coming her way.

'That was a terrible place to be in,' said Mrs. Jolliffe, 'and I may as well tell you this is my own story, and it was me waiting there.

'It was about an hour before they got at me, but it seemed as long as my whole life, and all the time I was there my only thought was :

"Save my life, dear God—and let me get back to my husband and children." And then, "Let me talk to Mother again just once before I die."

'And while I was lingering there wondering if the fire would get me, I learnt I was a happy woman with a husband

that was dear to me ; and it seemed to me God spoke to me with His own voice and said in so many words :

“ Ada Jolliffe, you’ve thought too much about yourself, you have. You’ve been a bad stupid woman, and the happiness you want is staring you in the face.”

And after they’d got me out safe and unhurt, I went home with a softened heart. And when my old Tom came and showed his care for me and was so pleased to see me safe, and the children came round me, I felt, “ These are my blessings. What does a body want in life but this ? ”

And that next day I had a long talk with my mother and we seemed to find each other again, and I understood what it was she’d felt for me all those years ago. And that nasty little black devil, that came into my heart in that woodshed when I was a child, skedaddled ; and I’ve never known him since—the little evil thing.

‘ P’r’aps you may say I was a bit worked up and hysterical with the escape I’d had. But believe me, I’ve seen life in a different way from that very day—and I’ve seen married happiness is half what you make it.

‘ I won’t say as I’ve never had no rows nor disagreeables with my old man since then ; I won’t say I haven’t never gone against him, but even when we’ve had our upsets, I’ve known I was really contented and wouldn’t change.

‘ And now I’m getting on in life it seems my joy and care is as much in my daughters’ marriages as me own. It’s a funny thing but I often feel as if I was the mother meself of that foolish young girl of eighteen, that knew nothing of life and went and married a man she’d never set eyes on but once or twice.’

Mrs. Jolliffe looked at her glass which was nearly empty. She finished it and wiped her mouth.

‘ Of course,’ she said, with the usual chuckle coming back into her voice, ‘ my old hubby’s got a whole lot easier these last few years. He’s getting more ripe as you

might say, and not so crabby. He enjoys a pint himself now and again, and a chat over all we've been through together.

He even went to the pictures with me the other day—the first time in his whole life he's ever done it. He had to let on he was shocked, but really he enjoyed it all. The piece we saw was Bluebeard's Eighth Wife. And when it come to that bit where the fellow puts his wife over his knee and smacks her, and she bites his leg, he laughed out loud and said it was the funniest thing he'd heard of in years.

“There's some truth in that, too,” he says to me afterwards. “That's not a bad picture of married life—two stubborn folk knocking a bit of sense into each other.”

‘Well, he's a funny old fellow is my Tom, and if I had my time again, I won't say as I'd ever hope to make a better marriage in this old mortal world.

‘Well, dearie, they're calling “time” now, and it's getting late. I must be popping along home. So ta-bye. I'll be seeing you some time soon.’

And giving a good-night wave Mrs. Jolliffe, a stout and burly figure, bustled off home in the gathering dusk of the twilight.

The Parents Left Alone

‘**T**IM ! Tim ! Come and open the gate !’

Mrs. Marshall stepped out of the back door of the farmhouse, and looked round the farmyard. There was no sign of Tim. There was no sign of any living thing. It was the iron grey dusk of a March afternoon : a piercing north-east wind was blowing straw about the yard, and every dog, duck, hen, and sparrow had taken shelter.

Mrs. Marshall drew a grey woollen shawl round her neck and shoulders, and picked her way across the yard. She was a small, wiry, grey-headed woman. She stooped very slightly from her constant hard work, and from her fifty-five years ; but she was still active, and her blue eyes were still bright.

She struggled with the heavy gate, lifted it off the latch, propped it wide open with a stone—and ran as fast as she could back to the warmth of the house.

At the back door, Harry, her eldest son, met her.

‘You’ll catch your death of cold,’ he said, ‘going out in your slippers. Why ever didn’t you let Tim see to the gate.’

‘Tim ain’t here,’ said Mrs. Marshall, ‘and you know your father don’t like to find that gate shut against his face. It irks him.’

They went into the kitchen where a good fire was blazing. Harry sat in a chair by the fire and lit a pipe.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’d have gone for you, if only you’d told me. But I don’t see that it ’ud specially matter if the

gate were left shut for once. You run after Dad too much to my way of thinking.'

He stubbed the burning tobacco down with his middle finger—and spoke deliberately between puffs at the pipe.

'Well, opening the gate's a small thing,' said Mrs. Marshall. 'You know how he hates to get out and open the gate for himself.'

'Yes,' said Harry, 'I suppose he does: specially on market days. It ain't too easy for him then.'

'Now, Harry,' said his mother. 'Don't get talking like that. He never takes anything to hurt him and never has.'

'No,' said Harry, 'just enough to make him market-merry, as they say. He always has come home like it on market days as long as I remember. Only there ain't much merry about it in his case.'

Mrs. Marshall looked at her son. He was a big heavy-moving quiet fellow of thirty-two. He spoke slowly and seriously and he always meant what he said.

'Don't you go judging of your father,' she said, 'I know some of his ways may not be your ways: but you won't get no good out of setting yourself up to judge him: I'm sure of that.'

'Well, when I marry Clara,' said Harry, 'I hope I shall make myself a bit pleasanter to her than Dad is to you.'

'Ah, that's what you think now,' said Mrs. Marshall. 'But politeness ain't everything in a husband.'

Harry made no answer. But he smiled to himself in the firelight, and his mother saw that he felt quite sure he was right.

'By the way,' he went on, 'Martin was in earlier this afternoon in his car and he said Dad had done famously with those heifers at auction to-day. Top price of the year he said. I wonder Dad don't get a car himself. It seems a bit out of date to keep on with a trap these days.'

'Oh, well,' said Mrs. Marshall. 'You can't expect Dad

to go changing his ways at his time of life. Why, there he is, I declare—home already. Glad I saw to that gate.'

As she spoke her husband, John Marshall, clattered in through the gate with Jackie, a tall active brown horse, in the shafts of the trap : at once he filled the yard with angry shouts.

'Where the hell's that bloody old fool gone to? 'Ave I got to stand all night hollering for someone to come and take my horse. Hi, Tim ! Joe ! Harry !'

Mrs. Marshall hurried out into the yard, forgetting her shawl altogether.

'All right, Dad,' she said, 'I'll take Jackie's head for a minute. You go in and get to the fire. No, Jackie boy, it ain't no good nosing me all over. I ain't got no sugar.'

Mr. Marshall half climbed, half fell off the trap, and stamped about to take the cold and stiffness out of his legs. He was a tall lean man : his hair was red, and he had a red straggling beard, which was tidied up only for family parties and other great occasions. His face was almost as red as his beard, and out of it across his whiskers shone a pair of cross blue eyes : paler blue than his wife's eyes, and at the moment rather watery and also rather bloodshot.

'Where's Tim?' said John Marshall, 'old fool : only time in the day he might be useful to me, off he goes. Don't care how long he keeps me waiting, it seems. Fat lot of good he is to stable a horse; he might just do to put an old broody hen in a coop.'

Mr. Marshall went in at the side door, still muttering to himself as he clinked about in the stone passage. In a moment Tim came to take the horse. Mrs. Marshall hurried in after her husband, helped him off with his coat and led him into the warmth of the kitchen.

'What I can't make out,' he said, standing in the middle of the kitchen, 'is where the hell Tim went to; old fool !'

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs. Marshall, 'I sent him down to the dairy to turn those cheeses : they're so heavy for me.'

'Just like your mother,' said Mr. Marshall to Harry. 'Whenever I want anything done it's always cheeses—cheeses—cheeses.'

'I'm sorry, John, I'm sure. But you see you're back early.'

Mr. Marshall stared her angrily up and down.

'Early, am I?' he said, 'so I've got to be told what time I'm allowed to come back to my own home, have I? And until then I can stand and holler myself hoarse : while all you are set here, by the fire.'

'Now do you sit down, Dad,' said Mrs. Marshall, and she urged him gently towards his arm-chair. He sat down with a grunt. It was now dusk outside ; the lamp had not been brought in and the big kitchen lighted by the leaping flames of the fire looked very warm and comfortable.

'You sit there and get warm, while Milly makes the tea,' said Mrs. Marshall, 'she'll have it ready in five minutes.'

'Gawd,' said Mr. Marshall, 'what's the woman babbling about *now*? Do you think I'm made of sugar or something? I never did hear such a lot of fuss about a bit of cold in all my days. I don't see it's specially cold. Still I will have my tea right away. Hey, Millie—Millie! YOU, Millie!'

He turned in his chair to a dark-haired girl of sixteen who was laying the table.

'You make my tea good an' strong. Do you hear me, Millie?'

'Yes, Mr. Marshall.'

'Well, answer then, girl, if you hear me.'

'Yes, sir,' said Millie hastily. 'I'm boiling you an egg too, sir.'

'Boil your head,' said Mr. Marshall, 'and hurry up.'

‘Yes, sir,’ said Millie. ‘Hard or soft?’

Mr. Marshall turned in his chair and glared at Millie. She was new; she was small, dark, pretty, and vivacious. He snorted loudly.

‘None of your cheek here, my girl,’ he said. ‘If you sauce me I’ll bundle you out of my house in double quick time; and box your ears too. Ask your mistress if I didn’t send young Daisy what’s-er-name back home crying to her mother.’

Millie fell silent at this, and for a few moments no one spoke. Peace fell on the kitchen. Presently Millie handed Mr. Marshall a large cup of tea. ‘Ah,’ he said with relish. She had made it strong and piping hot, just as he liked it. He sighed and stretched out his gaitered legs to the fire. A few minutes later Mrs. Marshall set the lamp on to the table, and he drew up his chair to enjoy the comfortable meal that was set before him: boiled egg; cold bacon; bread and butter and home-made gooseberry jam; and plenty of hot strong tea.

‘Well, Dad,’ said Harry at length. ‘How did the heifers go?’

‘Rotten,’ said Mr. Marshall, pushing his chair back. ‘Not worth the labour of driving ’em in, it wasn’t. Might just as well send ’em to the kennels, that I might. I’ve known the day, Harry boy, when I could get four times the price for good beasts like they: or pretty near. Well, perhaps not *four* times. Still, I suppose we mustn’t grumble at anything these days.’

Mrs. Marshall nodded and glanced at Harry and smiled.

‘They were good beasts too,’ she said, ‘what price did you get, John?’

‘Ah, that’s tellings, that’s tellings,’ said her husband. ‘Them as don’t ask questions don’t get told no lies.’

He laughed loudly at his joke.

'All right,' said Mrs. Marshall. 'Keep the news to yourself. I only asked.'

'Only asked,' said Mr. Marshall. 'Listen to that Harry my boy, I like that I do.' He laughed again, and began to fill his pipe.

'All right,' said Mrs. Marshall. 'You go on laughing, if you think it's so funny. I'm going down to pack up some eggs. Shall I send Millie in to clear away?'

Mr. Marshall nodded. 'Send her in,' he said. He went to his chair by the fire and blew clouds of smoke from his pipe. He watched Millie as she took the tea-things away. She tried to escape his notice as much as possible, but whatever she did, and wherever she went, he followed her with his eyes.

When Millie had gone out and closed the door behind her he turned to Harry and said :

'I like that little Millie.'

Harry looked at him in surprise.

'Of course,' said Mr. Marshall, 'she's a pert little piece, like they all are lately. Nobody never gives 'em a good larrupin' nowadays. That's the new clever idea.'

He took some puffs at his pipe and kicked the logs in the grate, sending a fountain of golden sparks up the chimney. Harry watched him.

'But I like that little Millie, all the same,' he went on. 'That little kid's got something to her. She's got a little go and gumption. I like the way she goes at her work. She'll make some man a rattling good wife one day. Take my word for it.'

Harry coughed, then he said :

'You may be right, Dad : but she's what I'd call a bit flighty, even for a kid : not my sort anyhow.'

'Well,' said Marshall. 'What's wrong with that? I like 'em young and pretty : always have done. A man's a man, ain't he? But mind you, Harry : no offence to you

and your Clara. Your intended is a fine young woman as ever I see. When I first watched her at them dairy demonstrations, at the show, I knew you'd picked a good wife there, Harry my boy.'

Harry smiled to himself. His Clara was not smart and pretty and pert: but she was sensible and strong and thirty; and when he had first shown her to his father at the butter-making demonstrations his heart had been full of love and pride. He pictured her now in her white coat; her strong clever arms, clear voice; her sensible explanations.

'Besides which,' his father went on, 'apart from your Clara, you're marrying with a good decent family, Harry. I don't know of a chap I've got greater regard for than her father. The Turners are decent farming stock, Harry, same as you and me. They've farmed land in these parts for hundreds of years; and old Turner's taken firsts in the dairy shows ever since I remember.'

Mr. Marshall nodded thoughtfully at his son.

'I must be off,' said Harry, 'I'm meeting Clara to-night.'

'Off you go,' said Mr. Marshall, 'I shall do a bit of shut-eye. Your sweethearting'll be over soon, Harry. You've fixed it for April haven't you?'

'Yes, Dad—six weeks' time from to-day. But why say that's the *end* of my sweethearting? Why shouldn't we be sweethearts after we're married?'

Mr. Marshall began to laugh loudly, but he saw his son's eyes fixed so solemnly on his face that he stopped his laugh and got up and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder.

'Well, it do put an end to it,' he said, 'and it don't. You see, Harry, 'tis like this—I've been married thirty-three years——'

But he was cut short by Millie, who came into the room and said:

'Please, Mr. Marshall—I've made up a big fire in the parlour. It will be more comfortable for you there, sir.'

'Oh, will it?' said Mr. Marshall. 'Well, I don't think so, Miss Pert. See that Harry; she wants me out of the kitchen. Just you buzz off, Millie.'

He flung a new log on to the fire, sat down and rested his long legs on the basket of fuel. 'Good-bye, Harry. I'd like the place to myself now, and if anyone comes, Millie, you say I'm dead.'

She went.

'Hey, Millie,' he called after her. 'Tell your mistress I want to speak to her in here.'

'She's down in the cellar, sir, packing the eggs.'

'Don't you argue with me,' he said, half rising from his chair. 'If you give me one more back answer, it'll be the order of the boot, see? Now do what I told you quick.'

She ran off.

'Eggs!' he shouted after her. 'Whenever I want anything it's always eggs—eggs—eggs . . .'

Millie went along the stone-flagged passage, and peered down the steep, dark cellar steps. She was rather frightened by Mr. Marshall. She felt half inclined to giggle all by herself in the dark at the top of the stairs. She could see dim candlelight somewhere below.

'Missis?' she called gently, after a while, 'Missis?'

'Yes, Millie,' came up Mrs. Marshall's voice.

'Master wants to speak to you.'

There was a pause in which Millie knew that Mrs. Marshall was straightening her back.

'Tell him I'm just doing the eggs,' said the voice.

'Please,' said Millie, 'I told him that.'

'All right,' said Mrs. Marshall, 'I'm coming. Bother these steps, they're that steep and slippy.'

She came up slowly.

'It'll be a funny day when I fall down these steps along

of three or four egg-boxes,' she said ; ' I thought I might as well bring some up.'

' Let me take them,' said Millie, ' I'm sorry—but he made me call you up.'

' Well, it won't hurt me, coming up once extry. Put the eggs in the back kitchen, Millie my dear, carefully mind.'

Then Mrs. Marshall went to the kitchen door and opened it gently. She looked in and it was just as she expected. Dad was already fast asleep. His hands hung loosely over the arms of the chair. His bearded chin dropped on his chest. His long legs sprawled out across the hearth and his old liver and white spaniel lay stretched at his feet. Both dog and man were snoring and grunting as they slept. The fire blazed and crackled beside them.

Mrs. Marshall looked at him and smiled.

' That's nice,' she said, closed the door gently, and saw Harry putting on his coat and muffler in the hall.

' Seems to get pretty heavy after market, doesn't he ?' said Harry.

' It isn't only market, Harry : he was up half the night with that mare.'

' Well, so was I up with her,' said Harry, ' besides, she foaled two days ago.'

' Well, you're young,' said Mrs. Marshall. ' Don't you be so judging, Harry.'

' Judging ?' said Harry in an injured voice. ' I'm not judging. I haven't said anything.'

' No, but you go thinking things. I won't have you judging your Dad. It ain't for you to judge him.'

Harry did up his muffler and patted his mother's arm.

' I only see what I see,' he said. ' So long, Mum.'

It was Harry Marshall's wedding day. The April sun had come out brightly, lighting up colours indoors and

out of doors that the eye had forgotten since last summer. There had been blossoms in the hedges as they drove along, and flowers in the long grass of the country churchyard.

Mrs. Marshall was dressed in a new dark blue silk dress with a white lace collar, and a blue straw hat with two white flowers in it. Her blue eyes shone. Her cheeks were pink with excitement. She seemed to have become years younger, only she still kept her slight stoop, and her hands looked gnarled against the blue silk dress.

Already she had seen Harry and Clara made man and wife. She had kissed them both in the vestry. Now in the Turners' farmhouse there was a confusion of loud voices, of jokes, of laughing faces. Everybody was talking to everybody else; and all the Turner family wanted to single her out for a few words.

Then with Mr. Turner directing them they took their places at the big table spread with a white cloth, sixteen or eighteen of the Marshalls and the Turners. On the table itself were jellies, bowls of fruit, jugs of cream, biscuits, cakes, and in the middle a large old-fashioned silver epergne.

At the sideboard Mr. Turner, large and red-faced, whittled away at a new ham, delved into a huge pie, cut off whole wings and breasts of chicken, and pressed on his guests the best of everything that the Turners' farm, and dairy, and kitchen could supply.

'Some more ham, Marshall, our own curing, of course.'—'Mrs. Marshall, *you* can't refuse my wife's extra special best—Pass up your plate, please.'—'Now, Mother, I'm going to open the champagne.'

'Pop' went half a dozen corks and the bottles came round. There was no shortage. Mrs. Marshall from her end of the table at her host's right hand saw her husband's glass filled up a second and a third time. His red beard was neatly pointed; his hair brushed. He wore a dark

grey suit with a white collar and white silk tie. He had a white flower in his buttonhole. He looked quite distinguished and was soon cracking jokes at a high speed with all around him—particularly with his younger son Martin. Together they had the table in roars of laughter.

Mrs. Marshall felt quite proud of him. He and Martin were the quick-witted ones of the whole party. Martin knew just how to play up to his father. Soon John Marshall got the ear of the entire table and told an anecdote which ended in a storm of laughter from every man and woman.

Turner thumped the table.

‘The best I’ve heard in ten years, Marshall,’ he said. ‘You always could tell a story. Now ye’ve earned another glass of bubbly for that. I swear ye have.’

Then there were more jokes : more stories : speeches. Throughout it all Harry beamed but was quiet and steady as ever. Then the party left the table ; some of them went into the parlour—some stayed in the dining-room ; some went outside into the pale April sunshine.

‘Hullo, old ‘un,’ said Harry, finding his mother alone for a minute. ‘Enjoying yourself?’

‘I’m very happy,’ she said. ‘All the Turners tripping over themselves to make a fuss of me.’

‘So they ought,’ said Harry. ‘You’re the most important person here. I say Dad’s going hot and strong. I hope you don’t pay for it afterwards.’

‘Find the girls, Harry,’ said his mother. ‘I want to hear all about Lucy’s new baby.’

So the afternoon passed away in a happy whirl. Almost before she could believe it, Mrs. Marshall found herself waving at the gate as the car whisked her Harry and Mrs. Turner’s Clara away together. Some of the younger men ran after the car shouting. She waved and waved even after there was no more than a noise. Then she realized she was alone at the gate.

So it was over, she thought. All over. Her eldest boy had gone from her, just as the others had gone before him. Only it was different this time, because he had been the last to go : and the first to come. In a way it was the end—the end of something that had begun many many years ago. What would it seem like at home, without any of them ?

‘Well,’ said Mrs. Turner, seeing her standing alone at the gate. ‘You’ll get chilly standing there. It’s clouding over. I declare everyone’s gone in but us two mothers.’

‘Ah, Mrs. Turner,’ said Mrs. Marshall. ‘My eyes are full : but not with trouble. I’m happy really.’

Mrs. Turner put her arm round her, and slowly they walked back.

‘It is a wrench,’ she said, ‘when it actually comes to it ; and Harry’s your last. I know how you must feel.’

‘You’ve all been so kind,’ said Mrs. Marshall. ‘I mustn’t be silly and feel like crying. I should feel thankful to think Harry’s got such a splendid wife, and Clara’s got a good man in Harry too, if I may say so.’

‘You may say that, my dear. We all feel that.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Mrs. Marshall, half laughing, half crying. ‘A tear from their own mothers won’t do them no harm. It’s natural.’

She stood with Mrs. Turner at the doorway of the house, and for a few moments she lost herself in a wave of feelings and memories holding Mrs. Turner’s hand : the old far-away years pressed about her with dream-like faces and whispering voices ; the lost faces of her children, with flaxen hair when they were three or four years old ; and then at her wedding, the loved face of her own mother, who died so soon afterwards ; then the ardent face of her husband when he was young—and different : each face called to her from the past. Gradually she heard the chatter of voices again in the Turners’ house, and the voice

of her own younger son Martin speaking cheerfully in her ear.

'Through with the waterworks, Mum,' said Martin. 'I never saw you crying when I left home.'

'Now, now,' said Mrs. Turner. 'Don't you be making game of your mother, Martin Marshall. I'm sure you men don't know how good she is.'

'Well, Mrs. Turner,' said Martin. 'She's the best mother I ever had. I'll allow that. But what I was going to say, Mum, is Dad wants to be off—and I've got Jackie all harnessed up in the trap for him.'

'Oh, don't go yet,' said Mrs. Turner.

'Mum, you mustn't go yet,' said her daughter Lucy, flinging her arms round her, and kissing her loudly, 'I've hardly seen you.'

'I'd love to stay: but Dad's right, I expect. Why, there he is at the door I declare.'

The whole party now clustered to see the bridegroom's parents go. Mr. Marshall sat stiff and ready with the reins in his hand. Jackie did not stand too well, and both driver and horse showed signs of impatience as the good-byes were said.

Mr. Turner helped Mrs. Marshall up and tucked her rug round her, saying as he did so, 'Your trap's over high for a lady, Marshall. It's time you bought a little car.'

'My wife would sooner drive behind a horse than in them rattling things,' said John Marshall shortly. 'Wouldn't you, Mother?'

'Well, I don't know but what I *wouldn't* like a car,' she said thoughtfully. 'It would be quicker.'

'Let me take you home in my car,' said Martin.

However, Mr. Marshall jerked the reins. Jackie, glad to go, started off briskly. The wheels crunched on the gravel and they swung out of the gate. The 'good-byes' died away behind them and they were alone together, with the

brisk clop-clop of Jackie's hooves, and the hedges rolling by.

Mrs. Marshall settled herself into the rug and gave a sigh. 'Well,' she said afterwards, 'I'm sure it went off ever so well.'

Her husband made no answer. She waited a little, and began again.

'The Turners were that kind and nice to me. I felt like a queen.'

There was still no answer. He sat very stiff and upright in deathly silence.

'Oh dear,' thought Mrs. Marshall. 'Whatever have I done to upset him this time? It's all been so jolly up to now.'

So they went on in silence. The ribbon of road slipped on and on underneath the wheels. The long-legged Jackie, with his ears well forward, strode out at his best pace, then slowed down to a walk to take the last hill on the homeward journey. The evening grew very still and Mrs. Marshall found her husband's ill-humour weighing on her like a black cloud.

'Oh, John,' she broke out at last, 'what *is* the matter, my dear? I'm sure I don't know what I've said.'

'Matter?' he said in a tone of bitter grievance: 'you know well enough. Whatever did you want to go shaming me for in front of all those people?'

'Shaming you? What *are* you talking about.'

'Saying my old trap wasn't good enough and you'd prefer to have a car; trying to take advantage of me, I suppose, just because you was so cocked up by that old Turner.'

Mrs. Marshall frowned and bit her lip.

'Now, why should you take things so ill, John? I couldn't help but agree that a car goes quicker than a trap. So it does, doesn't it?'

Mr. Marshall pulled Jackie to a sudden stop, and he made a noise like a savage dog about to begin a fight.

'Out you get, then,' he said. 'I won't drive you. If my horse and trap ain't good enough, you wait for your precious son Martin to come, and drive you into the ditch, I daresay.'

'Don't be so daft, John : drive on.'

'You get out of my trap.'

Jackie shifted about uneasily. He had topped the hill now and he was all for breaking into a brisk trot. John Marshall held him back firmly.

'Get out,' he said.

'A nice sort of silly I should look, sitting under the hedge waiting for a lift. That *would* be showing you up. Now drive on, do.'

She put out her hand and gave his arm a slight squeeze. He shook off her hand, as if it had been a scorpion. Jackie felt the shake on the reins and off he went.

'Stand, Jackie,' roared Mr. Marshall, reining him up again.

'Now you get out and walk. Stand, Jackie, stand !'

He lost his temper with the horse and gave him a cut with the whip. Jackie at once leapt forward, almost at a canter this time. Mr. Marshall stood up in the trap, like a Roman chariotceer, and jerked Jackie's mouth back hard, almost falling out of the trap as he did so.

'Now, mind, John, mind,' said his wife anxiously, holding on to the side rail.

'Get out,' shouted Mr. Marshall. 'Stand, Jackie. Damn your eyes.'

He lashed Jackie with his whip, and Jackie dashed off again.

'Christ, what ails the horse ?' bellowed Marshall. 'I'll give him a good hiding in half a minute.'

'Again he stood up, pulled Jackie back so suddenly that

he himself fell forward heavily on the splash-board of the trap, dropping the reins on the ground. Jackie, always rather irritable, danced about in the road, and began to kick backwards.

At that moment a large car with a piercing hooter rushed up behind them. It filled the evening air with a sudden car-splitting noise, as it went by. Jackie kicked out at the trap as if trying to get rid of it, and set off at a gallop.

Mrs. Marshall clung to the handrail. Mr. Marshall, yelling frightful oaths at Jackie, picked himself off the floor of the trap, and found the reins were trailing along the ground.

'Now see what you've done,' he shouted.

Jackie continued at a gallop. It was downhill now, and he put out his head, and went fast. His hooves made a mad clatter on the road. As they tore along Mr. Marshall leant over the splash-board, groping to pick the reins off Jackie's back.

'Oh, take care, John,' said Mrs. Marshall, her heart beating in her throat.

The trap swayed from side to side. Mr. Marshall lurched, grabbed, caught at the reins, fell off the trap, and disappeared under the horse's legs. The trap slewed round, one wheel went up the bank and then it stopped with a jerk. Mrs. Marshall with a sickening dread inside her looked round for her husband.

At once she saw him get up from under the trap and dust off his coat vigorously.

'Oh, John,' she cried out, and burst into tears. 'I thought you'd been killed,' she sobbed. 'I thought you'd been killed.'

'Don't be so silly,' he said, and climbed back into the trap. 'Not the first time I've been out of a trap, mother. I ain't that brittle. Let's get along. You'll feel better directly.'

Ten minutes later they were safely in their own farmyard. John Marshall handed the horse over to Tim, but he said nothing about their misadventure.

Mrs. Marshall went into the kitchen and sat down. The house was quite empty, as Millie had gone over to the Turners to help.

'Oh, I do feel queer,' she said. 'You gave me such a turn, John.'

'Well, sit quiet,' said John. She heard him moving about the kitchen, but she felt too dizzy to do anything but sit and rest with closed eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, she found he was bringing the lamp and the table was laid.

'Why,' she said. 'You've got the tea!'

He poured her out a cup and brought it over to the fire-side.

'There you are,' he said. 'There you are.'

She sipped it gratefully.

'John, you've cut sandwiches, and everything,' she said.

'Of course. Now what about a nip of whisky in your tea? That'll set you right.'

'I don't think so. I feel better now.'

They sat for some time in silence, then John drew his chair near hers and leant forward.

'I've been thinking,' he said in a quiet, unusual voice. 'I've been thinking. It ain't going to be so bad, really, now the children have gone. We must take things a bit more quietly. I can't run the whole of this place without Harry. I thought of renting all those upper fields with the wood. I know a chap as'll pay a good price.'

His wife nodded.

'Then there's the dairy,' he said. 'I want to get in a good strong girl to do it for you, and she can help in the house, too.'

'I can manage, John. I always have done.'

'Yes,' he said. 'But now we've got to look forward to getting older. We've got to go slower. We don't need to strive so hard. We've had our run. That's how I look at it. It's been a longish time too. Do you remember our sweetheart days?'

'Oh, John,' she said, and nodded.

He took her hand.

'Do you remember when Harry was a little baby? Do you remember saying to me at his christening party, "Now things is really starting"?''

'Yes, John, I remember plain as plain.'

'Life's been pretty full since then,' he said. 'It's never been quite the same as those first two years. But things are going to get slower again now. It'll be just us two again: us two alone: less to do—more time with each other.'

He stopped. Then suddenly he let go of her hand, and stood up and jerked out brusquely:

'Do you think you can stand me? P'r'aps I ain't been too bad in some ways.'

'Oh, John,' she said, clasping his hand tightly, 'I do love you so. All these years together. I do love you so. I don't say you deserve it: but I do love you.'

The Erne from the Coast

‘**W**HERE’S Harry?’

Mr. Thorburn came out of the back of the farmhouse. He stood in the middle of the well-kept farmyard.

‘Here, Harry,’ he shouted. ‘Hi, Harry!’

He stood leaning on a stick and holding a letter in his hand, as he looked round the farmyard.

Mr. Thorburn was a red-faced, powerful man; he wore knee-breeches and black leather gaiters. His face and well-fleshed body told you at a glance that Thorburn’s Farm had not done too badly during the twenty years of his married life.

Harry, a fair-haired boy, came running across the yard.

‘Harry,’ said the farmer to his son, ‘here’s a letter come for old Michael. It will be about this visit he’s to pay to his sick brother. Nice time of year for this to happen, I must say. You’d better take the letter to him at once.’

‘Where to?’ said Harry.

‘He’s up on the hill, of course,’ said the farmer. ‘In his hut, or with the sheep somewhere. Your own brains could have told you that. Can’t you ever use them? Go on, now.’

‘Right,’ said Harry. He turned to go.

‘Don’t take all day,’ his father shouted.

Mr. Thorburn stood looking after his son. He leant heavily on the thorn stick which he always carried. Harry went through the gate in the low grey wall, which ran round one side of the yard, where there were no buildings.

Directly he left the farmyard, he began to climb. Thorburn's farm was at the end of a valley. Green fields lay in front of it, and a wide road sloped gently down to the village a mile away; behind, the hill soared up, and high on the ridge of the hill was Michael's hut, three miles off, and climbing all the way.

Harry was thirteen, very yellow-haired and blue-eyed. He was a slip of a boy. It seemed unlikely that he could ever grow into such a stolid, heavy man as his father. Mr. Thorburn was every pound of fourteen stone, as the men on the farm could have told you the day he broke his leg and they had to carry him back to the farmhouse on a hurdle.

Harry started off far too fast, taking the lower slopes almost at a run. His body was loose in its movements, and coltish, and by the time the real work began he was already tiring. However, the April day was fresh and rainy, and the cold of it kept him going. Grey gusts and showers swept over the hillside, and between them, with changing light, came faint gleams of sunshine, so that the shadows of the clouds raced along the hill beside him. Presently he cleared the gorse and heather, and came out on to the open hill-side, which was bare except for short, tussocky grass. His home began to look far off beneath him. He could see his mother walking down towards the village with one of the dogs, and the baker's cart coming up from the village towards her. The fields were brown and green round the farmhouse, and the buildings were grey with low stone walls.

He stopped several times to look back on the small, distant farm. It took him well over an hour to reach the small hut where Michael lived by day and slept during most nights throughout the lambing season. He was not in his hut, but after a few minutes' search Harry found him. Michael was sitting without movement, watching the

sheep and talking to his grey and white dog. He had a sack across his shoulders, which made him look rather like a rock with grey lichen on it. He looked up at Harry without moving.

'It's a hildy-wildy day,' he said, 'but there'll be a glent of sunsheen yet.'

Harry handed Michael the letter. Michael looked at it, and opened it very slowly, and spread the crackling paper out on his knee with brown hands. Harry watched him for some minutes as he studied the letter in silence.

'Letter'll be aboot my brother,' said Michael at length. 'I'm to goa to see him.' He handed the letter to Harry. 'Read it, Harry,' he said. Harry read the letter to him twice.

'Tell thy dad,' said Michael, 'I'll be doon at farm i' the morn. Happen I'll be away three days. And tell him new lamb was born last neet, but it's sickly.'

They looked at the small white bundle that lay on the grass beside its mother, hardly moving.

'T'll pick up,' said Michael. He slowly stood and looked round at the distance.

Michael had rather long hair ; it was between grey and white in colour, and it blew in the wind. It was about the hue of an old sheep's skull that has lain out on the bare mountain. Michael's clothes and face and hair made Harry feel that he had slowly faded out on the hill-side. He was all the colour of rain on the stones and last year's bracken.

'It'll make a change,' said Michael, 'going off and sleeping in a bed.'

'Good-bye,' said Harry. 'You'll be down at the farm to-morrow, then?'

'Aw reet,' said Michael.

'Aw reet,' said Harry.

Harry went slowly back to the farm. The rain had cleared off, and the evening was sunny, with a watery light,

by the time he was home. Michael had been right. Harry gave his father the message, and told him about the lamb.

'It's a funny thing,' said Harry, 'that old Michael can't even read.'

'Don't you be so smart,' said Mr. Thorburn. 'Michael knows a thing or two you don't. You don't want to go muckering about with an old fellow like Michael—best shepherd I've ever known.'

Harry went away feeling somewhat abashed. Lately it seemed his father was always down on him, telling him he showed no sign of sense; telling him he ought to grow up a bit; telling him he was more like seven than thirteen.

He went to the kitchen. This was a big stone-floored room with a huge plain table, where the whole household and several of the farm hands could sit down to dinner or tea at the same time. His mother and his aunt from the village were still lingering over their teacups, but there was no one else in the room except a small tortoiseshell cat, which was pacing round them asking for milk in a loud voice. The yellow evening light filled the room. His mother gave him tea and ham and bread and butter, and he ate it in silence, playing with the cat as he did so.

Next morning at nine o'clock there was a loud rap with a stick at the kitchen door, and there by the pump, with the hens running round his legs, stood Michael.

'Good morning, Mrs. Thorburn,' he said. 'Is Measter about?'

'Come on in with you,' said Mrs. Thorburn, 'and have a good hot cup o' tea. Have you eaten this morning?'

Michael clanked into the kitchen, his hobnails striking the flags, and he sat down at one end of the table.

'Aye,' he said, 'I've eaten, missus. I had a good thoom-bit when I rose up, but a cup of tea would be welcome.'

As he drank the tea, Mr. Thorburn came in, bringing Harry with him. Michael, thought Harry, always looked rather strange when he was down in the village or in the farmhouse ; rather like a pile of bracken or an armful of leaves would look, if it were emptied out on to the parlour floor.

Michael talked to Mr. Thorburn about the sheep ; about the new lamb ; about young Bob, his nephew, who was coming over from another farm to look after the sheep while he was away.

‘ Tell en to watch new lamb,’ said Michael, ‘ it’s creachy. I’ve put en in my little hut, and owd sheep is looking roun’ t’ doorway.’

After his cup of tea Michael shook hands all round. Then he set off down to the village, where he was going to fall in with a lift.

Soon after he had gone, Bob arrived at the farm. He was a tall young man with a freckled face and red hair, big-boned and very gentle in his voice and movements. He listened to all Mr. Thorburn’s instructions and then set out for the shepherd’s hut.

However, it seemed that Mr. Thorburn’s luck with his shepherds was dead out. For the next evening, just as it was turning dark, Bob walked into the farmhouse kitchen. His face was tense with pain, and he was nursing his left arm with his right hand. Harry saw the ugly distorted shape and swelling at the wrist. Bob had fallen and broken the wrist earlier in the day, and by evening the pain had driven him back.

‘ I’m sorry, Mr. Thorburn,’ he kept on saying. ‘ Ah’m a big fule.’

The sheep had to be left for that night. Next morning it was again a cold, windy day, and clouds the colour of gunmetal raced over the hill. The sun broke through fitfully, filling the valley with a steel-blue light in which the

green grass looked vivid. Mr. Thorburn decided to send Harry out to the shepherd's hut for the day and night.

'Happen old Michael will be back some time to-morrow,' he said. 'You can look to the sheep, Harry, and see to that sick lamb for us. It's a good chance to make yourself useful.'

Harry nodded.

'You can feed the lamb. Bob said it didn't seem to suck enough, and you can let me know if anything else happens. And you can keep an eye on the other lambs and see they don't get over the edges. There's no need to fold them at night, just let the dog round them up and see the flock is near the hut.'

'There's blankets and everything in the hut, Harry,' said Mrs. Thorburn, 'and a spirit lamp to make tea. You can't come to harm.'

Harry set off up the hill and began to climb. Out on the hill-top it was very lonely, and the wind was loud and gusty, with sudden snatches of rain. The sheep kept near the wooden hut most of the time; it was built in the lee of the ridge and the best shelter was to be found near it. Harry looked after the sick lamb and brewed himself tea. He had Tassie, the grey and white sheepdog, for company. Time did not hang heavily. When evening came he rounded up the sheep and counted them, and true to advice that Michael had given him, he slept in his boots as a true shepherd does, warmly wrapped up in the rugs.

He was awakened as soon as it was light by the dog barking. He went out in the grey dawn light, and found a rustle and agitation among the sheep. Tassie ran to him and back towards the sheep. The sheep were starting up alert, and showed a tendency to scatter. Harry looked round, wondering what the trouble was. Then he saw. A bird was hovering over the flock, and it was this that had attracted the sheep's attention. But what bird was it?

It hovered like a hawk, soaring on outstretched wings ; yet it was much too big for a hawk. As the bird came nearer Harry was astonished at its size. Once or twice it approached and then went soaring and floating away again. It was larger than any bird he had ever seen before—brownish in colour, with a grey head and a hawk's beak.

Suddenly the bird began to drop as a hawk drops. A knot of sheep dashed apart. Tassie rushed towards the bird, his head down and his tail streaming out behind him. Harry followed. This must be an eagle, he thought. He saw it, looking larger still now it was on the ground, standing with outstretched wings over a lamb.

Tassie attacked, snarling in rage. The eagle rose at him. It struck at him with its feet and a flurry of beating wings. The dog was thrown back. He retreated slowly, snarling savagely as he went, his tail between his legs. He was frightened now, and uncertain what to do.

The eagle turned back to the lamb, took it in its talons again, and began to rise. It could not move quickly near the ground, and Harry came up with it. At once the eagle put the lamb on a rock and turned on him. He saw its talons driving towards his face, claws and spurs of steel—a stroke could tear your eyes out. He put up his arms in fear, and he felt the rush of wings round his face. With his arm above his head he sank on one knee.

When he looked up again, the eagle was back on the lamb. It began to fly with long, slow wing-beats. At first it scarcely rose, and flew with the lamb almost on the ground.

Harry ran, throwing a stone. He shouted. Tassie gave chase, snapping at the eagle as it went. But the eagle was working towards a chasm, a sheer drop in the hill-side where no one could follow it. In another moment it was floating in the air, clear and away. Then the eagle rose

higher, and headed towards the coast, which was a few miles away over the hill.

Harry stood and watched it till it was out of sight. When it was gone, he turned and walked slowly back to the hut. There was not a sound to be heard now except the sudden rushes of wind. The hill-side was bare and coverless except for the scattered black rocks. Tassie walked beside him. The dog was very subdued and hardly glanced to right or left.

It took some time to round the sheep up, or to find at least where the various parts of the flock had scattered themselves. The sick lamb and its mother had been enclosed all this time in a small fold near the hut. The ewe was still terrified.

An hour later Harry set off down the mountain-side to the farm. Tassie looked after him doubtfully. He ran several times after him, but Harry sent him back to the hut.

It was the middle of the morning when Harry came back to the farmyard again. His father was standing in the middle of the yard, leaning on his stick, and giving advice to one of his cowmen. He broke off when he saw Harry come in through the gate, and walk towards him across the farmyard.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘anything wrong, Harry? I thought you were going to stay till Michael came back.’

‘We’ve lost a lamb,’ said Harry, breathlessly. ‘It’s been carried off by an eagle. It must have been an eagle.’

‘An eagle?’ said Mr. Thorburn. He gave a laugh which mocked Harry.

‘Why didn’t you stop it?’

‘I tried,’ said Harry. ‘But I . . .’

Mr. Thorburn was in a bad mood. He had sold some heifers the day before at a disappointing price. He had had that morning a letter from the builders about repairs to some of the farm buildings, and there was work to be

done which he could hardly afford. He was worried about Michael's absence. He felt as if the world was bearing down on him, and he had too many burdens to support.

He suddenly shouted at Harry, and his red face turned darker red.

'That's a lie !' he said. 'There's been no eagle here in my lifetime. What's happened? Go on—tell me.'

Harry stood before him. He looked at his father, but said nothing.

'You've lost that lamb,' said Thorburn. 'Let it fall down a hole or something. Any child from the village could have watched those sheep for a day. Then you're frightened, and come back here and lie to me.'

Harry still said nothing.

'Come here,' said Thorburn suddenly. He caught him by the arm and turned him round. 'I'll teach you not to lie to me,' he said. He raised his stick and hit Harry as hard as he could ; then again and again.

'It's true,' began Harry, and then cried out with pain at the blows.

At the third or fourth blow he wrenched himself away. Thorburn let him go. Harry walked away as fast as he could, through the gate and out of the yard without looking round.

'Next time it will be a real beating,' his father shouted after him. 'Bring the eagle back, and then I'll believe you.'

As soon as Harry was through the gate, he turned behind one of the barns where he was out of sight from the yard. He stood trembling and clenching his fists. He found there were tears on his face, and he forced himself not to cry. The blows hurt, yet they did not hurt very seriously. He would never have cried for that. But it had been done in front of another man. The other man had looked on, and he and his father had been laughing as he had almost

run away. Harry clenched his fists ; even now they were still talking about him.

He began to walk and then run up the hill-side towards the hut. When he reached it he was exhausted. He flung himself on the mattress and punched it again and again and clenched his teeth.

The day passed and nobody came from the farm. He began to feel better, and presently a new idea struck him, and with it a new hope. He prayed now that old Michael would not return to-day ; that he would be able to spend another night alone in the hut ; and that the eagle would come back next morning and attack the sheep again, and give him one more chance.

Harry went out and scanned the grey sky, and then knelt down on the grass and prayed for the eagle to come. Tassie, the grey and white sheepdog, looked at him questioningly. Soon it was getting dark, and he walked about the hill and rounded up the sheep. He counted the flock, and all was well. Then he looked round for a weapon. There was no gun in the hut, but he found a thick stave tipped with metal, part of some broken tool that had been thrown aside. He poised the stave in his hand and swung it ; it was just a good weight to hit with. He would have to go straight at the eagle without hesitation and break its skull. After thinking about this for some time, he made himself tea, and ate some bread and butter and cold meat.

Down at the farm Mr. Thorburn, in the evening, told his wife what had happened. He was quite sure there had been no eagle. Mrs. Thorburn did not say much, but she said it was an extraordinary thing for Harry to have said. She told her husband that he ought not to have beaten the boy, but found out what the trouble really was.

‘But I dare say there is no great harm done,’ she ended, philosophically.

Harry spent a restless night. He slept and lay awake by turns, but sleeping or waking, the same images thronged his mind. He saw all the events of the day before. He saw how the eagle had first appeared above him ; how it had attacked ; how it had driven off Tassie and then him. He remembered his fear, and he planned again just how he could attack the eagle when it came back. Then he thought of himself going down towards the farm and he saw again the scene with his father.

All night long he saw these pictures and other scenes from his life. In every one of them he had made some mistake ; he had made himself look ridiculous, and grown men had laughed at him. He had failed in strength or in common sense ; he was always disappointing himself and his father. He was too young for his age. He was still a baby.

So the night passed. Early in the morning he heard Tassie barking.

He jumped up, fully clothed, and ran outside the hut. The cold air made him shiver ; but he saw at once that his prayer had been answered. There was the eagle, above him, and already dropping down towards the sheep. It floated, poised on huge wings. The flock stood nervously huddled. Suddenly, as before, the attacker plunged towards them. They scattered, running in every direction. The eagle followed, and swooped on one weakly running lamb. At once it tried to rise again, but once more its heavy wing-beats took it along the earth. Near the ground it seemed cumbersome and awkward. Tassie was after it like a flash ; Harry seized his weapon, the stave tipped with iron, and followed. When Tassie caught the eagle up it turned and faced him, standing over the lamb.

Harry, as he ran, could see blood staining the white wool of the lamb's body ; the eagle's wings were half spread out

over it, and moving slowly. The huge bird was greyish-brown with a white head and tail. The beak was yellow, and the legs yellow and scaly.

It lowered its head, and with a fierce movement threatened Tassie ; then as the dog approached, it began to rock and stamp from foot to foot in a menacing dance ; then it opened its beak and gave its fierce, yelping cry. Tassie hung back, his ears flattened against his head, snarling, creeping by inches towards the eagle ; he was frightened, but he was brave. Then he ran in to attack.

The eagle left the lamb. With a lunging spring it aimed heavily at Tassie. It just cleared the ground and beat about Tassie with its wings, hovering over him. Tassie flattened out his body to the earth and turned his head upwards with snapping jaws. But the eagle was over him and on him, its talons plunged into his side, and a piercing scream rang out. The eagle struck deliberately at his skull three times ; the beak's point hammered on the dog's head, striking downwards and sideways. Tassie lay limp on the ground, and where his head had been, a red mixture of blood and brains flowed on the grass. When Harry took his eyes away from the blood, the eagle was standing on the lamb again.

Harry approached the eagle slowly, step by step. He gripped his stick firmly as he came. The eagle put its head down. It rocked on its feet as if preparing to leap. Behind the terrific beak, sharp as metal, was a shallow head, flat and broad as a snake's, glaring with light yellow un-animal eyes. The head and neck made weaving movements towards him.

At a pace or two from the eagle Harry stood still. In a second he would make a rush. He could break the eagle's skull, he told himself, with one good blow ; then he could avenge Tassie and stand up to his father.

But he waited too long. The eagle tried to rise, and

with its heavy sweeping beats was beginning to gain speed along the ground. Harry ran, stumbling over the uneven ground, among boulders and outcroppings of rock, trying to strike at the eagle as he went. But as soon as the eagle was in the air, it was no longer heavy and clumsy. There was a sudden rush of wings and buffeting about his head as the eagle turned to drive him off. For a second he saw the talons sharp as metal, backed by the metal strength of the legs, striking at his face. He put up his arm. At once it was seared with a red-hot pain, and he could see the blood rush out.

He stepped back, and back again. The eagle, after this one fierce swoop at him, went round in a wide, low circle, and returned to the lamb. Harry saw that his coat sleeve was in ribbons, and that blood was running off the end of his fingers and falling to the ground.

He stood panting; the wind blew across the empty high ground. The sheep had vanished from sight. Tassie lay dead near by, and he was utterly alone on the hills. There was nobody to watch what he did. The eagle might hurt him, but it could not jeer at him. He attacked it again, but already the eagle with its heavy wing-beats had cleared the ground; this time it took the lamb with it. Harry saw that it meant to fly, as it had flown yesterday, to an edge; and then out into the free air over the chasm, and over the valley far below.

Harry gave chase, stumbling over the broken ground, and between the boulders—striking at the eagle as he went, trying to beat it down, before it could escape. The eagle was hampered by his attack; and suddenly it swooped on to a projection of rock and turned again to drive him off. Harry was now in a bad position. The eagle stood on the rock at the height of his own shoulders, with the lamb beside it. It struck at his chest with its talons, beating its wings as it did so. Harry felt clothes and flesh being torn;

buffeting blows began about his head ; but he kept close to the eagle and struck at it again. He did not want simply to frighten it away ; but to kill it. The eagle fought at first simply to drive Harry off ; then as he continued to attack it became ferocious.

Harry saw his only chance was to keep close to the eagle, and beat it down ; but already it was at the height of his face. It struck at him from above, driving its steel claws at him, beating its wings about him. He was dazed by the buffeting which went on and on all round him : then with an agonizing stab he felt the claws seize and pierce his shoulder and neck. He struck upwards desperately and blindly. As the eagle drove its beak at his head, his stick just turned the blow aside. The beak struck a glancing blow off the stick, and tore away his eyebrow.

Harry found that something was blinding him, and he felt a new sickening fear that already one of his eyes was gone. The outspread beating wings and weight of the eagle dragged him about, and he nearly lost his feet. He had forgotten, now, that he was proving anything to his father ; he was fighting for his eyes. Three times he fended off the hammer-stroke of the beak, and at these close quarters the blows of his club found their mark. He caught the eagle's head each time, and the bird was half stunned.

Harry, reeling and staggering, felt the grip of the claws gradually loosen, and almost unbelievably the body of his enemy sagged, half fluttering to the ground. With a sudden spurt of new strength, Harry attacked, and rained blows on the bird's skull. The eagle struggled, and he followed, beating it down among the rocks. At last the eagle's movements stopped. He saw its skull was broken and it lay dead.

He stood for many minutes panting and unmoving, filled with a tremendous excitement ; then he sat on a

boulder. The fight had taken him near a steep edge a long way from the body of Tassie.

His wounds began to ache and burn. The sky and the horizon spun round him, but he forced himself to be firm and collected. After a while he stooped down and hoisted the eagle on to his shoulder. The wings dropped loosely down in front and behind. He set off towards the farm.

When he reached his home, the low, grey walls, the ploughed fields, and the green pasture fields, were swimming before his eyes in a dizzy pattern. It was still the early part of the morning, but there was plenty of life in the farmyard as usual. Some cows were being driven out. One of the cart-horses was standing harnessed to a heavy wagon. Thorburn was talking to the carter and looking at the horse's leg.

When they saw Harry come towards them they waited, unmoving. They could hardly see at first who or what it was. Harry came up and dropped the bird at his father's feet. His coat was gone. His shirt hung in blood-stained rags about him; one arm was caked in blood; his right eyebrow hung in a loose flap, with the blood still oozing stickily down his cheek.

'Good God!' said Thorburn. He caught Harry by the arm as he reeled. He led him into the kitchen. There they gave him a glass of brandy and sponged him with warm water. There was a deep long wound in his left forearm. His chest was criss-crossed with cuts. The flesh was torn away from his neck where the talons had sunk in.

Presently the doctor came. The wounds began to hurt like fire, but Harry talked excitedly. He was happier than he had ever been in his life. Everybody on the farm came in to see him and to see the eagle's body.

All day his father hung about him, looking into the kitchen every half-hour. He said very little, but asked him several times how he felt. 'Are you aw reet?' he kept

saying. Once he took a cup of tea from his wife and carried it across the kitchen in order to give it to Harry with his own hands.

Later in the day old Michael came back, and Harry told him the whole story. Michael turned the bird over. He said it was an Erne, a white-tailed sea eagle from the coast. He measured the wing span, and it was seven and a half feet. Michael had seen two or three of them when he was a boy—always near the coast—but this one, he said, was easily the largest.

Three days later Mr. Thorburn took Harry, still stiff and bandaged, down to the village inn. There he set him before a blazing fire all the evening, and in the presence of men from every cottage and farm, Thorburn praised his son. He bought him a glass of beer and made him tell the story of his fight to everyone.

As he told it, Thorburn sat by him, hearing the story himself each time, making certain that Harry missed nothing about his struggle. Afterwards every man drank Harry's health, and clapped Thorburn on the back and told him he ought to be proud of his son.

Later in the silent darkness they walked back to the farm again, and neither of them could find anything to say. Harry wondered if his father might not refer to the beating and apologize. Thorburn moved round the house, raking out fires and locking up. Then he picked up the lamp and, holding it high, led the way upstairs.

'Good night, Harry,' said his father at last, as he took him to his bedroom door. 'Are you aw reet?'

His father held the lamp up and looked into his face. As the lamplight fell on it, he nodded. He said nothing more.

'Aye,' said Harry, as he turned into his bedroom door, 'I'm aw reet.'

The General Remembers

‘**S**PEAKING as an old soldier I have always had the highest admiration for acts of courage. Sheer physical bravery inspires me. It always has.’

‘Surely, General, everyone must feel the same about bravery. Everyone admires it.’

‘I suppose they do, I suppose they do. But my feeling is more than admiration. I can hardly describe it to you. When I see acts of desperate courage, I feel that men rise above their own minute lives, and their personalities. I seem to see through their bravery a tremendous pattern—the pattern of history.’

‘Bravery is your poetry, General.’

‘Poetry? Yes, I suppose it is. I have always felt the same about bravery. Even when I was a child my mind was for ever dwelling on ideas of physical courage. Any books that described acts of bravery, I read again and again.

‘I found one of those books the other day. *Brave Deeds of Our Century* it was called—meaning the nineteenth century. I hadn’t seen that book for sixty years, and yet as I turned the pages, the words came back to my mind as well known to me as the church service. I could repeat whole passages from memory.

‘I remember one story in particular that was my especial favourite. It was about a drummer boy, and that in itself seemed something almost electric with romance. This drummer boy was of course teased and laughed at, and his courage was questioned.

‘But the time came when the ranks wavered, and he stood up and drummed away till the danger was past and the men had rallied. “At last our gallant drummer boy was struck by a splinter, the brave rat-tat-tat began to falter.” You see, I still know it all by heart. “He swayed, pale with anguish from a wound he would not reveal, and fell into the arms of a burly sergeant who laid him in a place of safety. Then cheer after cheer broke from a hundred British throats, amid the smoke of battle, like a trumpet call answering the gallant deed of that young lad.”’

‘And so on. And how often have I stood side by side with that drummer boy, and been a trumpet call myself, and been caught in that sergeant’s arms. Night after night before I went to sleep I have revelled in that scene, word by word. And day after day my mind has wandered off to it during lessons.’

‘It was all rather foolish. All rather romantic, I suppose. Children must have been more simple-minded in those days. I was almost idiotic with imagining brave deeds.’

‘And, General, I suppose you have fulfilled those ambitions?’

‘No, I think not. That’s the worst, I suppose, of letting children and young people run away with romantic ideas. Yet I don’t know how you can prevent it. There’s so much time in childhood, isn’t there, for dwelling on ambitions which have no connection with reality? Facts are always so very different from hopes and longing.’

‘But surely the fact of being brave, of actually doing a courageous act, cannot be so very different from stories of being brave.’

‘I don’t know that I agree.’

‘You must in your time, General, have done plenty of brave things. You’ve fought in many campaigns, haven’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You won a D.S.O. in South Africa, didn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you do that?’

‘I don’t think I was in the least brave on that occasion. It was just an obvious duty. In fact, I don’t know that I could have avoided it.’

‘What did you do exactly?’

‘Well, I happened that day to be dancing attendance on old General Hadley-Woods. There was a bit of a Boer thrust going on and we had a bird’s-eye view from some high ground of the course of events. One of our positions, where there were guns and infantry, was in some danger of being surrounded—and there was a flat open stretch of half a mile or so under fire from the enemy.

‘The general said, “If you can get a message across there, you’ll save two guns and half a battalion.” I thought he was greatly exaggerating the whole situation, but there was obviously only one thing for me to do. I got on my horse and galloped off with his orders.

‘It was a good gallop, and I like a good gallop. My chief worry was taking a rather nasty jump over a stream. I have never been first rate on a horse, but the general was an expert, and very critical of my horsemanship. I was afraid of making a fool of myself.

‘However, I got over the jump very well, or so I thought, and that was really all I was worried about. I never noticed the bullets. And afterwards I got the D.S.O. It all seemed very different from the drummer boy. It was just a bit of luck.’

‘Everybody who wins medals says that. But there must have been something, General, in your life that really came up to your childish hopes and aspirations.’

‘I very much doubt it.’

‘What do you seriously think is the bravest thing you

have ever done in your life? Is there nothing you can pick out?’

‘Yes, perhaps there is. Perhaps there is. I believe there is one thing that I really can call my bravest action.’

‘What was it?’

‘Well, it has nothing to do with the Army. It was when I was a child in fact. But I’m afraid I’m getting garrulous; fault of old age, I suppose. Don’t let me bore you. Have another glass of port, won’t you?’

‘Please go on.’

‘Well, I suppose I was six years old at the time; not more. My father was rector of a parish in North Oxford. We lived in a big family house, where everything was spacious and untidy. It was very homely and delightful and all rather ramshackle.

‘My father used from time to time to make remarks about the house falling down for lack of paint, and I never knew how seriously to take him. Sometimes I thought he meant it as a kind of obscure grown-up joke, and at other times I thought he was really worried by it. Then I felt very sorry for him and anxious about the whole family; I used to worry and worry because father hadn’t got enough money to repair the house.

‘One summer afternoon I was playing in the garden. Like the house the garden was large and untidy. It was looked after very little and its overgrown shrubberies and bushes and unused sheds made a happy hunting ground for us.

‘At this particular moment I was the only child present, and there were several strange grown-ups. They had come to lunch, I think, and father had brought them out for a stroll round the garden. I went on with my own little affairs, but I was half listening, at the same time, to what the grown-ups had to say to each other.

‘Suddenly I heard my father say, “Look at that! Look

at that crack over the back door. Good heavens, we shall have the house about our ears any day."

'I looked. I saw the crack. There was a large stone which went right across the top of the back door. The crack was in this stone. Fear and horror seized me. I can remember a kind of hot stab of pain that made me gasp, and the summer day suddenly became a nightmare.

'The grown-ups went indoors, and I was left staring at the crack.

'It looked to me a terrible crack. At any moment the house might come tumbling down, all because of this crack, and my father and mother and my two sisters, and my new baby-brother, would all lie killed or terribly hurt among the ruins of our home.

'Yet the days went by and my father did nothing about it. I went about in a kind of dull agony—the fear of it always with me. I couldn't talk about it. Presently I decided that my father did not know what to do. He, like me, was just waiting for the crash, and he couldn't talk about it any more than I could. I can still remember as I played in the garden in hot sunshine suddenly I would think of my own fear and the danger that threatened us all.

'So, at length, I decided that I must act. It would not matter if I was killed in the attempt. This was my plan. I would arise one morning very early when everybody was asleep, and I would get my modelling wax, and I could fill that crack up with modelling wax.

'Of course it would be desperately dangerous. To go near the crack at all, even to look at it, was frightening: to stand on a chair face to face with the crack—to touch it and fill it up—that was an act which made me quake even to imagine.

'For days I went about trying to screw myself up. Plainly, it must be done one morning, done before the rest of the family were awake. No one must know about it.

They would never allow me to risk my life. When I had done it the family would be saved—the whole district would know of my brave action—and I should appear in story books like the little Dutch boy who put his thumb in the dyke. I might even take a modest place somewhere far behind my drummer boy.

‘Morning after morning, when the house was hushed, I lay awake trembling with fear, trying in cold blood to force myself to do it. And at last one morning in the chill of dawn, with teeth chattering, I found myself actually creeping downstairs, my heart beating, and a large piece of modelling wax in my hand.

‘On the kitchen stairs I met our old tabby cat. He rose and purred and rubbed himself against my legs. In the semi-darkness, I felt for his head; I can recall that he almost broke my resolution and as I stroked him I felt that this might well be the last familiar, homely action I should ever perform.

‘Then as gently as I could, I unbolted the back door, and pushed a chair into position. I know that I have never felt so frightened in all my life. I can’t understand what infantile will-power it was that drove me on. My heart thumped and thumped and I felt almost certain that when I touched the frightful crack I should at once be crushed to death.

‘However, by this time I had been heard. My father, expecting to find a tramp in the garden, came running along the passage in his shirt and trousers.

‘For a moment we stared at each other.

‘“You,” he said, “go back to bed this minute. What on earth are you doing?”

‘“Daddy,” I said, “the crack. I’m mending the crack.”

‘“What crack?”

‘“The awful crack, that’s going to make the house fall down. I’m mending it. I’m saving us all.”

'After some more explanation, he began to understand.

"But it was only a joke," he said. "Just one of my jokes. The crack's nothing. Have you been worrying about it?"

'Very kindly he led me back to bed.

"Go off to sleep and don't worry about it any more," he said. "It was very good of you to try and mend it, but it's quite all right."

'I lay in my bed wide-eyed and watchful.

'Later in the morning my mother said to me :

"Daddy asked me to tell you all about the crack. Let me explain. You see it was quite all right really. Just a joke."

"Oh," I said. "Don't ! Don't !" and I began to sob. All the pent-up emotion poured out of me. I was utterly disgraced. There had been no danger—just a grown-up joke. And I, idiotic little fool, had taken it seriously. I hadn't been brave. I had just been babyish. Now all the uncles and aunts would tell the story of how I had tried to save the house.

"What is it, my darling ?" said my mother. "Tell me all about it."

'But I would sooner have died than revealed myself any further. So I simply sobbed and pushed her away.

"You are a funny little boy," she said. "If only you'd tell me what it is——"

'But I have never told anybody till this minute. It's funny how your mind goes back to these childish memories when you're getting old. You've got time to think again when you're old.

'I'm sure now, that was the bravest action of my life, and the only one that really came up to my own childish hopes and ambitions of being heroic. But it's taken me all my life to find it out.'

A Message for Dad

‘MUMS, Mums ; I say, Mums.’
‘Do mind that jug now, child, you’ll have it on the floor as sure as eggs are eggs.’

‘But, I say, Mums, what’s wrong with Dad these days ? He’s been so cross.’

‘There now, Daise, that plate isn’t half washed. Look at the egg still on it. If only you’d talk a bit less, and watch a bit more what you’re doing.’

‘Oh, Mums, now you’re going all cross and horrible.’

‘Get along, Daisy, you naughty rude child. I’m not going to have you calling me horrible—not even in fun.’

‘Not even if you *were* horrible,’ said Daisy.

‘One more back answer out of you,’ said her mother, ‘and I’ll catch you such a slap.’

‘Of course you aren’t really horrible,’ said Daisy. ‘You’re such a darling, popsy little mumsy-wumsy, aren’t you ?’

Daisy’s voice went into a high squeak as if she were talking to a pet kitten, and she danced from one foot to another.

Daisy was ten years old. She stood at the sink dabbling half-heartedly in the washing-up bowl, and handing the slippery plates out to her mother.

She had a round face, and a snub nose, and two brown pigtails. A pair of large grey-blue eyes helped her face to look almost pretty, but it was movement and expression that gave it attraction.

Her eyes laughed when her mouth looked solemn. Her mouth twitched when her eyes looked steady. Thoughts flickered across her face like wind on the surface of a pool. Her colour changed from red to white under a skin that was a transparent veil of vivid feeling.

As she stood at the sink her slim legs vibrated with the movements of a body that could scarcely be kept still.

'Oh, little popsy Mummy,' she said, and turning suddenly round to clasp her mother, she smashed the plate she was holding against the wall. The pieces clattered on the floor.

'There, you silly little fool!' said her mother.

She pushed Daisy roughly aside, and began to pick up the bits.

Daisy clasped her mother round the waist.

'Do you love me?' she said. 'Don't be cross.'

'Help me pick up the bits then,' she said, 'and don't hinder me. Get the dustpan, can't you! Here, let me come and finish the washing up; you're more trouble than you're help.'

'But, Mums,' said Daisy, 'I was going to say something to you. I was going to say, what's wrong with Dad lately?'

Mrs. Roberts sighed. Her careworn face looked a shade more lined, a shade more uninterested than before.

'Is anything wrong with him?'

'Yes, I think so. He's been that cross and grumpy lately. Fairly bit my head off yesterday, when I sneezed in his ear. He tried to hit me, but I dodged.'

'There ain't no call for him to go hitting you round the head.'

'I don't mind,' said Daisy. 'I can always dodge. He ain't quick. As long as he don't catch me by the arm. But what *is* wrong with Dad?'

'Nothing. Don't go on so. He's no worse than usual.'

'Yes, he is worser than usual. I'll tell you what I think, Mum.'

'What?'

'He's worried. He wakes up gloomy. He comes 'ome gloomier. He goes off to the pub as often as he can.'

'Well, that's what's wrong with him. Drinks too much : so bad for his stomach.'

'I think he's worried about his job, Mum.'

'About his job? What do you know about his job?'

'Well, it's just what I think, Mum ; that's all. I think he's going to lose his job.'

'Oh, don't talk like that. We've had enough losing jobs : ever since he parted with the old Colonel—Hush, now, here he comes.'

'I've got a message for him,' said Daisy in a tense whisper. 'Something to tell him.'

'Don't go talking to him, till you see how he is.'

There was a heavy slouching tread outside. The next moment Daisy's father stood in the kitchen.

He put down a spade and a fork and some other gardening tools with a clang. Daisy and her mother looked at each other quickly ; there could be only one reason that he had brought them home. Then he went to the back door and kicked the loose earth off his boots.

'Hullo, Dad !' said Daisy.

He came back into the kitchen. His red face was angry and sullen as the mask of a tormented bear. His eyes had almost vanished beneath a set scowl. His chin was on his chest. His hair tousled over his forehead.

He looked round the kitchen while they watched him. Unable to speak, at first, he gave a growl. Then fell on to a wooden chair which creaked beneath him.

'Ain't I to get no supper?' he said.

'Got some back rashers for you,' said Mrs. Roberts. 'I was just clearing me and Daisy's tea away.'

'Why can't you have it ready?' he said, 'and pack the child off. I don't want her messing around while I eat. How often have I got to say that?'

'I'm just helping Mums,' said Daisy.

'Shut up!' he shouted. 'If you back answer me, I'll —' He grunted. 'Expect me to slave day and night to keep the home going, and when I come in there's nothing ready. Why don't you make that child work a bit? My Dad would 'ave. She's pampered, that's what it is. Here, what's all this in the dustpan—broken plate, is it? Did you break that plate, Daisy?'

'I was helping Mum.'

'Did you break it?'

'Yes.'

'Come 'ere!'

Step by slow step Daisy went to him, her eyes fixed on his. She stood close beside his chair.

'All you can do is to waste money, isn't it? Break another plate, and I'll take a stick to you, see? That's what my father would 'ave done to me, when I was your age. That's right; you begin to cry about nothing now. Brought you up too soft; that's what I've done. All I do is to work, work, work—giving you the best of everything, and all you do is to break things, and waste the money as fast as I make it.'

Daisy stood still, her eyes on his. Her lashes were wet, but no tears fell.

'Fine lot of use you are to me, aren't you? What do I get out of it all? Look at that pretty frock you've got on. Very nice too. Look at all your story books. I never heard of a child with so many books.'

'Very nice to sit home and read all day, isn't it? But I tell you you've got to learn different. You've got to learn

to help your parents. Life ain't all play—and if you can't learn sense, I'll have to learn you in a way you won't like.'

Daisy's eyes flickered for a moment to her mother's face, then back to her father.

'Now,' he said, 'take them boots of mine, and clean 'em up for to-morrow—and show 'em to me when you've done 'em. And give me my supper for God's sake, woman. How much longer are you going to keep me waiting?'

Without a word Mrs. Roberts put the rashers still sizzling before him. Daisy took the boots to the outhouse, and began to try and clean them. She soon saw it was a hopeless task with wet clay and earth still clinging to them.

She poked the mud off with a stick, but whatever way she tried some still clung on. Then she tried to cover the mud with blacking. The boots were wet all over, and no sort of a shine came on them.

She waited, looking at the boots smeared with mud and too much blacking, and wondered what to do with them. Then her father called.

'Ain't you done them boots? Bring them in.'

She brought them, and he struck them out of her hand on to the floor.

'What do you call those?' he said.

'They were wet,' she said. 'Can't clean boots when they're wet.'

'All right,' he shouted. He rose from his chair, glowering at her.

Daisy backed, then stood her ground. Her mother caught her eye and signalled with a raised eyebrow towards the door, but Daisy was caught against the wall.

'All right,' he said in a quieter threatening voice. 'Think you can cheek me, do you? This time I'll show you it ain't so funny. Go on. Clear out. Clear off to bed, and I'll come up with a stick later, and give you something you won't forget.'

Daisy edged towards the door. Her father raised his arm as if to give her a parting cuff, but she slipped out and left him threatening the air.

Very slowly she climbed the stairs of the little box-like house. When she reached her bedroom she stood at the window staring out. A sudden movement downstairs, the opening of a door, sent her scuttling to bed. She sat on the bed in her night-gown, listening, her knees clasped against her chest.

Her father's step went back to the kitchen. Then she heard his voice and her mother's voice rising and falling in a long argument.

She crept again to the window. It was a chill April evening, still much too early for her bedtime. It had been raining and a pale watery light shone across the back gardens and the few straight rows of little brick-built houses that edged the market town.

In the quiet evening she could hear her parents' voices going on and on. She hung out of the window. Her father no longer sounded angry—but gloomy and weary. Her mother's voice came shrill and hard.

'What did I tell you, Ted?' she said. 'I told you no good would come of it. But you had to go on.'

'So hard on a chap,' her father's words were lost in a low grumble.

'That's all very well,' said her mother. 'I told you again and again to stop it—but you had to know best. Now what are we going to do?'

'Oh, shut up.' Again her father's voice ran off into a low-toned grumble.

Daisy drew her head in from the window. Then she began to creep downstairs. Her feet felt in front of her for loose boards. She pressed her fingers to her mouth, as if telling the stairs and herself to be silent.

On the bottom stair she sat down and listened. Now she could hear her father's words plainly.

'It's no good going on at me,' he said. 'It's done now. I can't help it. I thought it would be all right.'

'Fancy you sneaking his money like that.'

'I tell you I didn't sneak it. I only borrowed it. I meant to put it back next day, only the luck's been so against me. What's a chap to do? I seem to work hard enough, week in and out.'

'And have you got any of that pound left at all?'

'No.'

'Did you put it all on that horse?'

'On horses.'

'Oh, I've no patience with you, you big fool. What's the sense of going on like that. Just a big fool. Well, you've got us into this mess. You'd better get us out. Is he going to take it off your wages week by week?'

'I tell you I've been sacked, so there won't be any wages. And he says if I don't pay him back in a fortnight he'll prosecute me.'

'Well, how are you going to do that?'

'I don't know. I don't know.'

He groaned aloud.

'Can't you try and go back to old Colonel Wethered's?'

said Mrs. Roberts.

'How can I? He said he'd never have me back again. And that was a dirty way to treat a man after ten years' work and winning prizes with his roses—and everything. Treated me rottenly, he did.'

'It was all your own fault. Turning up late like you did—and going off to the pub at dinner. No wonder the Colonel got sick of it. And now you've turned thief.'

'I tell you, I'm not a thief. I only borrowed the money. 'Tain't fair to let a chap have the handling of all that money—and then come down on him so suddenly.'

'That's right, you be sorry for yourself. Say it's all your bad luck. Only you'll be lucky if you keep out of gaol this time. And what about me?'

He groaned and groaned again.

'Oh, shut up,' he said. 'What's the use of kicking a chap when he's down. I wish I could go and get drunk.'

'Got any money?'

'Not a sixpence.'

'That's one good thing, then——'

She heard her father's chair scrape along the floor. He took a step towards the door. In a flash she was up the stairs three at a time. She sat on the bed and began to shiver. She found she had become very cold while she was sitting on the stairs in her nightgown.

She clasped her knees to her chest, and felt her heart beating. Her father was coming upstairs. Had he heard her? What was he going to do?

She heard her father's hand at the door. Then he stood in the doorway and looked at her. He had no stick in his hand.

'So you went to bed,' he said.

'Yes, Dad.'

'Well, perhaps that'll teach you not to back answer me. I'll give it to you next time.'

'Dad,' she said, almost smiling, 'I want to tell you something.'

'Well, be quick. I don't want to hang about listening to your chatter.'

'All right, Dad. When I was out this afternoon, I met old Colonel Wethered.'

'Oh.'

'He said to me, "You're Ted Roberts's daughter, aren't you?" So I said, "Yes, sir." I always call 'im *sir*, because I know he's the sort as likes it.'

'So you ought to call 'im sir. Is that all you kept me up here for?'

'No, Dad. Then he says—"I hear you're doing well at school—and you're always top of your class." So I said, "Yes, sir, touching wood, I am." Then he says, "I was talking to the schoolmaster about you, and I hear they're putting you in for a scholarship in a year's time." So I said, "Yes, that's right, sir," and he said, "That's a good girl; work hard and I hope you'll get it, and be a credit to your father."'

'Oh.'

'So I said, "Thank you, sir, I hope I shall." Wait, Dad, don't go. Then he said to me, "What is your father doing now; is he in regular work?" So I said, "Oh, yes, sir, he's got a very good job up at the market gardens." Then he said, "Can you carry a message to your father from me, and be sure you don't forget?" So I said, "Yes, sir," and he said, "My gardener's going; tell your father, I want him to come back and work for me like he did before."'

'Did he say he *wanted* me to come?'

'Yes, Dad; he said *wanted*, and so he ought to want, I think. The other gardener wasn't half so good as you, I'm sure.'

'H'm. All right. Thanks, Daise. That's a good girl.'

He came near the bed, placed a large rough-feeling hand on her shoulder, making her shiver slightly. Suddenly she put her arms round his neck, and looked into his sullen, unwashed, unshaved face. Then she kissed him on the end of the nose.

'All right, Daise,' he said, and patted her on the back. She kept her arms round his neck and said:

'You think you're very tough, Dad, don't you?'

He growled.

'But shall I tell you what I think of you?'

He found her eyes fixed on his.

‘I think you’re not so very tough,’ she said. ‘I think you’re rather like a little boy—a little boy about my age ; who does rather naughty things and then gets into a whole heap of trouble.’

She pulled his face close to hers and kissed it hard.

‘But I love you,’ she whispered fiercely in his ear, ‘all the same.’

She let him go abruptly and lay down in bed.

‘Good night, Dad,’ she said.

‘Good night, Daise.’

He wandered to the door, and looked back at her as if there was something else to say.

‘Good night, Daise,’ he said again. ‘Good night.’

Her Last Tears

AT Villa Garcia our boat took emigrants on board. It was about twelve o'clock. We nosed in among the islands and moored a mile or two off the shore. As we rose and sank gently on the swell, our turbines silent, we could see the lights of the town in the distance. Presently it seemed that one of the shore lights had detached itself, and was slowly bobbing out towards us.

In time a small steam-launch reached us, with twenty or thirty emigrants on board. The light fell on their faces—pale, bewildered, seeking faces. Their movements were uncertain and tentative, and the gleams of light fell on them in broken flashes. Sheep-like and unhappy, the little crowd of emigrants was jostled up a gangway and hurried away into the bowels of the ship.

The next day we glided on down the coast, and at Leixoes took on more emigrants—many more.

Now it was the very heat of the day. An immense, violent sunlight fell on everything. Bright-coloured rowing boats, red, green, and yellow, came out to meet us. The water of the harbour sparkled white in the glare. The sand looked almost white: the whole town was aching in white heat and dust.

Then the emigrants were driven up the gangway: not twenty or thirty this time, but two hundred. A few of the cabin passengers leant across the rail of the first-class deck smoking and chatting as they watched the emigrants file past.

The passports of the emigrants were inspected on deck. Each peasant yielded up his papers with a lost, uncomprehending face. Why? Why were some passports correct and others not? Why were some set aside and re-examined? Why were one or two families not allowed to board? Who could possibly understand?

The men were brown and yellow and gnarled. They looked like roots and tubers freshly taken from the ground, with the earth still clinging to them. Many of the women walked barefooted, which gave them a lovely and unusual poise. Most wore full black skirts of ankle length, which swung gently at each step; and yellow or green handkerchiefs were hooded over their heads.

They came with babies sitting astride their hips, and older children clinging to their skirts: aged men and women hovered round them. There were whole families of the land's poorest people, clinging to each other in bewilderment. They looked as if they had walked straight from their cottages and huts, hatless and shoeless, their handfuls of belongings wrapped in coloured handkerchiefs.

The customs officials shouted brutally at each family in turn. And tears more than once came to the women's eyes.

After an hour or so of noise, of shuffling feet, of brown and timid faces, they had all gone below to the emigrants' quarters, all except one old woman who was left sitting on a bench on deck, by herself. She was so old, so withered, so far sunk in weariness, she seemed hardly to know or care what was happening to her. Her own passport was approved, but her family was in difficulties, and had been sent back on shore, children and all. The time for sailing was now very close, and it began to seem likely that she would be swept off, uncomprehendingly, alone. But she gave no sign of emotion: she never glanced towards the

quay to see if her family were coming back. She looked straight ahead with dead, unchanging eyes.

Her face was a brown and crumpled mask, hardly human : so lined, so withered and world-worn that never again, it seemed, could it express her passing feelings. Her forehead and her cheeks were graven this way and that by the heavy hand of time, and left with one meaning only : a load of years that extinguished all but the last flicker of human feelings. Once she had had a lover, borne children. Once she had smiled and wept, been hurt, been glad ; but now her heart was too tired for feeling, her eyes too old, too sunken, ever to gleam or sparkle.

After eighty years of the stress of life her feet were treading the planks of a ship : she was uprooted and sent to die in a strange place. And without sighing, without moving, she gazed before her.

Among the passengers who saw her was a French girl of nine or ten—Huguette. She was a slender, dark child, very distant and remote, with delicate, light movements. Huguette watched the old woman with intense pity in her gaze, dropping her eyes hastily every time their glances met. Suddenly Huguette ran away. In a few moments she came back again, walking carefully and holding something in her hands. It was a small china model of the sixteenth-century Tower of Belem, a famous landmark on the north bank of the Tagus estuary.

She slipped under the barrier and went to the old woman, and placed the model on her lap. For a moment they looked at each other. Then Huguette gently touched one withered, unmoving hand.

'Ma petite église,' she said.

The old woman nodded, took the model in trembling fingers, and looked at it. She tried to say something to Huguette. But Huguette, overcome with shyness, darted away and vanished, unwilling to be seen by anybody.

When Huguette had gone the old woman looked at the model in her hands and stroked it. The afternoon seemed quiet now that the crowds had gone, and the air was changing to a softer coolness. After a long time she raised her head and, leaning it against the wall behind her, closed her eyes ; and from each closed lid tears trickled down her brown, wrinkled cheeks. For a flickering moment, as she wept, the grotesque mask of age was turned again to a living face, a tender, sensitive face, full of memories of joy and sadness, and a long tale of passionate feelings.

Then her family, their papers now in order, came on board. They gathered round her and led her away with them into the depths of the ship. And as she followed them her face resumed its utterly dead, expressionless look.

The Vicar's Lady

AFTER the death of the Vicar's wife the women of the Mothers' Union were very anxious that Miss Louie Dallas should preside at their Thursday tea-time meetings. In fact, the two or three women of the circle whom the Vicar often called 'his old faithfuls' insisted that it should be Miss Louie Dallas, and no one else. Mrs. Alberton, wife of the baker and confectioner, came up to the Vicarage one afternoon to see him in person about it.

'Please do tell little Miss Louie,' she said, 'we don't want no one else but her at they Thursday Sewing Meetings, now we can't have poor Mrs. Saunders.'

'Well,' said the Vicar, 'you know best whom you want. And yet,' he went on with a smile, 'of course, I'm only a man, but I can't help wondering if Miss Anne Dallas would not be more useful to you; I'm sure she knows more about cutting out, and all the rest of it.'

'Oh, there, Vicar—please,' said Mrs. Alberton, '*please* do ask Miss Louie Dallas to do it now. She's such a sweet little lady—and we do all respect and love her so.'

The Vicar thoughtfully ran his finger round the inside of his collar, and raised his head. Really, of course, the women were afraid that Miss Anne, the elder sister, would be a little too strict with them: would not lend herself quite so easily to gossip and cajolery. And then there was Mrs. Alberton's little order of buns and cakes from her husband's shop for the teas; Miss Anne might have something to say about that.

'All right, Mrs. Alberton,' he said, after a while, 'I'll ask Miss Louie, then. She's done so much in the parish all the last two years or so, while my poor wife was so ill.'

'Yes, she has indeed, Mr. Saunders. Now Miss Anne 'aven't got the time to be doing near so much. Being so much the elder sister, she's the 'ousekeeper of they two, sir, and she likes to devote more of her time to seeing the silver and furniture is kept up to the nines, and the books tally, and all things like that. But that little Miss Louie, she's so kind and nice—the very lady for us, sir.'

'Yes, she's a . . . ' the Vicar hesitated. He had nearly said, 'She's a dear.' He cleared his throat and changed it to 'very suitable.'

So the mothers of the Mothers' Union had their way.

One Thursday afternoon in the autumn, after Miss Louie had been presiding at the Mothers' meeting for the best part of a year, she was very late in arriving. After waiting and talking for some time, the women began without her.

'I remember now,' said Mrs. Alberton, 'Miss Louie did mention to me she would have to come on down from the Vicarage to-day: she went to see to the china and plate or something for this party he 'aves to give now they've made him Rural Dean. Likely she'll be along to us later.'

'She gives Mr. Saunders a deal of help these days, doesn't she, Mrs. Alberton?'

'Yes, Sarah, she does that.'

Sarah Greggs was a perky and shrewd little grandmother of Mrs. Alberton's own age and standing.

'Only this very last week,' said Sarah, 'she was telling me she took tea at the Vicarage every week so as to help Mr. Saunders through with various of the things. And very nice, too, I daresay she looks, sitting by his fireside and pouring out of that big old silver teapot of his.'

'Sarah,' said Mrs. Alberton, 'that's what I call drawing

a long bow at a venture. How do you know as Miss Louie actually pours out for the Vicar ?'

'Yes,' said one or two of the women, 'do you know—or are you just romancing ?'

It was felt to be a point of considerable importance.

Sarah Greggs looked round at the assembly over the top of her spectacles. She was a wizened little thing, and she had lost all her teeth. She was bright and bird-like, and seemed to keep some of the spirits of a teasing little girl even into her sixties. She knew that all eyes were upon her. So she carefully moistened a thread between her lips while they were waiting for her to answer, then threaded a needle, turned over a hem and pulled a stitch or two through it with a great air of preoccupation. Then she looked up and spoke.

'I ain't romancing ; and I don't see no reason for you, Mrs. Alberton, nor you others, to doubt my word.'

'Listen here,' she went on, leaning forward and addressing them all, 'she pours out every time she takes tea at the Vicarage. She sits on the left-hand side of the study fireplace, in the selfsame place where his poor dear lady used to sit : and she do pour out of the selfsame silver teapot. And I know that, first because my niece Millicent as is working there told me ; and she's a good, truthful girl. And secondly, because Miss Louie herself told me as much with her own lips, at the very last meeting we had.'

This piece of information set off quite a buzz of comment and conversation, and all were profoundly interested. Sarah Greggs turned more particularly to Mrs. Alberton, and said : 'That's as true as I'm set here, Martha, sewing shirts for they little blacks.'

'Maybe it is,' said Mrs. Alberton, 'but what's the sense of going and telling ?'

'Get along with you,' said Sarah, 'there ain't no harm in that. What do we come 'ere for, but a bit of nice-

mind ed gossip—and if we ain't to open our blessed mouths about our own Vicar, what next? And when it comes to a new Mrs. Saunders, why, then, it's the 'ole parish's business, whether he likes it or not. That's how I sees 'un, anyways.'

Mrs. Alberton sought for something to say, but only got as far as a slow 'Well . . .' when Sarah was off again.

'Besides, Miss Louie told me so herself. And then look how often Mr. Saunders be round to dine with the Miss Dallases—once a week, I'll lay. And very nice, too. Miss Louie's a dear, sweet lady, and 'tis time the poor man had a good wife—for the late Mrs. Saunders were an invalid, poor dear soul, for two year or more before she was took. Let 'im take Miss Louie, say I, and let 'em have a good time, for we're all as the Lord saw fit to make us: and it'll make both on 'em more happier.'

'Sarah,' said Mrs. Alberton, 'if I thought you weren't speaking in all seriousness, I should be shamed to hear you talk so. And starting other tongues a-clacking, too. Still, it's done now.'

'I don't set no tongues clacking,' said Sarah, 'they clack without me. People ain't blind. . . .'

At this moment the door opened and Miss Louie darted in. She was flushed and flustered. There was a sudden silence and all eyes were upon her.

'Oh, gracious me,' she said, 'I'm so sorry—I'd no idea it was so late. I've been up at the Vicarage helping Mr. Saunders with his arrangements for the meeting to-morrow—and we suddenly found it was after half-past three.'

She began to take off her coat and untie the scarf at her neck. Her face was doll-like and pink; she had a pair of very new gloves. Everything she wore was new and neat and good—and yet old-fashioned.

'Well,' she said, 'you needn't all stare at me so, please, even if I am late. Do I look wrong, or anything?'

'No, that you don't, miss,' said Mrs. Alberton, coming up to her. 'Let me take your things, miss. You looks ever so nice, if I may say so—you looks so young and fresh.'

'Thank you—thank you, dear Mrs. Alberton,' said Louie, slipping out of her coat. 'How nice of you.'

'This is a lovely coat of yours, Miss Louie,' said Mrs. Alberton. 'Real good it is, and I can see that's a good bit of fur round the collar and cuffs. Perhaps you'll be putting it in the next jumble sale, miss; I must tell my Daisy to look out for it. I love to see her in your things, miss. They're so good always.'

'You're too quick with Miss Louie's things,' chipped in Sarah Greggs. 'You took all the best at the last one. It ain't fair no one else should get a look in. I think Miss Louie's coat would suit *me*—don't you, Miss Louie, my dear?'

'Now, now, Mrs. Greggs,' said Miss Louie, 'you just said that to be provoking, you know you did. And fancy quarrelling over the very clothes on my back. Nobody shall have the coat—because there's a lot of wear in it for me yet, and I don't contemplate giving it away in the least.'

'There, my dear,' said Sarah, 'it was only my joke; don't be too hard on us, Miss Louie.'

'I shall be very hard on all of you,' said Miss Louie, and broke into a laugh at once. 'We've a lot of work to get through this afternoon; and several things I wanted to read to you.'

'Well, don't read us no Mission stuff, miss,' said someone. 'You gave us that last time.'

'Be quiet, Daisy,' said Mrs. Alberton sharply. 'Don't hearken to her, Miss Louie; there's some of us likes to hear of serious things, and work among the natives.'

'I relish a nice love story,' said Sarah, 'and I ain't ashamed

to say so. The young seems all for blood and killing nowadays—but I can sit over a love story till the tears roll off my chin. Why don't you read us a nice *love* story, Miss Louie, with a marriage and babies in it at the end. After all, we're a Mothers' Union.'

'Oh, Sarah,' said Mrs. Alberton crossly. 'You go on, Miss Louie.'

Miss Louie reached for the book on missionary work. As she opened it, she knew that Sarah's eyes were fixed on her. And for a moment she could not begin. There was a funny atmosphere about this afternoon. Everyone seemed to be watching her.

So the afternoon passed with more talk than reading, and a very easy amount of sewing.

The Vicar arrived, big, handsome, and genial, before Louie realized she had been at the meeting half an hour, and he closed the afternoon with a prayer and a hymn.

A few minutes later, while the mothers were putting on their coats and putting away their sewing, they saw Miss Louie leave with the Vicar and go off beside him to the Vicarage.

'Really, Mrs. Greggs,' one of the younger women said to Sarah, 'you shouldn't ought to 'ave come out with all that about love stories and babies. Poor Miss Louie looked quite uncomfortable; I'm sure she knew what you was thinking.'

'What of it? She'll be needing to get used to our thinking things a bit, if she's going to become Mrs. Saunders; she'll be a married woman and a mother like you or me then. She'll need to do something more than blush.'

'Mrs. Greggs!'

'Ah now, my dear, don't you go thinking, I mean nothing disrespectful. Little Miss Louie is ourn, ain't she? She's a lady, and such a sweet innocent I never saw—with no one to tell her, for old Mrs. Dallas died when she was

a slip of thirteen, and Miss Anne a young lady in her twenties.'

They were now on the pavement outside the parish rooms, bidding each other good night. It was a crisp, clear October evening. They saw the light go up in the Vicar's study, and a moment later a hand drew the curtains, letting a single shaft of light still shine through.

'Of course,' said Mrs. Alberton in her slow, careful way, 'in some ways I've often thought Miss Anne would make him the better wife.'

Later that evening the Vicar sat sipping a glass of port all by himself at the dinner-table of Miss Anne and Miss Louie Dallas. How charming their house was, he was thinking. How perfectly they did everything, how wonderfully neat and shining the whole place looked; what a well-managed dinner, what a good maid; all so quiet and so utterly right.

The Dallases must be a good family. They knew how to run a household. A worldly matter, perhaps, but it was the knowledge itself that pleased him. The good old-fashioned, decent knowledge. His own family understood these things, too. And in a position like his, and in other positions in which he hoped and expected to find himself, good breeding still went for something.

Now he took a second glass of port, and stirred his coffee in its exquisite black and gold Minton cup. One or two Georgian gentlemen watched him from the walls in the dim candlelight. The glowing coals settled in the grate and began to flicker and flame afresh. His glass of port, twirled slowly by the stem in his fingers, cast ruby specks on to the brilliant silver and snowy cloth.

But putting comfort aside—putting the graces of life aside—how kind and helpful the Misses Dallas had been the last two years. They had grown quite near to him; especially Miss Louie.

When he went to the drawing-room the lights were soft : the room was quiet and cheerful. The two ladies were busy sewing beside a spotlessly swept hearth and bright fire. Louie rose to greet him. She laid a hand on his arm and led him to the chair that they always put out for him. Miss Anne went on with her sewing. She never made the impulsive and quick movements which were characteristic of Louie. She never did anything in a hurried or undignified way. She had, the Vicar thought, the perfect repose and authority of a superior being of the *ancien régime*. She was wearing an iron-grey dress of silk, the colour of her hair ; beautifully made, without a hint of fashion ; snowy lace closed her throat and turned back her cuffs. One small diamond buckle sparkled on the grey silk. One would not have called it an evening dress, as one thinks of such things—yet it could only have been worn in the evening.

After a little while the Vicar said : ‘ I wonder, Miss Dallas, if you could spare your sister for another hour this evening, over at the Vicarage ? We were right in the middle of some rather urgent forms when she had to go to the Mothers’ Union this afternoon.’

Miss Anne looked up and inclined her head as if slightly surprised at the request.

‘ I promise faithfully to send her back early to bed ; Colonel Blackett is coming in at a quarter to ten about the Ruridecanal Conference, so I can’t keep her later than that.’

‘ Certainly, Vicar, if you wish it,’ said Miss Anne, paying most of her attention apparently to her work, ‘ but I hope you won’t think me interfering if I ask you specially to leave Louie with me to-night. As a matter of fact, she has been feeling rather tired lately, and has been overdoing things a little. So if you would excuse her this once, and not work her *too* hard in the next few weeks . . .’

‘ Why, certainly,’ said the Vicar, ‘ how selfish of me !

Have I really been driving the willing horse? Of course Louie must rest and take things easily. Well, I must be going along, anyhow.'

But after the maid had given him his coat and scarf in the hall, he returned to the drawing-room to bid a further good night, and said :

'All the same, Miss Dallas, I am going to ask your sister for a little extra help in the next few days : but I'm sure she won't find it tiring. It's not parish work. May is home from her visit, and in a week or so she is going up to Somerville for the winter term. Now the poor child is motherless, she must have some help in buying clothes and getting her things together. May is simply counting on Louie. So we'll give her a complete holiday from parish affairs, if she'll help May.'

'Of course—of course !' cried Miss Louie, in delight. 'I've always been so fond of May. Which day will she be back ?'

And Miss Anne said in her usual unsmiling way, 'Certainly. We can hardly ask Louie to refuse that ; but please, Vicar, don't let her do *too* much.'

Mr. Saunders took his leave, smiling to himself.

At eleven o'clock that night, when he had said good-bye to Colonel Blackett, the Vicar, who was by no means a self-indulgent man, did a most unusual thing. He pushed right away from him the papers he had intended to look through before to-morrow's meeting. He poured himself out a stiff whisky from the decanter which he kept as a rule only for visitors. Then he sprawled in his arm-chair, with his legs upon another, lying rather than sitting ; and smoked a pipe with deep puffs.

How well Miss Anne had managed her reference to the situation, he thought. It was the most delicate reference—yet quite clear and firm. Miss Louie was tired ; it would be better if she did not work quite so hard. 'In fact, dear

Vicar,' Miss Anne had really contrived to say, 'ought we not just to begin to think of defining the situation a little?' He appreciated her perfect tact and *savoir-faire*.

And he felt that he had dealt with it rather well in his turn. He had pleaded for vagueness and family friendship quite adroitly and Miss Dallas had taken his point so quietly and sensibly. But there *was* a situation to be considered; she meant him to realize that. And really the Dallas family would be a very suitable connection. He could almost begin to see Anne as a new sister; a slightly grim, yet loyal and effective relation. He felt a very strong admiration for Anne.

He looked round at the smoke from his pipe. He saw his own home, awkward and comfortless now; the fires never seemed to go really well; the place felt a little bare and unlived in. A few nights ago—no, it must have been weeks, or even months now—old Sarah Greggs, his housekeeper's aunt, had said to him: 'Mr. Saunders, this house needs a lady's hand to set it to rights, sir. It's getting a bachelor's look into it. My niece is a good girl, but she can't set a dinner on the table like they do at the Miss Dallahses'; she needs showing how. One of these days, sir, there's some of your best friends in the parish would be very 'opeful to see you a married man again.'

'What, Sarah?' he had said. 'Me marry again? You don't understand. No, no. Please don't ever mention it.'

He had felt almost shocked. He felt he could scarcely approve of second marriages. Marriage to him had been a young man's and a young woman's love. Now he was forty-five. And Miss Louie must be nearly forty; for of course it must be Louie that old Sarah was thinking of. But that was three months or six months ago. One became accustomed to different ideas. Now he had seen Miss Louie pour out so often at his fireside. He could imagine her at his table; he could see her on parish occasions by

his side ; he could see her inspire the Vicarage with a new life. She was a lady so well versed ; she was a companion so sympathetic. Like any clergyman, he was used to the admiration and support of women. It would be very welcome to find her always ready to help, to fiddle-faddle after him.

Then a different view of her came into his mind ; a different view altogether. He saw that it was getting late, and it was time for him to knock out his pipe and go to bed.

At the same time Anne Dallas, looking just as spick and span in her dressing-gown as she did in her evening dress, knocked on Louie's bedroom door.

'Louie, dear,' she said, choosing a moment when Louie had almost disappeared inside a cupboard to hang up her frock, 'I do hope you won't mind my referring to this—but do you think it quite *wise* to spend so much time at the Vicarage ?'

'Quite wise ?' said Louie, and she blushed deeply. 'What do you mean exactly, Anne ? Do you mean my going to the Vicarage could be—that people could gossip about it in a nasty way ?'

'No, I don't mean that at all. Don't think that,' said Anne. 'I hope the Vicar would have a great deal too much understanding ever to let anything like that arise. I was thinking, is it really quite wise just from your point of view. You don't want to become too dependent upon the Vicar's companionship. Nor should you let him rely on you too much and too often.'

Miss Louie Dallas flushed again. She lay awake for a long time . . .

In the next few weeks Louie made a new conquest. May Saunders had known Louie since childhood, and had

always found her the kindest of all grown-ups. Now she was completely charmed by Louie's devoted attention and sympathy, by her constant brightness and energy, by her interest in any idea and project that May ever spoke of.

So, in a few months, when May was back again from Oxford, Louie was round at the Vicarage more than ever. She seemed in the eyes of the parish to draw closer and closer to the Vicar. Even Anne could not but believe that the Vicar himself had made a deliberate move in inviting Louie's close friendship with his daughter; that was how Anne looked at it.

Christmas came. The Vicar's house was full of his own relations. But it was Louie who helped May to decorate the church with holly and ivy, and to arrange a tiny Nativity shrine with candles round it. It was Louie who helped May to take the decorations down again from the church and from the Vicarage itself after the guests had gone. And it was Louie who packed May's boxes a few weeks later when she went back to Oxford for the Lent term.

Meanwhile at the Mothers' Union, they were almost naming the day, and taking it for granted that soon Miss Louie would be the Vicar's new lady, though here and there one would say that the Vicar thought very highly of Miss Anne, too, and that she was really more the lady for the position.

'Where are we now?' said Sarah Greggs some weeks later. ''Tis getting on to the middle of Lent, justabouts. Well, I says that before the summer is out we shall hear all about it; and when these sewing meetings start again next winter we shall 'ave Miss Louie sitting here as Mrs. Saunders.'

'Well, I 'ope so,' said Mrs. Alberton. 'I think they should be happy.'

'Ah,' said Sarah, 'but sometimes I do wish Miss Louie

were a bit more . . . ' she seemed doubtful how to put it, ' a bit more a woman of this world. P'r'aps when it comes to the idea of marrying him, she may find she likes things well enough as they are, and turn the poor man down. She may find she ain't the marrying sort.'

As a matter of fact, Sarah had got this view of Louie from her own husband, a man equally ready with a free tongue and outspoken opinions as Sarah herself.

' She won't marry 'un,' he said scornfully one night when she kept talking about it ; ' you put it out of your 'ead. She won't have 'im, Sal—for all your tongue's given her to him thirty times. You talk too fast. I tell you she won't have 'un.'

' Why, she'll never say no to 'un,' said Sarah. ' What makes you think so ? '

' Well, I can't seem to see her marrying no man,' said Mr. Greggs, ' be he parson or pub-keeper, or a plain gardener like me. Miss Louie's a nice little lady to stop and pass the time of day with—and many's the nice bunch of blossoms I've tied up for her—but she's more like a little child or a doll. She won't marry the Vicar when it comes to the point. She'll turn 'un down.'

Some of the women saw the force of these ideas when Sarah had passed them on—and felt there was something to it. Perhaps Miss Louie would turn him down. Perhaps he would come to choose Miss Anne.

One afternoon Miss Louie came to the Mothers' Union, and everyone could see she was excited.

' Please, everybody,' she said, ' you must excuse me this afternoon.'

Her cheeks were bright, her eyes shone ; she looked younger and prettier than ever.

' I'm afraid I shall have to desert you for the whole afternoon.'

' Oh, Miss Louie—you ain't never going to leave us be

all by ourselves ; it won't seem like a meeting at all without you.

'I'm wanted at the Vicarage,' she said, 'all the afternoon. It's some very urgent work poor Mr. Saunders must get off by the evening post ; he's a Proctor in Convocation, you know, this year.'

'Oh, Miss Louie . . .'

'I'll be back at the end of the meeting,' said Miss Louie, 'for certain ; and I'll bring the Vicar with me.'

Mrs. Alberton went to the window and watched her cross the road and run up the Vicarage steps. The front door opened as she came—before she had even reached it.

But at five o'clock the Vicar came without Miss Louie.

'Miss Louie sends you all her apologies,' he said. 'She wanted to go off home ; I'm afraid she had a bad head.'

Then next week, again, there was no Miss Louie. Mrs. Tatlow came and presided at the meeting. She was not a lady who encouraged talk or attended to anything but the work in hand, and they had little time to exchange views.

Mrs. Alberton found time to tell one or two people that Miss Louie was down with an attack of her old illness ; no one quite knew what it was.

'Dear Miss Louie—and she was looking so well, too ; it's all been too much for her, poor child ! Did you see her, Mrs. Alberton ?'

'Only a glance—she looked quite pale and ill.'

That evening the Vicar dropped a bombshell.

'I'm going away,' he said to the mothers. 'All alone. I'm going to give myself a good rest from the parish, and the parish a good rest from me. Now we're over Easter, I can well take a long holiday.'

'Oh, sir—where are you going ?'

'Fishing,' said the Vicar. 'Just by myself. My daughter's back at Oxford again. Do you know how long it

is since I've been away? No, I knew you didn't. I haven't had a single Sunday off for two full years. I need a rest.'

The Vicar went, and left a buzz of questioning behind him. What did it mean? Why was he going? Surely they would hear something before he left.

But the next Sunday there was no Vicar, and no news.

Mrs. Alberton relapsed into a gloomy silence. Sarah talked faster than ever.

'What's it all mean?' she said to her husband a dozen times. 'That's what I wonder. Why's Mr. Saunders gone off like that? What's 'e gone for?'

'Fishing,' said her husband. 'E told you plain enough.'

'Fishing be blowed,' said Sarah. 'And where's Miss Louie? We ain't seen her this three weeks. Perhaps she's gone away, too.'

'Fancying up an elopement, are you?' said Mr. Greggs with a derisive laugh. 'You'd talk yourself into anything. I tell you, Sal, if you'd only listen for two minutes together, it's as plain as a coach'ouse door. The Vicar's gone for a fishing trip by 'isself, and I don't blame 'un. What could be more natural? He asked Miss Louie—that's plain enough—and she turned 'im down, same as I said she was going to. And I should say he's well out of it. Now, don't you go and start in on me . . . I'm meaning no disrespect to your little Miss Louie. Look at that old dry log there,' said Mr. Greggs, pointing to the fire with his foot. 'Now he's a dead 'un; he's been lying round for a year or two, dry. And the *nature's* all gone out of 'un. But the nature hasn't gone out of the Vicar, not by a long way. He likes a bit of fishing, and he likes a bit of riding; he sits a 'orse like any man round here; and didn't he used to be a county cricketer in his young days? I tell you, Sal, he's a man, same as me or any of us. There never was a wedding between they two.'

‘Well, I say . . .’ said Sarah, but for once she fell to thinking instead of talking.

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The Vicar did marry again ; but it was two years later, and Miss Louie was not the bride. She never married. In a few months her little illness was over ; the Vicar was back from his holiday. Miss Louie was still a great friend of May Saunders—still very bright and cheerful with the Vicar in public ; and sometimes it seemed she went to the Vicarage as much as before, and that there was no change.

Then two years or so later the Vicar introduced the new Mrs. Saunders. She was a widow, younger than Miss Louie by several years, and as unlike Louie as possible. ‘A fine big young lady,’ the mothers described her. Isaac Greggs said : ‘She’d make two of t’other.’ She could push the heavy Vicarage mower all the morning and play a good game of tennis in the afternoon. She was some distant connection of the Vicar’s, it was said ; she was big and handsome and strong.

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The Dallas drawing-room was bright with summer sunlight and wallflowers. This was just a month after the Vicar had been married.

Anne Dallas sat by the remains of her tea at the french window. She could read and knit at the same time, and also watch the lengthening shadows in the garden.

Presently Louie came in, and at once began to talk excitedly.

‘Well, dear,’ she said. ‘Here I am. They were rather early back, so they found me still arranging the flowers for them and making certain that everything was quite nice. The Vicar knew I was coming in to do it for them. And he seemed so pleased to see me—he insisted on my staying ; and he made me pour out tea for them.’

Miss Anne nodded and raised her eyebrows with interest. She seldom actually smiled.

'I knew you wouldn't mind my coming back late. I thought she seemed so nice, dear—she's so young—and like him in a way. I'm sure she's the very woman for him. And he looks so well and happy—quite boyish. There, that's better.'

Louie had broken off from what she was saying to adjust the angle of a falling wallflower in the bowl.

Anne bit off her thread with a jerk. Then she sat frowning at the sewing in her lap for some moments.

'Louie,' she said, 'I ought not to ask, I know. Please forgive me, Louie, for asking—why *did* you refuse him—oh, why *did* you refuse him?'

There was no answer. Anne looked up and saw her sister's tears were falling quickly on to the brown and yellow wallflowers . . . falling . . . falling . . .

'He never asked me,' said Louie.

I Have No Feeling of Regret

HOW bright the snow is outside. It lies very thickly in the yard and everywhere I look. There is a man crossing the yard with a bucket. He makes no sound. He is walking as if he were in my dream. His feet make no sound and he has no shadow. The air is so pale and the snow so brilliant that the light seems to be irradiated from every part of the sky at once. He sets his bucket down noiselessly. The whole world is cloaked with whiteness.

Everything is becoming clear in my mind. Only the endless arguments have been a dream; but inside I can see clearly what has happened.

I am now twenty-two and Eva nineteen. From the very first our marriage was against the wishes of her parents and of mine. They thought I was too young. They thought it would be too much of a struggle for me. They have always made my path too easy and all they thought about was my material comfort. They thought of me growing middle-aged and having a comfortable house and servants just as they have always had.

Yet my real happiness they did not understand or think about. That I needed poetry in my life, and colour, and a new sort of love meant nothing to them at all.

Then they thought Eva was below me in social class. Her own parents told me that as well as mine. Her parents and mine put their heads together and they entirely agreed with each other. Her father argued like this—'We are

only poor people. I am a simple soldier, the son of a country labourer, who has fought his way through life ; who by his own bravery and long service has been promoted to the rank of a sergeant ; who has retired and become a porter in a famous club, the resort of gentlemen and aristocrats—a man of the old school, who knows his own place, thank God ; and you (meaning my father), you are a gentleman, a professional man, one day you might come into this very club as a guest.’

That is how our parents talked. ‘It would be very uncomfortable for them if we married. My friends might not accept Eva. My grandparents would be austere and shocked. Eva herself could not enter into my life.’

But this, to us who loved each other, was the most wicked nonsense. We loved. We loved with all the ardour with which it is possible for two people of our age to love. Ever since I fell in love with Eva my life has been transfigured ; I have seen where there is a flame, and where there is no flame. And when my father said ‘But what money can she bring ? What settlement can I make with her father ? How will you live ?’ there was no flame in his words, or thoughts at all. He was being kind ; but his kindness was dead ; the flame had gone out, and in its place he had put a gas fire, an old-fashioned gas fire, supplied with a cheap and stifling gas from the black bowels of the earth, and heart of the city.

But to me and to Eva all was radiance. We thirsted for each other. It was in the country last summer that I first met her, and we were bound to each other from the very moment that we met. At our first interview, the very first hour in which we saw each other, we knew. We looked at each other, and we knew.

That very night, stealing away from the others, we lay on the hill-side—the branches were above us ; above the branches we could see the stars ; and an indescribable

pleasure and intoxication filled our limbs. Our hearts began to beat as if we should die ; and when our bodies touched our joy filled the whole sky.

From then on, you will understand that there was no question, no second thought in my mind. I was going to marry Eva, and to question it, or even to think of questioning it, was as if you should say to a strong swimmer who has dived into deep water, ' Do you intend to swim or to sink ? '

I too was plunged suddenly into a new element which flowed clear and refreshingly about me, though to others it was all unseen.

At once, the very next morning, I began to lay my plans for marrying Eva. My people were soon calling me unpractical ; yet I was intensely practical in the way I carried it through. The purpose was as clear as light in my mind, and, therefore, I always knew the way to advance towards it. You will see whether I was practical or not.

I was then still a student in my last year at the university ; but I found that under special circumstances the course could be shortened, and I could sit for my examination a full year earlier.

I visited the professors myself, and I convinced them that my father had lost so much money in the recent financial troubles that it was necessary for me to begin earning at once. They asked to see my father, but I replied with great assurance that he was ill, that he was so nervous and mentally worried that he could not speak of his money affairs for himself. But in his place I gave a complete account of his income ; I showed a list of his stocks and the taxes he had to pay. I mentioned, too, my mother's illness, the expenses of the doctors. I showed them that it was I who had taken over the control of all the affairs of our family. I showed them a letter, seeming to come

from my father, referring to his own illness and supporting what I said.

I had prepared my story so carefully, that the committee of professors, together with the bursar of the university, were completely convinced. The bursar asked me many searching questions, but the invention was so completely clear in my mind, that he could raise no point which found any flaw or improbability.

They all agreed that it was necessary for me to take my degree early, and they gave full assurance that every allowance would be made by the examiners. My next task was to apply myself with the utmost rigour and thoroughness to the work that lay before me. I had a small room in the town near the university, and visited my home for week-ends only. I set myself to a four months course of work, and discovered powers of concentration and study which I had never imagined I possessed.

I used to wake myself at five, have a cold bath and a cup of coffee. I would then work from half-past five or six until eight o'clock. I would then eat a light breakfast, with one or two other students, and spend about half or three-quarters of an hour in their company. I would then go back to my room, and attack my work with astonishing zest, which seemed to be heightened by seeing my friends wandering about in the market square, or going in and out of the main entrance of the university building, wasting their time and unable to apply themselves.

My luncheon I would always eat alone, thinking over my work as I did so. Then I would walk for an hour, still thinking and planning in my mind. Early in the afternoon I would return refreshed by the air, and would work on till about one hour before dinner. I would then give myself an hour of complete relaxation. I would put my studies away, my thoughts would turn to Eva, or to some amusing book or play or conversation with my

friends. I would lounge along the streets or sit at a café, and for an hour I would be idle and frivolous.

Again after dinner I would work on as long as the spirit moved me, but usually I went to bed by ten o'clock. In this way I could work for twelve or fourteen hours in the day, and my exhilaration mounted as I saw the immense amount of work I could cover, and the extraordinary powers of self-control and concentration which I possessed.

I entered now, for the next few months, into a private world of my own mind. The whole of my programme of work, reading, making notes, studying my notes and learning passages by heart, was complete in my mind, right up to the day of the examination ; and my excitement grew intense, as I saw the edifice of my achievement mounting just as I had intended, hour by hour, book by book.

I became possessed, so that as I drove myself on I found I needed less food, less sleep. The world around me grew dim, the streets, the shops, the buildings of the university, the booming of its clocks, the sweep of its pigeons' wings, became faint and nebulous. My own home, which I visited on Sundays, was a dream : only the print of my books was real, and my desk and the alternate sunlight and lamplight that fell on it. Even the lovely image of Eva grew dim, but she never vanished completely. I knew that it was Eva who was beckoning me on, and when her face, her almost childlike face, with its golden hair, appeared before me, I would smile and be filled with a new strength and joy to attack my task.

At length the examination came and for a week I poured out at a high speed the knowledge that I had prepared. I do not pretend that it was deep ; but it was clear. I never hesitated for a fact, for a quotation, for a scheme of ideas.

A few days later the examiners were heaping congratulations upon me. My papers had astonished them ; but I need not go into that. This was all part of my plan. It

was necessary that my papers should make this impression, because I now proposed to use the influence and help of the professors in the university to find work for myself, work that would begin to pay me a salary, however small, at once.

My tutors, from what they knew of me, suggested that I should become a writer or a teacher, but already I had formed quite a different plan. The district from which I come is, as you know, agricultural ; the country life of hundreds of villages and of immense acres of rye and wheat and barley is concentrated on our town.

When I came for the first time to think seriously of employment, it seemed to me that our two or three firms of grain merchants were the businesses and the families which occupied the wealthiest, the most dignified, in fact the best positions in the whole life of our part of the country ; and through their interest and wealth they are closely linked up with the banking houses.

And I saw that the wealth and importance of the grain merchants, together with their banking connections with other cities and in other countries, put them in a position of genuine control over all the affairs of our town. The professional men might pretend to look down upon these merchants ; so might the old landowners ; but I saw quite clearly that the professional men, the landowners, the builders, the shopkeepers, and our little university itself, were all grouped round the central flow of wealth and life which the grain merchants controlled.

I argued to myself now, that if I could secure a position anywhere in one of these businesses as a warehouse clerk, as a factor who travelled among the farmers, or as a salesman who visited millers and bakers, I should be bound in the course of years to rise to a position that would put me beyond all criticism and feelings of social disadvantage.

I had never thought of this before. I had scarcely thought

for a moment of what my future life was to be. Up till now I had merely supposed, vaguely, that I should become a university professor or a writer as my tutors had suggested.

Now my mind was changed by my love for Eva. I saw things swiftly and clearly. My friends at the university were surprised at my idea, but by their influence I secured some interviews with some of the most powerful men in the grain business. I prepared myself for these meetings with the same thoroughness as I had given to my studies. I read up the grain business from books and from statistical documents. I talked to millers and to farmers, and I looked up the personal histories of the men I was to interview. I know I made an impression at these interviews. One man in particular was interested in my account of myself. I retold the story of my father's illness, of my responsibilities, then of my examination. His questions revealed my interest and knowledge in his own business. All this was unusual in a university student. He very quickly made up his mind that I was worth his attention. He gave me a position in his business, in which I was to begin at once as a clerk in a department which dealt with transport. If, in a year's time, I was doing well, he promised that I should be given the opportunity to learn every side of his business, just as a young member of his own family would be.

The very next day, at my own wish, I began my new work. We were within two or three weeks of Christmas now and on this evening the weather turned suddenly cold. The sky went grey and yellow with a hint of snow. The richer men wore their heaviest overcoats. I made up a glowing fire in my stove.

At the same time I felt the most extraordinary relaxation and release of my nerves and my will-power. Marriage with Eva was now almost within my grasp. No longer need I plan and drive myself. That evening I bought a

bottle of wine, and drank it alone in the room where I had worked so long and so furiously.

All the time I had scarcely seen Eva. Now, alone, she came to me. Images of her filled the room, all those sweet images of her that I had driven away for weeks thronged about me ; her face leaned over mine, her golden hair falling against my eyes and lips. She kissed me, and I felt the very warmth of her lips and saw the excitement in her eyes. I saw her sit on the bed beside the wall. I saw her walk and stand by the window. I spoke to her, and her voice answered. Together we lay on the bed and whispered to each other.

When I woke and dressed the next morning Eva was still with me ; and I was as perfectly with her as if she had in fact been there. When I reached my work, her image left me. My mind and will reverted to the level of control and order which I had given them.

That evening I thought again that there was no need to delay. Eva lived in the town with her parents, and she had work in a shop. Now I could tell her that everything was arranged and we could be married the very next week. We must be married in time for Christmas. I decided that I could not tell my parents about the marriage until Christmas day itself. They were still thinking that I was at the university as a student. They had no idea of my activities during the autumn. On Christmas day I proposed to reveal the whole situation to them.

Again, as I made these plans, the image of Eva came to me so clearly, that my heart beat and tears sprang to my eyes. 'Eva' I whispered in my room. The wind was piercing outside, the air was harsh ; but inside my room and inside my heart there was joy brighter than a hundred suns. It seemed to me that all the air was glittering with my happiness. Eva's image stood before me so clearly that I could scarcely believe that she was not with me.

But the next night she was with me in actual fact. I brought her to my room and very tenderly I took her in my arms and held her silently and unmoving. We sighed again and again, and her eyes, as I looked into them, were windows into her love for me and her soul. The deepest calm and contentment filled us, and we passed an hour as if it had been a few minutes. Our mood now was like the calm waters of a wide river which flows bright and clear and steadily, without a ripple.

Later I revealed to her the whole progress of my plan. All that we had to arrange now was in what way to conceal our marriage from her parents until Christmas : then we would confront her parents and mine with the living and unalterable fact when our last difficulty was overcome.

I found that Eva had already promised the shop people, with whom she worked, that she would sleep in their house, in order to help them during the week before Christmas. Thus it would be easy for her to give them notice, and to leave her parents' house ; and not only to marry, but to spend the whole week before Christmas with me.

As she left me, I knew that her heart and her will and her spirit were drawn to mine as firmly as mine were drawn to hers ; and I knew, that though her will was less resolute than mine, her soul was caught in a spell, a wheel of life that was stronger than she was ; that would turn, and bring us together through a million hardships, that would make her, young and timid though she was, pursue her love for me to death.

The next day when I woke the skies were grey and heavy. Banks of snow were gathering under them, the wind was harsh, people's faces were pinched, and they hastened about the streets with their heads buried in their coat-collars. I went to my work at the 'grain merchants'. I worked and I spoke mechanically. Inside me there was a rushing torrent of joy. I knew now that in two days Eva would be mine.

All that day the images of Eva were in my mind. I saw her, spoke to her while I worked. In the evening I lay silent or sat with my head in my hands. An hour passed and another. I needed no food. And so another day went by. My body and the surface of my mind moved like a machine. Inside I was obsessed with her.

The next day we were married. I had made all the arrangements. I came away from my office, she from her shop, at lunch-time. In less than an hour the civil ceremony was completed, and we each went back to our work. It was now snowing. In the snow I met by chance my father. He asked me how my studies at the university were progressing. 'Very well,' I said. I gave him an account of them. As I did so, I watched myself speaking. The words came from my mouth glibly: I answered as if the last four months of my life had not existed. But to me this meeting was a dream.

The scene changed, my father drifted away from me in the snow and I was back at the office. In the afternoon my employer visited my department. It was the first time I had seen him since I had joined the firm. He had a long talk with me. Again my voice answered automatically, taking up its appropriate part, that of the eager apprentice, whilst I, amazed and dreamlike, heard it speak. Then in a tumult of strange dreams of Eva and of the past few months I went back to my room. I made up the fire in the stove. I prepared a drink of hot spiced wine from an old recipe of my mother. Then the door opened and Eva was with me. Her face was bright from the cold. There was snow in her hair and on her coat. She stood on the threshold. I drew her in.

For a long time we neither of us spoke. I gave her some of the wine to warm her. She was trembling from head to foot and so was I, but it was not from cold.

Now as I looked at her time had stopped. My own

heart beats were separated by years of my life. The room grew magnificent, while we in it were two tiny images inside a dream palace. Then the room disappeared and we two grew huge. Her face was as large as the sky itself. How long we remained silent I do not know. At length I drew her towards me, and as we embraced we shuddered. The pent-up feelings, the hopes and fears and the strain of months were relieved. We saw that we had been given to each other, that the waiting and the dreaming were over. She burst into a flood of tears, and as I kissed her I found that tears were streaming down my face also.

At length we grew calmer. We drank more wine. So the evening and the night passed, and the joy that I had known on the first night when we had met and loved in the country darkness was no more than a tiny stream, compared with the immense tide of pent-up love and desire that now carried us away.

Next morning when we woke the snow had fallen thickly. It was still falling. The world had turned white. Footfalls made no sound and voices were muffled. As the flakes fell we could not see across the street.

We parted, and I went to my work. In the evening as I came home, walking in the snow, I noticed in the window of a theatrical costumier a beautiful dress which caught my fancy. It was of heavy white damask with a silver and gold pattern, a reproduction of a costume of the high Renaissance period. It glittered under the brilliant lights of the window, and a small crowd gathered in the dusk to look at it. I pictured Eva to myself in it.

On the third or fourth morning of our marriage we had a sudden violent quarrel. Eva confessed to me that I had not been her first lover, and that two years before she had known me, a cousin, a boy of her own age and class, had seduced her. This had only happened once, she told me.

I do not know that I seriously care about this, or that I cared about it at the time. I do not think it made me angry. It had been a swift passing incident of sudden physical pleasure. It was trivial. Her cousin was nothing to me and almost nothing to her. Eva was now all mine, and mine in a way that this boy had never dreamed of. Yet when she told me of it a sudden stab made me feel, was she wholly mine? Might she not now suddenly slip away from me? And that made me take her with a quick violence in my arms, and hold her roughly instead of tenderly, with one hand tangled in her hair and the other pressed round her throat, till she gave a stifled scream.

I did this only for a moment; a savage gesture of possession. I smiled as soon as I did it and released her at once. But she cowered away from me. She had not understood. She was angry and frightened. How dare I lay hands on her? Was this all the love I had for her?

I said nothing and after a while I tried to soothe her, but she still utterly failed to understand my emotion. She came from a class in which the more brutal men strike the women. That was all she had seen in me. And suddenly this enraged me again. It seemed that for the moment she *was* no longer mine. She was resisting me by her crying and by her fear. I seized her again, feeling, you *are* mine! How can you ever leave me or have any existence apart from me?

I held her hair and throat as I had done before. I bent her backwards fiercely, looking into her eyes, which stared at me in terror. She tried to shriek and to struggle.

I thought—Good God! This is not Eva. She writhed. I flung her away from me with a sudden revulsion. She fell with a crash, striking her head against the solid metal of the stove. Instantly she lay still, and I finished dressing myself and went to my work.

The work that day was extremely absorbing. We had

to account for a shipment of grain, for which we had guaranteed delivery, and which had gone astray. I discovered after many inquiries, that, owing to a curious mistake, of the telegraphic company, the captain, to whom the instructions had been cabled, had taken the shipment to the wrong port. Having discovered this, it remained to decide whose was the responsibility for the mistake; what was the amount lost by our firm in having our shipment refused, after the delay; and so on.

In the course of the afternoon I had to take a written report on the matter to our lawyers in a different part of the town. As I walked through the streets I felt the snow move softly under my feet. I saw Eva as she had come to me on the first night of our marriage, with bright cheeks and snow in her hair.

All thought of the scene in the morning had vanished from my mind. It seemed rather that these few moments of our quarrel were an idle trick of my fancy, and that all my other pictures of Eva were real.

But when I opened the door of my room, she did not run to meet me. She lay silently and still in the dusk of the room. She lay exactly where I had left her by the stove. She was clothed in a single silk chemise. It was half torn away from her body. Round her head was a little pool of blood, cold and dried. I gazed at her. The colour had vanished from her limbs. She lay like white marble, gleaming faintly in the dusk. I picked her up, and already she was cold, utterly cold, and becoming stiff. I laid her on the bed and covered her with the bed clothes.

I then got myself some supper, which I ate calmly, and finished a letter to my parents as I had intended, planning to see them for Christmas. I slept in a chair by the stove. I felt happy and very calm, for I felt now that I could never lose Eva again, and that our love which had been perfect could never be made imperfect.

The next day I went to my work as usual. Again it was an interesting day. We were still occupied with the same case in our department. We received a cable from the captain of the strayed boat. I had now to make a full report on the matter and take it to one of our directors at his private house. When I left him, it was about twelve o'clock in the morning. I began as I walked through the snow to think of Eva. I did not think of her as being alive or dead. I did not believe that she was alive or dead, any more than I believe I am alive or dead now ; but I thought of her as cold as marble, and I wanted to make some offering to show my love and to set off her beauty. It did not seem right that I should let her lie as she was.

I thought of the wonderful dress of white damask, patterned with gold and silver tissue. While I thought of it my feet took me to it. The crowd moved softly round me. The sky was grey. I asked the price of the dress and it was thirty pounds. I had only a few shillings. My weekly pay was only a few pounds. However, in my room I had a gold watch, a gold cigarette case, a signet ring, and an excellent suit of clothes.

I only remember the snow falling, the heaped snow, now grey underfoot, and the crowd of dream people on the pavement. I went to my room. I went from place to place, pawning, selling, persuading, talking, all that afternoon. The sky turned from grey to brown. The sun was a veiled opal light behind the domes of the cathedral.

When I had collected enough money it was dark. I returned to the shop and made an offer of so much cash on the spot for the dress. The proprietors agreed to this, and the dress was wrapped up for me. I took it and set off again. Suddenly I realized that hours had passed, and that I had not returned to my work since lunch-time. It had been snowing heavily all afternoon and grey mounds

of snow were now swept to the sides of the main roads. In the dark I stumbled and fell against them.

The shops were beginning to put up their shutters. The streets were empty now. Soon the dirty, trodden snow was becoming covered again with a new white surface.

I found I still had several pounds in my pocket. These too I wanted to spend on something for Eva. I came to the flower market and there I found a stall where a man in the dark was carefully packing away the remains of his unsold stock.

Among his flowers were some huge white chrysanthemums—each blossom as big as two fists, brilliant white globes. I showed him I had money, I told him I wanted hundreds of these blossoms—hundreds—to-night. He told me that at midnight a new delivery would be coming up from the country. I arranged to meet him at his stall at midnight, and he promised to secure as many flowers for me as my money would buy.

The streets were now deserted. I wandered by the river. I crossed the bridge, backwards and forwards ; the clouds moved away and the sky was clear. I walked in the cathedral square where the new fallen snow sparkled with a crystalline surface under the brilliant night sky. I heard the bells ring eleven and then twelve o'clock. Then I returned to the flower market. The flower seller took me to a dark, silent, cement-paved hall where a lorry was unloading white flowers in the darkness. I waited while he and another man piled a hand-cart high with the white chrysanthemums and branches of white lilac. I gave the flower seller all the money I had and together we went back to my room, wheeling the cart. I told him to be quiet so as not to disturb the caretaker, and silently we carried the flowers in armfuls and put them outside my room. Then I said good night to him.

I opened the door of my room. The moonlight streamed

in through the window making squares upon the floor. Swiftly I set to work. I placed Eva upon the outside of the bed coverlet. I found the pillow on which she had been lying was stained with blood. The wound in her head must have broken open and flowed afresh when I first moved her. I took away the blood-stained pillow. I thrust this and also the crumpled bedclothes into a cupboard. I placed a clean white sheet and clean pillow on the bed.

Then I clothed Eva in the damask dress. In the moonlight the white and silver and gold were all drained to the same dead marble as her face and breasts. I laid her in this dress on the bed, and combed her hair.

Then I arranged the flowers, blossom by blossom, spray by spray. I worked with great patience and care, and when I had finished the bed itself was entirely hidden. I had made it appear as if Eva was floating on a mass of white blossoms. They welled up in a bank from the floor and then rose again against the wall above her.

The gold and silver fabric of the dress was half revealed, half concealed by the tide of flowers that rose around her. I left her hands showing among the flowers, while arms were hidden. Her head and hair and throat and hands appeared as if she rested upon a tide of blossoms. They held her up like a sea. Her head lay on lilac and chrysanthemums. The pillow and the sheet were entirely hidden.

When I had done this there were still many flowers left. I strewed them about the room, hiding all the furniture as far as possible, leaving nothing to be seen but flowers.

I worked all night very intensely and carefully ; and passionately, because I felt I must complete my work before dawn. And when I had done everything possible the dawn of a new winter's day was breaking. As the light came in minute by minute, I saw more clearly the picture I had made.

In the new snowy light the masses of white flowers seemed to dazzle the eye. In the very midst of the thickest bank of flowers the form of Eva's body was hidden. I could see only her hands and her face, now pale as marble among the flowers with blue-lidded eyes and an exquisite and deathlike beauty. Round her face her yellow hair streamed and was lost in the flowers.

I gazed entranced as the light grew clearer and clearer. Minute by minute I gazed, and I saw the whole of human life and desire, and all the future and the past, of my life and of a million lives. I saw and felt the meaning of life and death. I saw into God's eye and I knew that I would never live nor die again nor in any sense come nearer to the truth than I had come in this hour and in this sight. And I heard the sound of a distant sea.

Then, I think, after much calling and far-away voices and a noise like the sea, which I hardly heard, the door was burst open, and the room was full of people. I was taken away but I neither thought nor saw anything clearly at the time.

Since then there have been weeks of argument. How could I speak of these things, or answer questions, or tell lawyers and coroners and judges what has happened? They move on a different plane of understanding.

But it is all very clear in my memory up to that moment. What has happened since is not clear, and the sea is always in my ears, the surge of a far-off sea, swelling and falling : sometimes it is near at hand, so that every face that comes near me is drowning. But I have no regrets, no unhappiness ; only I feel dull and drugged, and I sometimes feel I am already dead.

