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VALERIE

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THE SONG AND THE SILENCE

THE STAR CALLED WORMWOOD

THE GREEN TREE AND THE DRY

AUNT BETTY

TWO FOR JOY

THE END OF MR. DAVIDSON

VALERIE

A Study of a Temperament

by

MORCHARD BISHOP

*Not always can flowers, pearls, poetry, protestations,
nor even home in another heart, content the awful soul
that dwells in clay.*

EMERSON

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
1948

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BOOK ONE

THE CLOUDS OF HAWTHORN

The clouds of hawthorn keep so short a state.

JOHN DRINKWATER

CHAPTER ONE

MR. AND MRS. HENRY SINGLETON

1

IT is never true to say that any novel begins quite at the beginning, for the thing can't be done. Even if you should start with all your principal characters neatly ranged in their cradles, engaged in drawing their first breaths—and heaven only knows that that would be a situation sufficiently undramatic—you have still the factor of their parents to consider . . . and *their* parents before them; and so *ad infinitum*. Human life being a continuous process, there is nothing for it, then, but to let your start be arbitrary, remembering always, of course, that some arbitrary points of departure are better than others.

For which reason, after all due consideration, we have decided that the most fitting place for this story to begin is upon the terrace of a small but comfortable residential hotel in the delightful town of Amboise, in the late spring of the year 1906. This terrace overlooks from a considerable height the wide, slow-flowing waters of the Loire, that now run golden in the light of a declining sun; and standing upon it, looking out, side by side, over the chequered panorama of fields and vineyards, their elbows planted on the high ornamental stone balustrade, are a man and a woman, who have that morning signed the register as Mr. and Mrs. Henry Singleton of London, Angleterre. He is a well-preserved, bearded man with a finely-shaped head, who seems to be in his middle forties; and she is a very pretty, rather feckless-looking creature apparently a good deal—even a great deal—his junior. She is, in fact, though dressed to look as mature as possible—in which endeavour the fashion of the day is all in her favour—, barely twenty years of age.

At once, you see, the arbitrary factor has entered. Henry Singleton has already, for between forty and fifty years, been

acquiring characteristics, personality, has been being shaped by life in ways of which we can know nothing; and even his twenty-year-old lady is already the complex product of a million coalescing changes and chances. Just as it is impossible really to know or understand anything about the casual acquaintances whom you meet for an hour or two on your journey through life, so it is impossible fully to know or understand the people who are thus arbitrarily brought to your notice in books. At best one can be given a few lines of external description, a few pages of recapitulatory narrative, that shall evoke—or try to—a highly simplified image of an infinitely complicated entity.

In this particular case, the recapitulation need only be brief, since a profound knowledge of the past lives of the couple in question is not essential to the matter we have in hand. Henry Singleton had had a brilliant and successful career as an architect. By the time he was forty-eight he had made sufficient money to retire, and had decided to do so. He had married when a young and impoverished draughtsman, and had begotten four children, three boys and a girl. These were now grown-up, and one day earlier in this same year of 1906 his daughter, Mary, had brought home with her to tea her late school-fellow, Annie Conway, who had but recently put her hair up and at once changed, chrysalis-fashion as is the way of her sex, from a gawky schoolgirl into a charming young woman. Singleton, who for years had got on badly with his wife, who indeed was a disagreeable female, had, in the inexplicable way in which these things happen, immediately developed a violent passion for his daughter's school-fellow. It may perhaps be advanced in partial extenuation of this highly irregular behaviour that he was half of French origin, the other half being Scottish. The prospect of entering upon a protracted life of retirement in the society of his wife was one that had long irked him, and he consequently took the violently unorthodox step of asking Annie Conway, upon only their third or fourth meeting, whether she would be willing to run away with him. He was a very personable creature for his age, and well-to-do; Annie, who was one of a long string of impoverished unmarried sisters, and Welsh

into the bargain, evidently had a streak of recklessness as well as a streak of guilelessness in her composition, for she agreed to his proposal. Singleton, almost demented with delight—as of a man that sees an entirely new life opening before him when he had thought all was over, passionately kissed her soft, foolish, unlined schoolgirl's face, and proceeded at once to Thomas Cook's to make the necessary arrangements for a trip abroad. He behaved with commendable generosity to his wife, leaving her a note which said that though, no doubt, her pride would be injured, he realised that for many years her sole genuine interest in him had been financial, and that all arrangements were in train to see that she should in no wise suffer in this respect. Then he repaired to the district in South London in which Annie lived with her crowd of unmarried sisters, and, meeting her at the corner of the street carrying the ridiculously inadequate straw basket that held all her trifling possessions, drove her at once in a cab to Victoria station, and started on their journey before either he, or she, or his wife, had time to engage in second thoughts. And so now here, after several weeks of wandering through France, they were at Amboise, blissfully happy, though perhaps inclined to be a little astonished at the extent to which, increasingly, they found themselves at cross-purposes.

By that 'cross-purposes' one doesn't mean, naturally, that they were unhappy, or that they quarrelled. Annie was as devoted to him as he was to her. It was merely that she had been too ignorant, and he too much devoured by his passion, for either of them to have reflected at all, at the start, on what a very oddly matched couple they were. Henry Singleton was a scholarly and erudite man, mature, used to the ways of the world, while Annie, to all intents and purposes, was a child. He found her childishness delightful and endearing at first. . . on the honeymoon. Later on, when they returned to England and settled down, and she started to keep house for him, he, who had been accustomed to having his house run smoothly and efficiently for the past twenty years or so, had at first been perplexed and, later, really put out by her total lack of capacity.

But in this we anticipate. For the present he was enjoying a

second spring, and she—oh! positively blossomed at every point in the sunshine of his appreciation. She was really a delightfully attractive young woman. All the male guests at the hotel gaped at her with approbation, and at him with envy; and all the female ones made rude, and as it happened entirely truthful, remarks to the effect that of course you could see they weren't married, and she manifestly no better than she should be.

Yet despite this, despite even the fact that the genuine Mrs. Singleton when asked, later on, to divorce him refused to do so, we prefer for the sake of simplicity and convenience to refer hereafter to Annie under the style of Mrs. Singleton, since so in fact she was until the day of Henry Singleton's death. Indeed, she was in the end even rewarded with her 'lines', becoming well and truly wedded to him in the Registry Office to which he conducted her on the day following that upon which he received the intelligence of his real wife's demise. But this was many years ahead; and it was a formality for which the birth of their only child, a girl, Valerie, did not delay itself.

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Their long continental sojourn over at last, Singleton and his new young wife (as we prefer to call her) settled down towards the end of the autumn in a comfortable villa in one of the Thames-side outer London suburbs, to await the birth of the expected baby. Mrs. Singleton was so young and so simple that she was delighted about it. Her husband, though he was pleased that she was pleased, had previously experienced to the full the pleasures of paternity, and was not quite so overjoyed. Besides, it was at about this time that a complete awareness of his late wife's dog-in-the-manger attitude to a divorce was first brought home to him, and the realisation that she had no intention of permitting him once more to assume the conventional robes of legal matrimony rather considerably annoyed him, and affected his temper. Annie was not very good, either, in her role of expectant mother; she was inclined to be helpless and not infrequently tearful as well, and, of course, just to the

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same extent as her physical attractions were necessarily diminished for him, so did her mental shortcomings grow more noticeable. Singleton was kind and forbearing with her, but he could not help finding her trying, and sometimes it was as much as he could do to keep in temper with her. To quite a considerable degree he found himself, most illogically, disposed to blame the unborn baby for the state of affairs into which they were drifting. It wasn't the child's fault, obviously; but it would surely not have been unreasonable for it to have deferred its arrival until a little later on! When Valerie was born, one wet February afternoon, it was, her father reflected, not without bitterness, a little under eleven months since he had taken the plunge and run away with Annie. Such precipitancy was hardly thoughtful, and augured, he felt sure, a thoroughly rapacious egotism on the part of the child, with which he was quite unable to feel in sympathy. Besides, if he had to have a baby at all, he would far rather it had been a boy. A boy might have had his brains, and would have grown into a companion for his old age; would be someone whom he could instruct and advise. This girl-child was sure to be just such a scatter-brain as her mother; though no doubt, like her, a pretty scatter-brain.

Henry Singleton's state of mind at the time of the birth of his daughter was thus complex. While he still loved her mother for her remarkable comeliness, and was madly jealous of her as is the way of husbands who are a great deal older than their wives, he had by now reached that stage of detachment when he was able to face the fact that, without any possibility of gainsaying, she was really rather a fool. Not a vicious fool, of course, there wasn't a grain of vice in her, but just merely a complete feather-head. From which admission it is not really very difficult to gauge how matters were likely to proceed between them: Singleton, as he grew older, would naturally respond less and less to her prettiness (the one real link for him), and would find himself increasingly irritated by her mental inadequacy; while she, who had found in his kindness and his consideration her chief reason for throwing in her lot with him, would, as these things tended to diminish, grow more

and more puzzled and unhappy. In the case of some women one would have to add resentful. That this wasn't the case with Annie was due to her possessing a singularly sweet nature, and a certain fundamental humility, which enabled her firmly to convince herself that, if anything was amiss between them, it must necessarily be her fault, rather than his. Wherefore she became excessively puzzled and muddled, and expended the full store of her puzzled and muddled affections upon her little daughter, since she deemed that, for some reason which she did not understand, Henry had ceased to need them. And Henry, who had by no means ceased to need them, but had merely lost the knack of evoking them, took his revenge upon her by becoming rather crochetty and increasingly eccentric.

He was, among other things, a man of an intensely active disposition, much given to those by-products of the active-minded unemployed that are called hobbies. All his life he had worked hard, and retirement did not really suit him. Before long he had fitted up a workshop for himself in a shed at the foot of the garden, in which he passed long hours daily, making articles neither precisely necessary nor even beautiful, out of metal or of wood. Because he now visualised his life as stretching before him for a very long time during which manifestly—since he had burnt all his boats—nothing of any very great significance could be expected to happen to him, his projects in this genre were ambitiously conceived. He set to work, for example, on the construction of a scale model in wood of Canterbury Cathedral which, when it was finished, was fifteen feet long and five feet high. It contained, as he was accustomed to tell visitors, seventeen thousand separate pieces of wood, and it had taken five years to complete. In addition to this he built model ships, made boilers, conducted chemical experiments. He was a strong rationalist, who had grown up in the era when Darwin and Huxley had dominated British thought, and he was a profound believer in the dignity and importance of Science, so spelt with the majuscule. Equally he was a professed and militant atheist, and made it entirely clear to Annie, who had been brought up in the easy pieties of the Church of England, that in cleaving to him she was expected to cleave to

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his doctrines as well. For which reason, the little Valerie was, of course, not christened, nor was she, during her whole childhood, permitted to come into contact with religious practices of any sort.

But Henry Singleton's eccentricities by no means confined themselves to his workshop. He was, by nature, a very hot-tempered man, though he was far from being a bad-tempered one. He had a profound sense of justice and of what appeared to him to be his rights, and this meant, among other things, that he was almost always engaged in one kind or other of a dispute. His disputes varied: sometimes it was with a tradesman who had overcharged him; sometimes it was with some perfectly harmless stranger who, in his view, had been guilty of studied discourtesy to him or to his wife; sometimes it was with a neighbour who had infringed his rights or his privacy. Whatever the grounds of the dispute might be, one thing was always certain to be the case: Singleton was always in his own estimation in the right of it, and almost always, such was his pertinacity when roused, won the day.

For the rest, he bought a skiff and spent a good deal of his leisure pulling up and down the reaches of the river, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of his little family. If it was the latter, he always unhooked the rudder before letting Annie get into the stern, because he said that when she attempted to steer she constituted herself a menace to every craft on the river. It was not, really, that he was a bully. It was rather that his intelligence was of an order so greatly superior to hers that he was incapable of giving her credit even for the little that she had.

This, naturally, exerted a depressing effect upon her. When, in their early days, she had attempted to converse with him on the topics in which he was interested, she had often made observations so totally imbecile that he had felt constrained to bite her head off; and, once this had happened sufficiently often, she found she had grown so frightened of vouchsafing any opinion at all that she quite ceased to do so. She was a woman of really remarkable ignorance, though, if he had had more patience with her, he would have found that she by no means

lacked natural intelligence. It was simply that her upbringing had been quite empty of that book-learning which, in his Scottish background, had characterised his. Singleton, of course, had sufficient intelligence to realise this, and in the beginning had suggested to her that it would not be a bad thing for her to acquire the art of reading. Poor Annie, who was only too willing to do anything that might placate her formidable spouse, had done her best, and had read, without a glimmer of understanding, the volumes which he set before her. Unhappily though, in his choice of these he exhibited a singular obliquity of imagination; and when he found that works such as *The Origin of Species* and (as a concession to her weakness) Ball's *Story of the Heavens* produced upon her mind a species of something that he could only liken to paralysis, he gave it up as a bad job, firmly convinced that the fault lay not in him but, exclusively, in her.

It should not, however, for all this by any means be assumed that Singleton regarded his elopement as a failure. It was true that, after he had grown somewhat more accustomed to Annie's physical charms, he had permitted himself to feel some disappointment in her intellectual attainments. Yet, despite this, her physical charm was still very great for him, and he realised that she had many other sterling qualities in addition: she was gentle, equable, patient, well-meaning, truthful and devoted to him. Since his late wife had been none of these things, and a termagant into the bargain, he found himself well-satisfied with the change. He was old enough to be philosophical and to realise that a man couldn't expect to have everything; he was grateful for what he had.

While as for Annie, her disillusionment had run upon lines parallel to his. At their first meeting it had been his splendid manners, his old-fashioned courtesy, his dignified leonine bearing that had captivated her: all that in conjunction with the fact that he had been the very first man ever to take a passionate interest in her, or even, indeed, to treat her as though she were a fully adult person. It had, consequently, been a very real grief to her when she had found that these delightful surface qualities one by one peeled off, and vanished, with propinquity.

The manners and the courtesy had been the first to go—not entirely, of course, since Henry was very definitely a gentleman and had his standards, but they were noticeably inferior to his first high, indeed impossibly high, performance—; and when he was in one of his rather frequent rages they very nearly vanished altogether. Next, the dignified appearance had declined: he had gotten himself into the habit of wearing his very oldest clothes for the workshop and for the river, and he had at length taken a fancy to walking about looking just like a tramp, in old canvas shoes, a patched suit, and a yachting cap. Annie, who had frequently been assured by her relatives, in unison and also severally, that she had done a very foolish thing and had ruined her life, longed with an extremity of passion that Henry should appear neat and dapper and distinguished upon every occasion that any of these aforesaid relations should choose to visit them. When this happened she would timidly remonstrate with him, begging him to put on a 'nice suit'; instead of which he always insisted, of course, in making himself a bigger scarecrow than ever. And last, and worst of all, was his temper. This, since she was a mild and gentle little thing, quite terrified her, particularly when it was one of what she called his 'jealous tempers'. Though very far from being a loose type of woman—and indeed it is scarcely ever the loose type of woman who does what she had done—she was, in some respects, rather a frivolous and coquettish creature, she adored flattery from men and was not above a little harmless flirtation. Henry, when this aspect of her became apparent, at once jumped to the conclusion that she was a wanton, and told her so with immense gusto, and threatened to keep her permanently locked up in her bedroom and only permitted to go out under his surveillance, if she didn't mend her ways. She was so completely under his dominance that she really believed he meant it, and, in floods of tears, promised to reform.

Meanwhile the baby Valerie was growing up. She was a quiet, rather ethereal little girl, very like her mother, with dark curling hair, an appealing mouth and a ridiculous little nose that turned up slightly at the tip. She had large grey enquiring eyes and that air of self-sufficiency that comes early to an only

child, especially when one or both of its parents is comparatively elderly. Her mother adored her. She dressed her in white piqué frocks, and pushed her about the streets in a bassinet lined with yellow satin and plentifully garnished with fringed tassels. Because Annie was more than a little frightened of her husband, and awed by his intellectual supremacy, she made, as it were, a friend and confidante of the child almost from the time that it could speak or be spoken to. Before very long there was a sort of conspiratorial relationship between the two. Daddy, it was tacitly assumed, was 'being funny', or 'in one of his paddys', or, possibly, 'having a row* with the butcher.

Those rows with the tradesmen were almost the first thing that Valerie could remember at all clearly. The Sunday joint would come on to the table, and Daddy, sharpening his carving-knife, which he would do with great efficiency on a small thing like a portable grindstone, would essay to carve it. It would respond ungraciously, and he would then cry out in a loud and anguished voice: "Tough! Foreign stuff! Just wait till I get hold of Bates's man!" And then the next day, when Bates's man arrived at the back-door, Daddy would be told, and, a vast imposing figure with his jutting beard and his carpet slippers, would dart forth into the kitchen, and there would come soon a chorus of voices raised in expostulation. Valerie, who regarded her Daddy as a very awful and a very magnificent portent, only to be approached with extreme reverence and abasement, would be thunderstruck to observe that, when Daddy shouted at Bates's man, Bates's man had the undreamt-of temerity to shout back at Daddy. . . .

It was not that he was unkind to her, only that she felt he deemed her a creature so immeasurably beneath him. From time to time he condescended: showed her the model he was working on, adding always, though, with the greatest impressment, "Now, don't touch anything!" Or, again, sometimes he would read to her out of queer books that were not by any means so easy to understand as were the fairy-tales that her mother told her (against orders for, as there were no such things as fairies, it was plainly wrong to clutter up a child's growing brain with facts that weren't true). But always, al-

ways, however much he might seem to unbend and to approximate himself to her level, there was the feeling strong in her of his condescension, of his not really being able to bring himself down to so lowly a plane as that upon which she dwelt; and this mortified her, and made her feel that she was a stupid and ignorant little creature. And because she perceived, or sensed rather than perceived, that it was with a similar veiled condescension that he regarded her mother, she early formed the opinion that there was in women generally some secret inferiority which rendered it impossible that they should ever stand on an equal footing with that magnificent, if slightly incalculable and indeed volcanic creature, Man. With her mother, of course, she felt no such constraint. The poor simple Annie was such a child, in years, in understanding, that her daughter felt for her all the tenderness and sympathy that one might experience for an equal.

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In the fullness of time, Henry Singleton's righteous quarrelsomeness started to make enemies for him in Cordova Road; and because enemies have a knack of ferreting out everything that is to your discredit, the whisper at length got about that he and Annie were not legally married. When this reached his ears, Henry Singleton, who had strange reserves of chivalry concealed within him, flew into an absolute paroxysm of rage, and declared he would 'have the law' on his wife's traducers.

"Oh but you can't, Henry dear," said Annie, who, with her usual ineffectiveness, couldn't pronounce her r's very well. "You can't because it's quite twue, isn't it?"

Roaring out "The greater the truth the greater the libel," Henry had thereupon rushed out of the house without stopping to put on his hat, and had taken a long and fulminating walk on which he mapped out his plan of campaign. On his way home, feeling a little jaded after so much furious cerebration, he had turned into the bar of *The Anglers Rest* to get himself a drink, and there, since it chanced to be a Sunday morning, seated up at the counter and pleasantly engaged in conversing

with the barmaid, he had encountered his next-door neighbour, a Mr. Brent, who every weekday went up to business to an office in the City.

Brent hailed him, saying: "What will you take, Singleton?"

"Very good of you, I'm sure. Thank you! A glass of ale would be admirable."

"Two beers, please," said Mr. Brent, as he moved his stool a little to one side to make room for Singleton. "And how is the world using you, Squire?"

"Tolerably well, I thank you," said Singleton, picking up his tankard. "Your health, sir!" and he turned to Brent and gave a little formal inclination of the head.

Mr. Brent was a not unintelligent man, and he had a rather considerable respect for 'old Singleton', as he was accustomed to think of him, being some fifteen years his junior. Though they were neighbours, they were not on terms of any very great intimacy, but they knew one another sufficiently well for Brent to have formed the opinion that the other was what he called *a long-headed sort of old boy'. They had first become acquainted in the fashion in which Singleton so often made the acquaintance of his neighbours: by a quarrel. It had been a quarrel over a dustbin that had been deposited on a spot of ground which Singleton had deemed to be part of his premises. Since the dustbin was indubitably the property of Brent, he had roared out to him—who was at the time working in his front garden—to come and remove it. Brent, himself not a very meek man, had argued the point, declaring that the place upon which the dustbin stood was his property; nay, more, had made matters a great deal worse by asseverating that he himself could create out of the same aforesaid dustbin a better man than was his neighbour, Singleton. Strangely enough, Singleton, instead of being incensed, had suddenly discovered something intensely amusing in this riposte, and, clapping his junior on the shoulder, had said: "My dear boy, life isn't long enough for such petty nonsense as this. I will go and fetch my Deeds, and see who is in the right!" And when he had done this, it was found that the honour of both parties was equally satisfied, since the dustbin was standing plumb upon the

dividing line of their respective territories, with one half of the area of its base in Singleton's premises, and the other half in Brent's. After this, the neighbours had not quarrelled any more, but had adjusted their occasional differences by sweet reasonableness and negotiation, while Brent from time to time had been invited round to have a look at the contents of old Singleton's workshop, and Singleton, in return, had been treated to an occasional special view of the roses which were his neighbour's hobby and heart's delight. The two wives also, both being young, both being married to males somewhat tempestuous, and both mothers of such tender years as almost still to rank as amateurs in the business, found they had much in common, and in some sort became friends. Of which, more hereafter.

Brent, who deferred to his neighbour's superior knowledge and education, started to talk about the aeroplane, which in those days was much in the news. What puzzled him, he said, was how a machine that was heavier than air, got up into the air and contrived to stay there.

Singleton, very obligingly launched out into an explanation of the mystery, checking himself in the mid-course of his dissertation to say: "But now you'll take a drink with me?"

The return of hospitality accomplished, the two men strolled out of the bar and set off in the direction of home. It was a delicate early summer day, and the road was overshadowed with great horse-chestnut trees that scattered their white and pink blossoms all over the asphalt pavements. Brent was wearing a flannel suit and a straw boater with guard attached. He was a doggish, rather dapper, young man, doing well in the world and not generally displeased with himself. He carried a bamboo walking-stick which he twirled, striking and stirring the floating chestnut blossoms; and as he walked he hummed to himself a little tune.

Singleton, hatless and suddenly conscious by the side of this dapper figure of his own extreme untidiness, felt a sudden unaccustomed flow of geniality. Perhaps it was the beautiful morning, perhaps it was the ale he had taken; whatever the cause, he felt all at once an unusual desire to seek the other's

confidence. After all, he was much mewed up with feminine society, with his wife and his daughter. A man's man, he knew all too few men. He felt that Brent, for all that he was, comparatively speaking, a mere youth, was a youth of the world, and one who would be able to enter sympathetically into his dilemma. As was his way, once his mind was made up he lost no time in beating about the bush. He said, bluntly enough: "I hear my affairs are the subject of much gossip in the neighbourhood."

Brent stopped twirling his walking-stick. Yes, of course they were, though it was hardly for him to say so. What a pity it was that old Singleton should be such a curmudgeon! He assumed that he was endeavouring to pick a quarrel, and really that was very tiresome. He replied, somewhat guardedly, "Oh so are everyone's affairs in this place. Good job they've got something to keep their tongues busy!"

"You've heard it then?" persisted Singleton.

Brent, unwilling to lie, and indeed seeing no purpose in it, nodded his head.

"Well, it's perfectly true," said Singleton with a rather saturnine chuckle, "though I'm blest if I know how they managed to ferret it out."

Brent, touched by his frankness, was, at the same time, embarrassed by it. He started again to twirl his stick faster than before, and emitted odd disconnected phrases: "No business of anyone's—free country—damned shame!"

"I agree with you absolutely," said Singleton, picking up his drift, and secretly pleased with the very proper sensibility with which his admission had been received. "It is, however, very disagreeable, and very distressing for my good lady."

"Ah, h'm, ha! I suppose so," said Brent.

"I mean—if your dear little wife were to get wind of it."

"Oh yes indeed," said Brent with great conviction, guiltily aware that it was indeed his dear little wife who had first enlightened him as to the state of affairs next door, a piece of information which she had acquired from the maid, who had had it—who knows how?—from the fishmonger's man.

Singleton strode on, his brows knitted in deep thought. "It's

—very—vexing," he said at last. "Damned vexing! The only thing will be to move, I suppose; and I don't want to move. I like this place,"

"Then I shouldn't take any notice," suggested Brent boldly. "You're not the only one—not by a long chalk; and if you were, I don't see that it would matter."

"You don't? I consider that a very friendly observation," said old Singleton, regarding him with kindness. "Coming from a young man married to a very sweet girl, I find that a singularly charitable and kindly observation."

"Do you?" said Brent. "I don't see why you should. The world is a big place, and life is a queer business. We should be hard put to it if we had to spend our lives sitting in judgment on other people. It's quite job enough, sometimes, to keep our own doorsteps clean."

Old Singleton said no more, but, on parting at their respective front gates, he insisted on shaking hands warmly with Brent; and what had before been merely a casual acquaintanceship between the two men was now, suddenly, in the queer intangible way in which these things happen, perceived to have grown into friendship. It was a friendship particularly between the two wives, since Singleton, who had previously been disposed to be jealous of his wife's women-friends, had evidently bestowed upon his timid and law-abiding Annie a plenary indulgence so far as her being friends with Mrs. Brent was concerned.

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And so now it would be the commonest of sights to see the Brent and Singleton wives out together in convoy, pushing their respective bassinets in the direction of the suburb's shops. You must figure Mrs. Brent as a slight, fair, quiet—and oh so respectable, oh so timid—little thing, conducting her blue bassinet, containing a very very new baby girl, by the side of the taller, so much more loquacious, dark-haired and—save only where her Henry was concerned—so much bolder Annie. Trotting between the two prams is a podgy little boy in a sailor-

suit, Philip, Mrs. Brent's first-born, for she, though married to a so much younger husband than her neighbour, is her senior by some couple of years, and has been married several years longer. The dark wide-eyed Valerie in her yellow bassinet is not quite three, and Philip Brent, who regards her not at all, being of an age at which girls are anathema, is already over six. So, in costumes that they do not dream will ever seem antiquated beyond belief, these two young women that will one day—in a flash, in a space of time that when it has passed will seem cruelly short—be old women, widowed and disregarded, brightly chattering about nothing in particular, push their respective offspring over the most decorous of suburban pavements beneath the gay sun of a vanished summer. And Valerie, lying in her pram, rejoicing like a little animal in the delicious warmth of that sun, thinks her strange incommunicable baby, thoughts, and says nothing; while Philip Brent, toddling and trotting, expresses himself fluently upon all such matters as seem to his rapidly unfolding intelligence to be of the deepest moment. He catches Mrs. Singleton's eye (whom he likes), and, blowing out his cheeks with the pride of ownership, proclaims, in a gasp of pompous importance: "Mis' Singleston, I've got a great big ball; and a punnay man!"

"He means a funny man," interprets his proud mother. "A golliwog. Philip, darling, blow your nose!"

And suddenly, from the depths of the yellow bassinet, arises a stricken cry: Valerie, asserting her rights to an equal place in the sun: "Mummy, mummy! I wants to 'ave a punnay man!"

CHAPTER TWO

VALERIE IN BUD

i

FORTIFIED BY the friendship of the Brents, the Singletons stayed on in Cordova Road for yet a year or two longer; but the neighbourhood's gossip—as such things are apt to do—

rather than diminishing appeared, if anything, to increase. It really was very unpleasant, though if old Singleton hadn't been such a stickler for his rights they might have weathered the storm. But when a man will insist on doing such unorthodox things as rushing out and telling the carol-singers to get off his doorstep, and taking his walks abroad at six o'clock on summer mornings wearing his pyjamas and dressing-gown—to say nothing of the unrelenting warfare which he continued to wage with the tradespeople—it is hardly to be wondered at if the general censoriousness of mankind does not do its best to take revenge. It was upon one of these occasions of wordy warfare with the grocer's man that the last turn had been applied to the screw. The grocer's man had delivered some rashers of streaky bacon that had bones in them, and one of these bones had stuck in Mr. Singleton's throat and nearly choked him. Consequently, upon the grocer's man's next appearance, he had pounced upon him and uttered passionate complaints. To which the grocer's man had had the shockingly bad taste to refer to the Singleton household as "You and your 'ore and your barstard", at which old Singleton, who was twenty years if a day older than the grocer's man, had, very properly, knocked him down. Arising with a cut lip, the grocer's man had slunk away vowing vengeance, and Mrs. Singleton, in a flood of tears, had taken refuge with Mrs. Brent. To these two ladies had thereafter presented himself a furious and rampaging Henry, who had roared loudly at the quaking and totally blameless Annie: "Cease your blubbering, woman, and go in and pack! We're leaving this God-damned, self-righteous place this very day."

And so they had, and the next the Brents heard of them, after a longish interval, was that Henry had bought a house on the coast of Dorset, near Weymouth, and that they all loved it.

Valerie, at the time of this removal, was barely five years old. Afterwards, when she thought of her early suburban years, she did so without regret, for she had been too young to remember almost any part of them. The only thing that she consciously missed was the benign white-painted plaster head of a horse that looked out with a beady and enquiring eye from the facade

of some stables that faced Cordova Road. She had been much attached to this horse, and she grieved for him. She missed, too, the long green alleys of the raspberry-canefields where, in a sun-dappled shadow, she could hide away for hours, secure from the alarming and inscrutable bellowings of her beloved but intimidating papa, and, from time to time, timidly and with an enormous sense of sin, select and eat a raspberry whose absence, she judged, wouldn't be noticed. But such delights as these were small indeed to the greater delight of living—yes, actually living—at the sea-side, which was a place to which children, less fortunate than herself, were only precariously conveyed for one fugitive fortnight in each year.

2

Yes, it was indeed pleasant for a little girl, and a solitary little girl, to be permitted to grow up by the sea-side, and to have the great green waters everlastingly tumbling and thudding right outside her bedroom window, and the long white cliffs for her playground. Not that the little Valerie wished for herself, still less was permitted, to run about as she liked, as a tomboy. Her mother was a great deal too centred upon her for anything like that to happen; and her father, while there were whole immense periods—oh, weeks and months they seemed—during which he didn't appear to take the slightest notice of her, yet had very rigid and proper notions as to the perils and dangers that Nature held in reserve for unaccompanied little girls.

So it was that Valerie grew up, from five to six, from six to ten, a prim, demure, decorous, quiet child, who, if she had within her anything of the burning and turbulent heart of her father, of the queer feckless recklessness and gaiety of her mother, had yet small opportunities of exhibiting either. She was, on the whole, what is called a good little girl, and, as is so often the case with only children, she was a curiously old-fashioned and precocious girl, much given to conducting her conversations in the only way she knew, which was after the adult manner of her parents. This led to people calling her 'quaint', and she did not like to be called things she did not

understand. Grown-ups, she found, could at times be very silly and very trying. She would, for example, respond to their questionings with a phrase that she was confident was perfectly orthodox, because she had heard her father or her mother use it, and then what would be her mortification when, instead of her interlocutor politely receiving her answer at its face-value, she would instead find herself greeted with a high-pitched squeal of mirth and the inane cry of "Valerie, you're simply killing! You really are the *quaintest* little thing I!"

One day, after a protracted dose of this 'quain' business, she took it upon herself to ask her father what the word meant. She knew that if she asked her mother she would receive a long and vague sort of flutter of information which wouldn't really appreciably forward her investigations. Daddy, however, could always be relied on to give a straight and sensible answer to a straight and sensible question. Daddy, on this occasion, took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at her long and hard with a quizzical and thoughtful expression in his bright blue ruminative eyes. His eyes were deeply set with many wrinkles at their corners that splayed out into rays, and between them his nose was thin and sharp as a hawk's bill. "Quaint/" he said cautiously, weighing his pipe in his left hand as though by an exact assessment of its bulk he could best hit on the precise meaning of the word. "Quaint means queer and old-fashioned, rather tumble-down, not really old but wishing to affect the semblance of antiquity."

Valerie's eyes clouded with tears, and she pouted, "I'm not tumble-down and old-fashioned," she almost shouted.

He looked slyly at her. "No, of course you're not."

"Well, Auntie Bessie said I was quaint."

"Your Auntie Bessie is a fool at the best of times," said her father. "I shouldn't pay the least attention to anything that *she* says. Though, upon my word, now I come to think about it, I'm not sure she isn't nearly right this time: you really are rather a quaint little thing."

Valerie glared at him, and stamped her foot. "No I'm not!"* she roared.

"Now, Valerie, you know quite as well as I do that I do not

permit little girls—or anyone else—or *anyone* else for that matter—to stamp at me! Come along and sit on my knee, and I'll explain it to you to the best of my ability."

To the best of his ability! That was the excellent thing about Daddy, when he was in one of his good moods. He always spoke to you just exactly the same as he would speak to a grown-up. No nonsense of baby-talk with Daddy. Out came the long words, sonorously rolling, and Valerie felt almost as pleased with the compliment of being treated to 'the best of his ability' as if she had been given half-a-crown. She clambered up on his knee and began, very timidly, to stroke his beard—now all turned quite grey—which was a phenomenon that always fascinated her.

"Now then," said Singleton, putting his arm round her and patting her on her podgy little knees, "what I think Aunt Bessie really *meant* to say was that you are a very *grown-up* little girl for your age. You see, I said that quaint meant old, didn't I?"

"You said a lot of other things, too," said Valerie, doubtfully.

"Ah yes, but I took your question for a serious literary one, as it were. I thought you'd come across the word in a book. And suppose I were to ask you, my dear, how your reading is getting on?"

Valerie squirmed a little on his knee. That was the worst of Daddy, even at his most genial: he was always sure, sooner or later, to get on to one's lessons, and she knew that so far her slow progress at these had been a great disappointment to him. "Rather better, *I fink*" she said, dubiously.

"Think, notyWA;," he said, automatically; and then, perceiving that Annie had left a bundle of newspapers carelessly scattered all over the floor—a thing he hated, a thing he positively loathed, for he was an orderly man with a passion for tidiness—, he added: "Now give Daddy a kiss and run away and play, for there's something that Daddy has to see to."

Valerie kissed him. His beard was tickly and had a curiously musty smell. She really adored her father, but had small opportunity to shew it, and was much too shy to do so without en-

couragement. He, knowing that she was awkward with him and was most certainly in awe of him, believed, on the other hand, that she rather disliked him. As a small boy he had disliked his own father quite enormously, and it had never crossed his mind that what was natural to the great bulk of little boys did not necessarily apply at all to little girls. To him, children were children, and that was an end of it.

Valerie had slipped off his knee and run out of the room; and he now, on his knees on the floor, tck-tcking his tongue with annoyance at Annie's incurable untidiness, picked up the scattered newspapers and ranged them carefully, in exact order of date, on the table.

3

Thus Daddy in one of his good moments. Daddy in a bad moment was altogether otherwise. Jove stepped down out of the firmament of the heavens, and the rays of his lightnings, the reverberations of his thunders, zig-zagged about the confused head of the small Valerie in such a fashion that she behaved as one demented and ran about like a little frightened hen. It wasn't that he was really cruel or unkind; not that he beat her or anything so melodramatic as that; it was just that when Daddy got into one of his rages the whole sky went completely black, reason ceased its reign, and a period of wild and frightening panic broke loose inside her head. For this, no doubt, her mother was partly responsible, since Annie's reactions to the thunderings of her lord were precisely similar. The only difference was that, whereas the years had taught her mother resilience (which was, in any case, a quality of which she possessed by nature a great deal more than her daughter), so that the moment, the very moment, that the tumult had abated she could relax, and throw herself back and laugh and say, "Oh Henwy!" after the retreating form of Jove, this was not at all the case with the child, who remained white and shaken for hours after the outburst, because she was quite unable to assure herself that it wasn't liable at any moment to break out all over again, and with redoubled fury.

Daddy was, for her, an unpredictable factor. His storms always rushed out of a perfectly clear sky; for which reason she had ceased to have faith even in those which appeared the most placidly azure. She was, that is, constantly on the *qui vive* for trouble, and this—since trouble really came comparatively seldom and even then did not last very long—meant that she expended a great deal of her nervous energy on quite unnecessary apprehensions. Daddy had, it was well known, several very difficult and tender places in his composition. One of these was a hatred, quite passionate in its intensity, for anything which savoured, in the remotest degree, of what he deemed to be dishonesty or untruthfulness. Himself a scrupulously straightforward and morally courageous person, he was simply unable to comprehend how anyone, under whatsoever compulsion of timidity or passionate anxiety to avert retribution, could even for an instant contemplate, by lying, to escape the consequences of their misdeeds. Valerie, on the whole, was as honest and truthful as most children, but she was also a very apprehensive child, and sometimes her fears drove her to utter falsehoods which, even as she propounded them, she perceived to be hideously inadequate and unconvincing. She realised that this was stupid of her, since the effect, when she was, inevitably, found out, was merely to augment the gravity of her original guilt; but, unfortunately, there were times when her panic was stronger in her than her reason.

One morning, for instance, she had the misfortune, when she was rummaging on the mantelshelf in search of a pencil, to tip over and smash to fragments on the hearth a rather handsome blue and white Spode jug. She was alone in the sitting-room, and, her nerve utterly shaken by the appalling crash, she proceeded at once, without any clear conception of what she was doing, hastily to pick up the broken pieces which she then smuggled out of the house in her pinafore and buried in the garden—rather in the same way as that in which a remorseful murderer desperately disposes of the body of his victim. But, being not of the stuff of which true malefactors are made, she was inefficient even in her deception, and in her rapid flight left unnoticed behind her one large broken fragment of the jug

upon which, unfortunately for her, the characteristic blue glaze was clearly visible. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Singleton entered the sitting-room, and, stooping down to the fireplace to investigate some fancied untidiness therein, his quick eye perceived the incriminating fragment. He picked it up, and looked at the mantelpiece. Yes, the Spode jug was missing!

With one bound he was at the door, shouting at the top of his voice for his wife. Valerie, in the garden, heard him, and her heart, cowering desperately, counselled immediate flight. Hatless and in her gym. shoes, she crept out of the side gate and started walking to the town, which was some three miles distant. She was only ten, and had in her purse the not very adequate sum of threepence.

Meanwhile Mr. Singleton, with the mien of an avenging fury, was confronting his wife and his maid-servant with the damning shard of the otherwise missing jug. Both, of course, expressed the completest ignorance of the catastrophe, and when it was perceived shortly that Valerie was missing, it became clear that their indignant disclaimers were valid, and that the real culprit had fled. Henry Singleton lashed himself into a condition of positive frenzy. "It is not," he said, over and over again, "the breaking of the jug that I mind—though it was valuable and I inherited it from my mother—, it is the state of mind of the person who having, no doubt inadvertently, smashed it can then imagine that they can escape the consequences of their action by hiding—by actually concealing—the pieces! If she had made a clean breast of it, I should have said nothing."

"Oh Henwy!" said his wife. "You would, dear, you know!"

"Well, I might have been tempted to express a little transient annoyance, but I am fundamentally a reasonable man. I know that accidents will happen. I'm not a bully, and I resent more than I can say this implication on the part of my own child that I am."

"Well, dear," said Annie, "you mustn't be too hard on her. She is a nervous little thing, and I expect that, if the truth were known, she is feeling far worse than any of us about it. Besides, I'm *wowwied* that she should be out alone like this.

Suppose a strange man were to speak to her! You hear of such *dreadful* things happening nowadays."

"Oh I shouldn't worry about that, my dear," said Henry, rather grimly. "She'll come back when it's time for lunch. And then I'll deal with her!"

But this being just what Valerie wished so passionately to avoid, she didn't come back to lunch, nor to tea either. She spent her threepence on buns, and sat on the beach among the holiday-makers—for it was at the end of the holiday season—and wished, quite simply and explicitly, that she could die. She realised only too well that by averting the evil hour she was only making it all the worse when it should come, as inevitably it must; but for all that she found she just hadn't the power within her to go home and face her father until she was absolutely obliged to. It was a question now of being hanged for a sheep as well as a lamb; and the saddest thing of it all was that she wasn't even enjoying the sheep. The sun poured down out of the clear sky, the little waves came tumbling and lapping in endless succession into the sheltered bay, and all about her were gay and happy people without a care in the world, bathing, digging the golden sand, playing beach cricket, screaming and laughing in their appreciation of merely being alive. In all that tumultuous multitude it seemed to her that she alone was forlorn and desolate. Though her father, in accordance with his rationalistic tenets, had brought her up very carefully to have no dealings with the unseen powers, she yet knew from her school-fellows that there was a being upon whom it was considered a good thing to call in time of trouble; and she now found some slight consolation in a tentative approach to that being, praying very quietly to herself: "Oh God, if there is such a Person, let me be dead."

But God appeared to take no notice, and one by one the holiday-makers packed up and went home to their high teas, and at last the beach grew chilly and empty. Valerie, who was terrified of the dark, knew that now it was her hour, and that she must go back. She had left it late, and night was already falling when she reached the end of the lane which, turning off the main road some mile from their house, led to it. She felt

dreadfully hungry now, and too emotionally exhausted to mind very much about anything save for the shadowy faceless things which she knew too well lurked already waiting for her behind the darkling, ever rising, hedges. Soon, when it was really dark, they would creep out from their ambushes and try to intercept her. She started to run. The lane at this point curved sharply to the right and up a short steep hill, and with a gasp of terror which she found it quite impossible to repress she saw suddenly that, on the crest of this hill, there stood a motionless shape that barred her path. She stopped some dozen paces from the thing, which seemed to her excited imagination to loom to an enormous height and to be surrounded about its top with a semi-luminous mist. Her legs refused to support her, and she was on the point of falling when her father's voice came out of the mist, which was, in fact, nothing but the smoke of his pipe, at which he was puffing unusually fast because he was angry.

"Valerie!" he called.

"Oh, Daddy," she said, unable to utter another word.

He looked at her curiously. The speech of reprobation he had prepared so carefully died on his lips. "Why, what's the matter, my dear?"

The sudden kindness in his voice was more than she could endure. She burst into tears, and said, between her sobs: "I broke it."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

"Oh but I'm so sorry. Really I am."

"I'm sure you are; but why did you try to hide what you'd done?"

"I don't know. I didn't mean to break it."

"That isn't the point. Accidents can happen to anyone. I'm not an unreasonable man, I hope. I should have said nothing at all if you'd owned up to me. Why didn't you?"

"I was too frightened."

She couldn't have said a worse thing. It infuriated Singleton. He forgot the pity he had felt at the child's evident distress. He resented deeply that she should admit that she was frightened of him. He burst uncontrollably into the long

diatribe which he had been preparing all day on the subject of moral cowardice. It was all admirably true, excellently expressed, even if somewhat above the head of a frightened, tired child of ten.

Valerie didn't say anything, which laid her open to the suspicion of sulking.

"Well," said Singleton at last, irritated by her silence though he had in fact given her scant opportunity to speak while his tirade was in progress. "What have you got to say for yourself, eh? I suppose you realise you've frightened your mother to death, running away and staying out all day like this? I was just off to make enquiries about you from the Police. That's a fine state of affairs, isn't it?"

It was no use. Valerie couldn't explain herself, couldn't explain that her panic was instinctive and unreasoning. To her father, who was himself eminently a man of reason, there was no meaning in an action so pointless and fruitless as hers must seem. "What I don't see," he kept on repeating, "is what you hoped to gain by your silly prank? You knew you'd have to come home eventually; you knew you'd have eventually to own up and be punished. I can't see what your *idea* was! You must have had an idea, and because I'm interested in ideas I wish profoundly that you'd be good enough to tell me what yours was."

And so on, and so forth, until Valerie, in floods of tears, herself not now in the remotest degree able, under his barrage of rationality, to recall a single one of the reasons which, that very morning, had made her policy of flight seem not only cogent but inevitable, was obliged to say, foolishly, that she 'didn't know'.

This seemed to her father a highly improper and indeed a mendacious statement. He himself never did anything for which he could not, on reflection, give a reason, and he felt that her inability, or refusal, to do so implied manifestly incalculable depths of duplicity and turpitude. And so, though he had started off by deciding that he would forgive her on the grounds that she had already suffered sufficiently, he now changed his mind, and, working himself into one of his customary passions at the reflection that he had begotten a fool,

cried out: "I wish sometimes you'd never been born, you stupid little ignoramus"; and sent her to bed supperless. Soon, however, he again grew calm enough to explain to her that her punishment was not because she had had an accident with the jug, or even because she had concealed the pieces, but rather was due to what he chose to call her obstinacy, her stupid temerity, as he deemed it, in futilely pitting her puny will against his.

Her mother, of course, smuggled up some supper to her in her bedroom, so that that part of her punishment wasn't operative. Her real punishment lay in the fact that, not having been able to explain herself and having, therefore, given her father a totally false impression of the way she felt, she despised herself and deemed him right in thinking her a fool. Poor Valerie, who had a desperate admiration for the quality of intelligence which she dimly recognised—as something most precious and desirable—in her father, spent many unhappy hours in her childhood weighed down to the earth by the consciousness that she totally lacked any such quality in herself. She didn't, by any means; what she lacked was only self-confidence, which was an attribute that Singleton's heavy-handed if well-meaning efforts to render her what he would, probably, have called 'a civilised member of society' did nothing in the very least to foster.

4

But for all this there were many compensations for Valerie, and it would be giving an entirely false impression of her early days to represent them as other than fundamentally happy ones. Because she was an only child, she was obliged to be resourceful and self-contained, and, though many of her pleasures were ones which she had to learn for herself, and which she had no one to share with her, they were none the less for this real pleasures. Ever since she could remember anything, she had known that the next best thing to having what you want is to make believe that you have it; and as she grew older her imagination, her capacity for living in her fantasy, rather than declining as with so many children it does, tended

to strengthen. Having very little company of her own age until she went to school (which she did not do until she was over eight, since her father had a theory that a too early submission of their tender brains to the processes of formal education was bad for the young); having, as we have said, little or no company of her own age, she did the next best thing and created it for herself by investing with quite superabundant life and personality her toys—her stuffed animals, and, particularly, her dolls. She had two dolls whom she especially loved: Katie Jane who was pink and fair, blue-eyed and of an open feminine disposition; and Grace Helen who was black and ill-favoured and temperamental almost to the point of malignancy. Valerie's life in relation to these two dolls was vivid and dramatic to an almost unbelievable extent. She was, however, cautiously reticent about this, and no one had the least idea that they meant so very much to her. As she grew older she became ashamed of her fantasy, and only played in secret with the dolls; but it was not until she was over fourteen that she contrived finally to steel herself to relinquishing her attachment for them, and then it was with regret. With one side of her nature she was, of course, fully aware long before the final parting that they were nothing but toys of china with stuffed bodies and gummed-on wigs; but with another they were, because she had so long cared for and tended them, more real and more important to her than anything in life, except her parents. The characters with which she had respectively endowed them were so marked and distinctive that she found it almost impossible to remember that they were exclusively the product of her own imagination; and, because they were projections of her most secret thoughts, she loved them with that tenderness which we lavish most easily on our projections of ourselves. Oddly enough, she loved the sinister Grace Helen more than the tractable Katie Jane. The latter was almost insipid in her consistent virtuousness, but Grace Helen more nearly resembled herself in her propensity for getting into trouble and behaving badly. Perhaps, indeed, Grace Helen was a projection of Valerie as she saw herself; and Katie Jane of herself as she would have wished to have been.

After her dolls and the strangely arduous, grown-up and responsible games which, as a compensation for her solitude, she played with them, Valerie's next best distraction lay in reading. She had a few children's books of her own, but in addition to these her father had a good library from which, in accordance with his theories, he was always glad for her to borrow a volume, provided only that she did not break its back or soil its pages. Her own books were the usual ones of her period: *Alice*, and *Brer Rabbit*, and most of the Beatrix Potter stories, of which last she was especially fond, though she knew them almost by heart. Her favourite character in all of these was perhaps Tom Thumb in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* who, as will be remembered, on finding that the fish which he discovered in the doll's house would not 'come off the dish', because though 'extremely beautiful' it was made of plaster, 'lost his temper' and smashed it with the fire-tongs. This seemed to her terrific, and reminded her of her father. She admired Tom Thumb to excess because he appeared to her to represent all that she herself would like to be, and so abundantly, in her mildness and her gentle diffidence, was not.

But though she loved her own books in the same secretive reserved fashion as that in which she loved her dolls, it was really in the books which she obtained from her father that her awakening mind first caught strange glimpses of vast half-apprehended vistas that, stretching to remote horizons, were, for her, at one and the same time, both exciting and terrifying. Only a half or a quarter comprehending what she read, she thus made the acquaintance of Ganem, who was called the Slave of Love, of Prince Gamaralzaman and his beautiful Badoura, of the wise and crafty Ulysses, of the lean knight who rode on quests totally inexplicable to her through the dry, sun-parched, lunar landscape of Spain. And least comprehensible of all was the latter's companion, whom she felt sure would have been considered very common in Dorset, since he frequently said the most outrageous things.

Unfortunately, few of Daddy's books were like these three. Mostly they had titles which to her meant nothing, such as *Man's Place in Nature, Literature and Dogma, Short Studies on Great*

Subjects, and so on; and sometimes, even if their titles were simple and promising, as in the case of *Bacon's Essays*, it was another matter when you opened the book because you could hardly find a word in it that seemed to make sense. But Valerie, in all humility, assumed that this was only natural, since it wouldn't be reasonable for a clever man like her father to possess, as a general rule, books that should be readily understandable by a child so dull and uninspired as herself. She was only glad that, for some reason unknown to her, he had condescended to keep on his shelves that remarkable trio of volumes already referred to—*The Arabian Nights*, and *Don Qixote*, and *Stories from Homer*. Incredible as it may seem, her solitude, her unsatisfied intellectual curiosity, was such that she read these three volumes through, dull passages and all, not once but several times. *The Arabian Nights* was her favourite, and of all that book she preferred the story of the luckless, though ultimately fortunate, Ganem, the Slave of Love. In explanation of all this it should perhaps be added that another of her father's many theories was that poetry was all rubbish, enervating and a waste of time; for which reason he declined to allow any sort of poetry—even Shakespeare—to exist at any time in his house. *The Arabian Nights* got in under the pretext that it was something to do with ethnography; or perhaps it was comparative mythology. In pursuit of this latter subject Mr. Singleton also actually possessed a Bible; but he kept this always carefully locked away in a drawer, since he did not think it expedient to run the risk of letting it fall into the hands of his daughter, to the possible diversion of her mind from the pure milk of rationalism.

5

As has already been indicated, it was not until she had passed the age of eight that Valerie was permitted to mix with other children at school. She had grown by then into a charmingly pretty little girl with long curling dark ringlets and large serious eyes. She was, however, painfully shy, and this shyness gave her a gaucherie of manner so noticeable as largely to offset

the charm of her appearance. Affectionate, impulsive, longing for companionship, she was too unpractised in the ways of ordinary childish intercourse to obtain what she sought, since her manner fluctuated between an excess of confidentiality which embarrassed her tougher-fibred schoolfellows, and an exaggerated aloofness which repelled them. True, this was only to begin with; for Valerie was neither insensitive nor unobservant. She quickly learnt the way in which her schoolfellows habitually comported themselves, and without any very great difficulty came to model her ways on theirs. She thus soon became, so far as her surface behaviour was concerned, of the same genus as themselves, and was even readily accepted as such; it was only within herself, in her private and solitary hour, that she recognised that still, in her own essence, she differed from them.

But more and more as time went on this difference seemed to matter less, and troubled her less. Valerie was an emulous child, with a desire for admiration and distinction, and now at length she was in a field which gave scope to these desires. Besides, she quickly developed a juvenile passion for an assistant mistress at her school, and went to quite enormous lengths to achieve any distinction either in the realm of learning or in that of sport that might earn a smile from that, no doubt very ordinary, divinity—a Miss Betchworth who, being herself upon the point of matrimony after an interminable engagement, had in fact but little interest to expend on the romantic attachments of small girls. Yet despite all these things, or perhaps because of them, Valerie's passage through school was by no means as distinguished as she had intended it to be. She had only a small natural aptitude for games, lacking the concentration, and indeed the stamina, to be first-rate at them; while as for her lessons, though she was intensely willing and eager to learn, she found herself much handicapped by a certain constitutional inexactitude of mind which rendered her always in trouble with such matters as mathematics and grammar, in which approximate and intuitive approaches were rather worse than useless. She was not a dunce; though her father grumbled at her reports, she contrived always to retain a fairly respect-

able position somewhere rather above the middle of her class. She was better than mediocre, but she lacked distinction.

When she became aware of this, all the self-distrust of her earlier days, that had partly been dispelled at her first contact with other children, returned, though this time with the difference that, having acquired guile and some knowledge of the world, she now kept it to herself, putting up outwardly a very respectable imitation of the slangy, satchel-swinging, lanky schoolgirl. She had by now abandoned her passion for Miss Betchworth, who had indeed left to become married, and, instead, expended her affectionate impulses on a succession of fallow, stolid, impassive schoolgirls, like herself, pig-tailed and straw-hatted, with whom she twined arms and walked about the playground exchanging mysterious and sensational confidences.

Few things can be more chaotic, more hopelessly difficult to plumb, than the mind of an English schoolgirl approaching the age of puberty. She is a creature of almost infinite complexity, in part a child still possessed of her full stock of juvenile memories, in part some other more adult thing for which, all unknown to herself, the race has already decreed an ineluctable destiny. She is fat, she is shy, she is gauche, she is fallow; spotty, self-conscious, tormented by a thousand things she does not understand and hardly cares to understand. She is like a vessel with sails full hoisted, waiting for a wind; and like such a vessel liable to be swept in any direction that that wind may choose to blow her. Sometimes it is in the direction of a febrile religiosity; sometimes in that of a desperate passion for one of her own sex; sometimes in that of a highly unsuitable and unspoken yearning for a comparatively elderly member of the other sex; and sometimes it takes the form, merely, of a violent enthusiasm for hockey. Whoever it was that wrote about the maiden 'standing with reluctant feet where the brook and river meet', he was, at least, in the right in his choice of the word 'reluctant', since it is a painful stage for which little sympathy and understanding are conceded, and which everyone who experiences it—as experience it they must—is glad enough to get done with.

In Valerie's case, this stage was as disagreeable as it is with most others. Her mother took upon herself, when she thought the occasion warranted it, to give her a brief explanation of the circumstances, though, as it happened, this wasn't necessary, since her fellow-schoolgirls had already done so considerably more luridly. Valerie listened to all they had to say, and to all her mother had to say too; but she found herself quite unable to believe it. All the same, that night was the last night she took her dolls to bed with her—secretly, of course—and, in a passion of farewell to the reprobate Grace Helen, told her the whole dreadful story, and then, ashamed of herself and aware that from now on such subterfuges and substitutes were not for her, sternly took both dolls and put them away for ever on a shelf at the very top of the cupboard. Then she cried herself to sleep.

We have said that her elder school-fellows had instructed her in what are called, perhaps with undue simplification, the facts of life, and, though it is unnecessary to labour the point, it may be just as well to add that she acquired from them in the course of time a great deal more information of a highly pungent character. There is a vast amount of cant and hypocrisy and muddled thinking exercised about such matters as these, and people are fond of talking about schools, both for girls and for boys, that possess a 'high moral tone'. The schools very likely do possess it, but it is quite certain that the pupils do not, since the combination of natural curiosity with a sexual vigour that is growing daily creates a ferment too powerful for any pedagogue soever to restrain in its ebullitions. And after all, why should he? The rules of the game, which we did not invent for ourselves, being as they are, it is just as well that we should learn them first as last.

And having said so much, we are visited with compunction lest it should be thought that Valerie's later school-days were one long orgy of scabrous anecdote. Nothing could be less true—except the suggestion that neither she nor any of her fellow-pupils ever gave a thought to the matter which, after all, so far as we know, was the principal reason for their being in the world at all. This being made clear, we can proceed.

At about the time with which we are now concerned, Valerie found herself lapsing from the gregariousness of her earlier school-days back into her more primitive craving for solitude. This was, no doubt, a symptom of the physical and psychical disturbances she was undergoing, though she rather naturally did not see it like that, but thought of it instead as 'a love of Nature'. They were very keen at her school on a love of Nature. Miss Rowbotham, the principal, was a Wordsworth addict and had even written a book about it; and the result was that her pupils of the upper forms were always being instructed that it was precisely their bounden duty to love Nature, because 'Nature never did betray &c', and 'One impulse from a vernal wood &c', and 'I gazed and gazed but little thought &c'. Now Valerie, who up to going to school had, as we have explained, been shielded by her father from the pernicious influences of poetry, and was, as a consequence, far more liable to succumb to its attractions than if it had been part of her existence from the beginning, had, all the time she had lived in Dorset, been, in an inarticulate and uncritical sort of way, very fond of going for long walks. If in this earlier period of her life you had asked her why she liked to do so, she would probably not have been able to give you any very explicit answer. She would have said, as likely as not, if she had said anything at all: "I like the country; and I like walking." But now, thanks to Miss Rowbotham all this was changed; or, at least, changed so far as her answer to your question was concerned. Valerie now knew that why she liked going for long walks in the country was because she had a 'love of Nature', like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Having satisfactorily settled that point, the next thing she set out to do was to write poetry herself, like her two great exemplars. The first time her father discovered her doing this, he was so put out that he expressed his disapproval by an action he had never before committed, and was never to commit again: he boxed her ears. After this Valerie took care only to write her poetry after she was safely in bed. She soon grew tired of this, however, and decided that it was not her vocation; but she kept up her 'love of Nature', and her long solitary

walks in pursuit of it, because she found she really enjoyed them. They gave her something, she hardly knew what, that was quite different from any other part of her present way of life. Sometimes she prevailed on her mother to accompany her on these excursions, which naturally only took place at week-ends and holiday times, and then she found, very strangely, that the magic something—whatever it was—quite vanished. Fortunately, however, Mrs. Singleton much preferred playing such things as tennis and badminton (at which she far excelled her daughter's somewhat mediocre prowess), so that it was not at all difficult for Valerie gradually to leave her out of her walks, and to resume her solitary way.

'Love of Nature' was all very well as a label to justify these expeditions of hers, but what was much nearer the truth of the matter was that she had gotten into the habit of doing her thinking at such times. Valerie, at this period, was thinking enormously, almost continuously, though very vaguely and loosely, so that if you had asked her precisely what she was thinking about she would have been obliged to say that she didn't know. And, indeed, perhaps thinking is hardly the right word for it; day-dreaming would be better; day-dreams in which were jumbled pell-mell all the wrack and rubbish of her discarded baby-thoughts; the would-be sophisticated horrors of her more knowing school-fellows; the adventures of the crafty Ulysses, and of Ganem, the Slave of Love; and Miss Rowbotham's 'love of Nature'. True, she had a conscious eye now for such phenomena as she had previously noticed without thinking of them: the motionless bright-eyed hare upright in the grass; the shy bee-orchis; the golden cascades of autumn; the little claw-marks in the glistening snow. But all these things—all these things—were not the real cause of her wanderings. It was true that she seemed to be searching, but what she searched for was herself: what manner of person she really was, what manner of life she really wanted to live. Youth is touchingly, heartrendingly humble: she knew the truth concerning neither of these things, and she imagined that, if she thought hard enough and long enough, she would be bound to find the answer.

She found no answer, but she had many enjoyable walks, and she laid the foundation, if one may use with a difference a phrase grown somewhat threadbare, of a genuine love for nature which remained with her throughout her life.

6

One of her favourite excursions for a long summer's afternoon was to strike on to the cliffs to the east of Weymouth, at the point nearest her home, and to walk towards Lulworth on the old grassy track that runs parallel with the sea. This footway, after it has dipped into and been lost in the declivity of Ringstead Bay, rises again steeply to the height of the White Nose, and runs thereafter through one of the most beautiful and unfrequented portions of the Dorset coast. On your right hand lies the great winking mirror of the sea, framed at the back by the dark jutting mass of Portland, while far off in front the faint blue-misted shape of St. Alban's Head rests its blunt nose on the water as a dog's head on its paws. All before you, back from the cliff edge, rise the green and rounded shapes of the Purbecks, tumbling in one behind the other like slices of bread and butter on a plate. The cliff-top here is wide, almost a plateau, dotted with gorse bushes and covered with long coarse grass which in the summer is burnt by the sun to a brownish parchment tint. There are cows feeding leisurely in the green patches between the gorse scrub and the coarse grass, but there are no houses to be seen, and, usually, no people. A solitary telegraph line that shrills and mutters in the wind is the one thing artificial in the scene, and even this does not seem obtrusive as it strides with its patiently spaced poles over the undulating landscape, tying in, as in a picture, the remoter distance with the foreground.

Lulworth and its celebrated cove was a really long walk from Weymouth, and Valerie did not aspire to go so far. She was quite content to take her few sandwiches and her flask of tea with her, and to lie out in the sun on Bat's Head, or in the shade of the gorse bushes and stunted thorn trees when the sun was too hot, and to gaze out at the blue sea and the dark

purple-grey monster that was the Isle of Portland, and, in the confused and dreamy way that was customary with her at this time, think her long, lopp, ignorant thoughts. We call them ignorant because she was still only a child and knew nothing of what life was really like; but it might be kinder, and it would certainly be no less accurate, to call them innocent. Innocence, indeed, being to the soul very much as ignorance is to the mind.

One afternoon, when she was half-way through her sixteenth year, Valerie was idly mooning along this favourite track of hers, thinking of nothing in particular and picking a bunch of purple scabious to take home to her mother, when an adventure befell her. Coming along the path from the direction of Lulworth a solitary man, who had the appearance of being a holiday-maker, was approaching her. She saw him first on the high ground some way off, then he descended into a fold in the hills and was lost for a long time; then he was suddenly quite near. There being no one else in sight, she naturally watched his approach and saw that he was young and bronzed and rather good-looking, with an open-necked khaki shirt and shorts and with a big rucksack on his back. When he drew level with her he stopped and wished her good-afternoon, and then asked if he was on the right track for Weymouth,

"Yes," she said. "Go right ahead. You'll see it lying before you in a mile or so."

He thanked her and went on; and she, thinking no more about it, proceeded on her way.

At the top of the next rise she turned for a moment to see if he were still on the right track, and what she saw then caused her heart, though she didn't entirely know why, to jump and seem to miss a beat. For the stranger was no longer going west, but had turned on his tracks and was following her, somewhat sheepishly it is true, gazing at his boots and making no attempt to catch her eye. Nevertheless there he indubitably was, not a hundred paces behind her.

Now though she wasn't herself yet aware of it, Valerie at this stage of her career was already quite a tall and mature-looking young person, who appeared older than her fifteen and

a half years. She had long and very shapely legs that were encased in brown stockings, she wore a dark-blue gym. dress, and, because of vanity, had around her neck a string of turquoise beads that her mother had given her. Her dark hair was blown over her face, pony-fashion, by the fresh wind from the sea, and altogether the young man with the rucksack may be said to have made a very understandable mistake in having turned in pursuit of her. But Valerie, at the time, didn't think of the matter on lines so eminently rational. She became, instead, seized with a violent agitation in which was curiously blended about one part of elation with three parts of fear. The elation was real enough, but the fear was so much the stronger that it quite submerged it. She had heard about men who followed girls; and about what happened next. That was to other girls. Now it was *her*. It had never been her before: it was in this that lay the cause for her elation, though she was in much too great a panic just then to savour the comfortable part of the thought, however much she was able to do so, over and over again, when later that same night she lay safely stowed away in her own bed. Now all that mattered was to escape, to get away, to make quite sure that he didn't catch her up. Valerie quickened her dawdling pace; after a little while she turned round again and saw that her pursuer had done the same, and that, if anything, he had made ground. This was too much; in unashamed and unreasoning panic she started to run, and on she ran, stumbling and panting, till she felt her heart ready to burst. Then and only then she dared once more to look back, and saw her pursuer a mere spot—as it seemed to her heated imagination a puzzled and disconsolate spot—on the distant hillside. Whereat, such is feminine illogicality, she at once regretted her flight and threw herself down on the grass, half-hoping that he would come on now and explain himself to her. After all, for all the stories one heard about them, all men could not be bad and heartless. After all, there had been the honourable Ganem who had behaved with such very remarkable respect and reverence to the beautiful Fetnah; to say nothing of the courteous Don Quixote and the highly laudable sentiments which he invariably expressed with regard

to his Dulcinea. Certainly it was a very strange business, this affair of men and women. Your elders and betters warned you against men as though they were ravening wolves; your books told you a story quite otherwise; and your own feelings seemed, oh so eminently, to confirm and supplement the story that your books told you. It was almost as though there was in this business of the sexes two entirely different things that had got themselves so thoroughly tied up and tangled together that there was now no disentwining them. She knew well enough what men did with women—her schoolfellows had made sure of that—and the process seemed to her one both indecorous and disrespectful; but what she did not know, and what she could not for the present determine, was just how much it was this thing by itself, alone, which made men—well, follow you as this one had done—, and how much it was something quite otherwise, something which she could only put dimly into words as being a yearning, a longing and a craving in the heart of a man that resembled precisely the longing, the craving that was in hers: for what? For what? It seemed to her that it must be for a tenderness, a kind of sheltering, a looking-up-to, a sanctifying. ... It was a thing like admiration, but it was more gentle; like the passions she had had for her girl-friends, but a thousand times more subtle; like the tremulous reverent adoration she had had for her father as a little girl: a love that was a submission, that was tempered almost with fear. And if all this was what she felt to be meant by love, what then was that other thing? And was it only because of that other thing that men followed girls about, and sometimes even whistled after them, as had happened to her more than once recently in the streets of Weymouth? Surely one did not whistle after a God!

She sat for a long while on the short crisp turf, thinking her confused, her foolish thoughts, waiting—a waiting that in the end grew almost to be a hoping. But the young man didn't arrive. Indeed, when Valerie had taken to her heels, he had realised at once that, as it ran in his vernacular, there was 'nothing doing', and the will for the chase had incontinently left him.

"Pity!" he had said to himself as he had plodded on his way:

an auctioneer's clerk released from bondage for his two weeks' annual holiday. "Pity! A dashed lovely girl!"

He went on to console himself: she wasn't the only one; there were plenty of pretty girls; and however much they might run and giggle and protest and evade—aye, and struggle—they all of them in the long run came meekly enough to what they were meant to come to.

"After all," said the clerk to himself (for he was a thoughtful type), "after all, it's only natural, isn't it? it's only the way things are. For all their pretty ways and their head-tossings and their high and mighty touch-me-not attitudes, it's really just as much their line of country as ours."

Valerie walked home in the sunset, her young ignorant-innocent face quite corrugated with the effort to think clearly. She thought of her pursuer, knew that he still thought of her, wondered what it was that he was thinking. Would, no doubt, have been horrified if she had known, for, though quite a nice young man, he was not of the school of Ganem, who was called the Slave of Love, and would almost certainly not have behaved in anything like so exemplary a fashion if he had had that worthy's opportunities with the beauteous Fetnah.

That night, in her dreams, matters went better. The young man caught up with Valerie before she had had time to fly into a panic and take to her heels, and he was charming, simply charming. Not Ganem nor Quixote could have behaved half so well. He kissed her hand, he was most respectful; in fact, in the end, it was Valerie herself who, excited by her own dreaming, felt at length impelled to quicken a little the tempo of the action, and, putting her arms round his manly neck, had kissed solemnly, with many big puppy-kisses, his smooth sun-bronzed cheek.

7

After this, things in a little while grew clearer, and she knew what she wanted; or thought she knew. Other girls had what they called 'a boy', and she was going to have one, too. The process, since she was charming, was not difficult, though far

from being, as she soon found, satisfying. The great lox quarry from which the article 'boy' was hewn was a certain school which, for no very good reason, dignified itself by the title of College, past the drive-gates of which all girls making their way to the school that Valerie attended were obliged to go. This very naturally led to a good deal of hanging about by the older boys, as they left school in the evening, and, on winter nights, to a certain amount of surreptitious cat-calling and whistling. And it was by means of these primitive processes that Valerie and her bosom-friend of the moment, a swarthy damsel prematurely moustached and by the name of Lucy Potter, succeeded in attaching to themselves a pair of swains called, respectively, Ted and Fred. For general safety and propriety it may be said that these affairs were almost always conducted in this multiple fashion, a pair of girls permitting themselves to become attached to a pair of boys, who then paraded the streets with them, particularly after dark, escorting them to their homes and indulging them in conversations quite unbelievably inane. Ted, who was tall, solid and spotty, with broad shoulders and a wide impassive face, was Valerie's share of the spoils, while Lucy had to put up with Fred, who was short, monkey-faced and much spottier. Ted was an argumentative young person with a positive passion for exposition. He would walk along beside Valerie—with Fred and Lucy a discreet yet decent distance in front of, or behind, them—and he would expound to her his views on sociology, politics, religion, science, or anything else that happened to occur to him. Ted had two conversational gambits, and very nearly only two. The first was to start every second sentence with the provocative and inflammatory phrase 'My contention is'; the other was to commence the alternate or intermediate sentence with the slightly more apologetic locution 'Well, actually.'

"Well, actually," Ted would say, "what we ought to do is to have a revolution (or do away with the Roman Catholic Church, or whatever his then policy happened to be). My contention is that we've put up with (his principal bugbear of the moment, whatever it was) too long. Well, actually. ..." And so on; and so on.

Valerie would walk along beside him, occasionally nodding, wondering whether, perhaps, this were all. Now and then, when they parted, Ted would kiss her, strange ourang-outan-like kisses, she thought, which produced in her no satisfaction at all, though she was glad that the process seemed to gratify him. One of Valerie's greatest weaknesses was that she was always glad to give pleasure, even when she received none—and who can be sure that this is, indeed, a weakness?

For the rest, Ted had, it would seem, some sort of confused theory in his mind which equated the art of love with the practice of gymnastics. When overwhelmed by amorous desire he would indulge her with a kind of complicated wrestling-bout, wherein he would squeeze her breasts through the front of her dress until they hurt most abominably, or would seize her in his arms and rock her to and fro as though he were trying to hurl her to the ground. She was glad, again, that these exercises seemed to give him pleasure, but felt with deep private dismay that, if these were the initial manifestations of love, then the final ones must indeed be truly frightful. In everything he did Ted was heavy-handed and clumsy; he handled her as though she were an old gladstone-bag or a sack of potatoes; and in the end Valerie came to the conclusion that, willing as she was to give him pleasure in his adolescent fisticuffs, there must yet surely be others cast in a solider and stouter mould that would give him equal pleasure and would not bruise so easily or become so utterly exhausted. She took steps, therefore, to evade the further ministrations of Ted, who had in no least particular provided her with anything she sought.

There followed now what seemed an infinitely long, confused period, in which everything she wanted seemed to exist only in her own imagination, and had in the World outside her mind nothing that at all resembled it. She developed fixations upon men who were, for her, pure abstractions: the celluloid men of the films, strangers glimpsed for a moment on the Front, impossible men such as handsome policemen and bus-conductors, paper men who lived only in books—the Mr. Rochesters of that world with his countless successors (for she had now become a secret addict of trashy fiction which she ob-

tained from a little library in a back street that provided her, for twopence a time, with a fresh thrill and a fresh dream); and then finally, and most satisfactory of all, a sort of grand composite imaginary man whom she had evolved out of her inner consciousness and who resembled no living creature she had seen anywhere. This paragon of all the virtues was rather elderly; he was, at any rate, thirty-five and his hair was going grey at the temples. He was gentle, wistful, he had seen a good deal of trouble and sorrow, and he was consequently very understanding and sympathetic. He was solicitous, patient, considerate; he treated her with quite enormous respect and made love to her in a gentle and melancholy fashion which did not entail any cracking of her bones and sinews. He was well-read, cultured, he wore elegant but not showy clothes, he was rather well-to-do, his eyes were dark, his feet were small, he was extremely gentlemanly and he knew his way about—that is, he conducted himself with dignity but without a trace of bullying or pomposity in public places, such as fashionable restaurants. He adored her, but for some reason it could never be; he frequently kissed her hand; he was given to sighing; and his name was Mr. Tom Fremantle.

To the composition of Mr. Fremantle had gone everything that was pleasant and agreeable to Valerie in the first seventeen years of her young life. Physically, no doubt, he was a composite of all the most attractive film-stars and actors she had ever seen; psychically he was a combination of all the characteristics which she had desiderated in her father and in the so woefully inadequate males of her present acquaintance. Mr. Fremantle, though very gentle with her, was, it should be added, very far from being a milksop: he excelled at all sports and games, and he had, except where she was concerned, a quick, though admirably just, temper. In this he resembled the ideal of her babyhood, the spirited Tom Thumb, who had broken up the deceptive plaster fish in what, surely, was the most righteous of all possible indignations.

For more than a year Valerie was obliged to console herself with the imaginary ministrations of the impeccable Mr. Fremantle, and during that time the thought did cross her mind

very often that the reason why he had no flesh-and-blood supplanters must lie in some deficiency in herself. She had all the touching humility of the very young; she totally lacked assurance, thought she was much too fat, even went so far, when she remembered to do so, to tie up her legs in bandages before she went to bed, because she thought they were less slim than they should be. And yet, for all these doubts and fears, for all the sense of diffidence and self-distrust that Mr. Fremantle's unchallenged pre-eminence created in her, his reign was not, in many ways, the least satisfactory period of her life. The best of a lover entirely imaginary is that he never disappoints one, never does the unexpected or the unwanted, and is, of course, never in the least degree selfish or exacting. And then, at last, came suddenly on to the scene the real and actual Mr. Tobias, and it was strange that if you had gone out of your way to create specially a personage who, in every particular, was the complete antithesis of Mr. Fremantle, you would have come near to evolving a grotesque that greatly resembled that odd, oddly intriguing, oddly pathetic, little man. It is in feats of irony such as this that life excels itself and provides a spectacle which, however distracting it may be, is at least always fascinating.

But before we come to Mr. Tobias, we must go back a little, since, having by rapid stages brought Valerie to her eighteenth year, we have tended a little to lose sight of her parents; and whereas eighteen years at the beginning of a life is nothing, eighteen years when it is superadded to middle-age is a very great deal. Henry Singleton had been forty-nine when his daughter was born, so that he is now sixty-seven, and a comparatively old man; and even her lively and juvenile mamma is maturing towards something like thirty-nine. Life before twenty is a continual reaching out, and the days pass unregarded like the days of spring; but life after thirty is a contracting, a closing in to the long evenings of autumn. Valerie's parents, under this closing-in process were changing, in their own way, as much as she; not though, as she, for the better, but for the worse.

CHAPTER THREE

VALERIE IN BLOSSOM

I

WHEN, SOME nineteen years earlier, Henry Singleton had eloped with his wife (and she was really, by the way, his wife now, since the registry-office ceremony already prefigured in these pages had taken place some two or three years since), he had done so under the stimulus of the illusion that by the possession of her person he would acquire perpetual felicity. It is hardly necessary to add that he had not done so; for who has? Annie, as women go, was a very nice woman and one entirely capable of making any ordinary man reasonably happy, and it was not in the very least her fault that her Henry was far from being an ordinary man. It is, moreover, extremely doubtful whether any other woman in her position would have made a much better job of him. For the trouble with Singleton was not that he was irascible, many happily married men are exceedingly irascible, and it was not that he was many years her senior, for many, though not too many, happily married men are in like case; it was not even that Annie was really rather unusually foolish while he was really rather unusually intelligent. No, it was none of these things. The real trouble with Henry Singleton was that he had a restless and a questing mind; he hadn't a particle of repose in him; and he ought never to have retired from active life. It was, if the muddled metaphor may be conceded, rather as though a battleship's engine had been taken out of its proper situation and bedded down in a back scullery to run a domestic lighting-plant. His vibrations shook the house constantly, rattling all the doors and windows in the most alarming fashion; what was even worse, they shook him too, and were rapidly engaged in shaking him to pieces, shaking him into his grave.

It was young Mr. Brent, his late suburban neighbour, who

made the most appropriate comment on the situation. The Brents, with whom almost alone among their acquaintances of the past the Singletons had kept in touch, from time to time paid their brief visits to Weymouth, and would take Annie back with them for a short suburban sojourn. Never Henry; he wouldn't come; and, when asked to, always said he was too busy.

Well then, it was this young Mr. Brent, who indeed was young no longer and was, in point of fact, wearing so very badly that he wasn't able, as it turned out, to prolong his life much beyond his fiftieth year, it was he who, to his wife, on the occasion of their latest stay with the Singletons at about the period to which our narrative has now arrived, passed the ultimate comment on Singleton, saying: "The old man's aged beyond belief! He was always a bit mad in a nice way, now he's mad in a dangerous way. If those two women of his weren't so abnormally sweet and unsophisticated they'd be scared stiff of him."

"Oh but don't you think they are, my dear?"

"^Fiddlesticks! 'Henwy's so funny!' That's all Annie will ever say about him. Henry's a whole lot more than funny: he's a demoniac who's done nothing for nearly twenty years but think up gadgets to stop the bath-taps leaking. He's slowly been storing up enough dynamic energy to blow that little place of theirs sky-high if he ever loses control!"

It was largely true. Singleton's mental energy during the years he had lived in Dorset had, almost of necessity, taken to expending itself exclusively on highly ingenious and thoroughly trivial domestic contrivances. His fine mind, racing round with nothing attached to its axle-shaft, had devoted itself to such whimsies as improving the mechanics of the family mangle, revolutionising the system of septic-tank drainage, inventing, as Brent had said, inordinately complicated devices to stop his taps from dripping. He busied himself desperately in what was near to hand because he was terrified of becoming bored; and his whirling mind, lacking the friction of another's, was consuming itself. Annie was useless to him; Valerie might not have been, had there not been between them that gulf which so very

often separates parent from child: that inability to realise that the child which was once an imbecile baby has assumed a character and a personality. Besides which, Valerie was for the present absorbed almost to the exclusion of all else by her Mr. Fremantle.

No, there was no help for it! Old Singleton was racing himself to death; and though the process was one sufficiently deplorable for his relatives, it was not, mercifully, one that was particularly disagreeable for him. For he was able, almost up to the last, to preserve the comforting illusion that his so strenuous activities were of deep and paramount importance.

In the summer of 1924, that is when Valerie had turned seventeen and was on the point of leaving school to undergo the mysterious process called 'finishing', Henry Singleton fell ill. That, at least, is the charitable way of describing it, because what actually happened was that he started to behave very oddly. It all began one fine day as he was working on the roof of the house, affixing to the chimney-stack a patent windmill which, he declared, should greatly reduce the domestic electricity bills by generating current to replace that supplied by the local authorities. This was all quite in order and in entire conformity with his normal practice; but what was not by any means so much in order was his sudden decision that he would remain on the roof and take his meals up there so as to be out of the reach of his enemies, who, so he asseverated, were composed of a mixed horde of Jews, Roman Catholics and Negroes. To implement which alarming decision he had produced from his trousers-pocket the small revolver which he always kept in the house as a safeguard against thieves. It took Valerie and her mother a great while to persuade him that his precautions were needless, and, when at last they succeeded in coaxing him down, they found he really looked so ghastly that they put him straight to bed and sent for the doctor.

The doctor didn't know what to make of him, since he appeared to be perfectly rational in his conversation, though a little wild; but he looked very wise and asked Mrs. Singleton privately if she thought it was a case for certification. Annie was furious. "Poor old man," she said. "Of course not! He's

been a good husband to me, and I and my daughter are fully capable of looking after him."

Which they did, though unhappily the bulk of the business fell upon Valerie, since her father, with one of those ugly subconscious obsessions for which there is no accounting, had suddenly taken it into his head that he was afraid of his wife and wouldn't have her in the room for fear, as he said, that she would try to poison him.

This, naturally, put an end to any projects whatsoever of 'finishing' Valerie, whether in Paris or elsewhere, and for eight months she became the willing drudge and nurse of her sick father. It was not an easy task, for he was physically as strong as ever, and a very trying patient. He refused to remain in bed, and thought nothing of darting out of the house in his pyjamas and slippers, and making for the Weymouth highroad; from which course he had, naturally, to be dissuaded and brought back home again by the most devious and patient cajoleries. And because he had, in the sad fashion we have described, so utterly turned against his wife, it necessarily devolved on Valerie to exercise the cajoleries. It was an experience that matured her a good deal. Her father had always been given to outbursts of temper, and now in his decline he was less and less able to control this. He often stormed and shouted at her for hours, using the most deplorable language and threatening her with physical chastisement. And then, what was very much worse, at the end of it all his mind would suddenly clear and he would shed tears and beg her to forgive him, and say that he knew he "was going mad and implore her not to desert him.

Oh yes, it was a harrowing enough experience for a girl barely eighteen.

As the months went by, he grew weaker, and with increasing weakness seemed to become more sensible. He even grew reconciled at last to the presence of his wife in the sickroom, and begged her to pardon him for all his unworthy suspicions of her. "You know, my dear," he would say in the most touching self-abasement, "that I haven't meant a word of it. You've always been a good wife to me. I don't know what induced me to say such frightful things." He had not, of course, remem-

bered saying them, but Annie, rather foolishly perhaps, seeing him softened, had told him that he had done so, and had begged him, in floods of tears, to say what she had done to displease him. In the highly emotional scene which followed, Valerie had been a most unwilling participant. Her father had commanded her and his wife to sit upon either side of his bed, and he had then, stretching out a hand to each, given them the equivalent of a secularist's blessing, and begged their pardon. He had proceeded, in a most embarrassing strain, to speak at much length of the early days of their elopement and of their French sojourn. He had recalled little intimacies which caused Valerie's innocent cheeks to blush scarlet and he had called her mother by the stupid yet touching pet-names he had had for her during this period. It was so sad, so strange, to see this wreck of a man once more reliving the golden days of his last passion. It was dreadful, and at the same time almost beautiful; and Valerie learnt more from her dying father of the true nature of love than she could ever have acquired from a million Teds, or a billion Mr. Fremantles.

When at last he died, worn out by the incessant motions of his questing restless brain, it was quickly discovered that he was far less well off than his family had, for years, been led to believe; and it became apparent that the only 'finishing' Valerie would receive would be that which turned her into an employed person. This was an entirely new idea for her. It was also quite clear that they would be obliged to sell their house and move into a smaller one. •

Mrs. Singleton considered it only right that his children by the former marriage should be notified of their father's death, with the result that the sons, all three of them, turned up at the funeral: a compact posse of heavy, black-moustached, middle-aged business men in black jackets and striped trousers whom Valerie regarded in bashful and almost tittering awe as those strange unknown creatures upon which she had so very often exercised her imagination: her half-brothers. These half-brothers were not very forthcoming. They remained loyal to the memory of their deceased mother, and refused to take any cognisance at all of the more recent Mrs. Singleton. All three,

however, feeling rationally enough that Valerie could hardly be held responsible for the fact of her existence, condescended to thrust a flabby hand into hers, and to say with an embarrassed sort of guffaw: "Ha—your brother Cedric, don't you know!" Or, of course, Alec, or Chalmers, as the case was.

After the funeral-service which, in accordance with the deceased's known preferences, was as rigorously secular as it was possible to be, the step-relatives were invited back to the Singletons's house to be apprised of the contents of their late father's will. This, which had been made at a date subsequent to the death of his first wife, laid down that the interest on all the properties and appurtenances of which Henry Singleton, Gent., might die possessed should, in the first place, pass to his dear wife, Anne, until such time as she no longer had need of it; and that then, after her death, it should be divided in equal shares between Valerie and the fat step-sons and their sister, as some slight recompense for the fact that their father had not, in his lifetime, been able to do all he would have wished for them. The amount of the estate was such that Mrs. Singleton was assured of an annual income of between four and five hundred pounds a year, which was ample for her; but the result of dividing this up into five after her death would naturally mean that Valerie's expectations were very limited, and that she would be obliged, as during her father's lifetime she had never in any way been led to believe necessary, to work for her living. Fortunately she was not at all perturbed by this intelligence, since she had never regarded with any violent enthusiasm her destined career as a young lady of leisure, from which there was no escape save through the dubious door of marriage.

After the will had been read, the step-relatives, who hadn't expected such generous treatment from their unregenerate father, condescended to unbend a little, and even conversed with the peccant Annie as she administered to them glasses of pale sherry and thin slices of madeira cake. And to Valerie they were even quite charming, for she was a distractingly pretty girl, and, even though she was their sister, a fully-grown sister whom one has never seen before is almost like any other pretty girl. After this refreshment, with all reasonable assur-

ances of cordiality, they went away to catch their train; and Valerie and her mother were left to build a new life as best they could.

2

The most notable characteristic of this period of rebuilding was the sudden emergence of an entirely new and totally unpredictable Mrs. Singleton. Her personality, up to the present, had been so much overshadowed by that of the masterful and vigorous Henry that it had been generally assumed that she didn't possess such an article, and was merely a kind of bundle of agreeable pliances and accords. Only Valerie, perhaps, who had, after all, seen more of her mother than anyone living, had even the remotest inkling that there was another and more positive side to her, and even she was surprised to see how extremely positive it was once the restraints of matrimony were removed.

Mrs. Singleton, whose principal characteristics as a wife had been those of sweet temper and compliance, blossomed out as a widow, all of a sudden, in a day, in a moment as it seemed, into a thoroughly frivolous person who, while retaining all her sweet temper, contrived at the same time to exhibit all the signs of possessing an exceedingly strong will and a capacity quite profound for wanting her own way. She resembled, as it were, a spring which, having for a long time been kept under tension bent to the left, was now, with the tension removed, perceived to bend naturally, with an equal vigour and persistency, to the right. Until her husband's death, she and Valerie had always formed the two halves of a league for mutual defence and aggression, and now that the cause for their league was removed, her daughter discovered, to her considerable astonishment, that the other had habituated herself so long to these postures of aggression and defence that she now couldn't help turning upon her old ally those weapons which they had spent so many weary years in perfecting together. Oh, one doesn't mean by this that the two women fell out and exhibited an open antagonism, or anything of that sort. They

were too much genuinely attached to one another, and had shared too many vicissitudes together, for this to be possible. It was merely that it became increasingly clear to Valerie that her mother had decided, her husband's reign being over, there should still be but one predominant influence in the house, and that her own—as was only right and proper, no doubt.

This was explicable, even if a little to be regretted. But what was not quite so easy to understand was the entirely amazing wave of frivolity which, at the same time, seemed to sweep over Mrs. Singleton. She was forty, or very near it; she was a widow with a grown-up daughter; and she now took it into her head to dress, to behave, to conduct herself as though she were still a young woman. The young are curiously unsympathetic and lacking in understanding for the plight of their elders. What was stirring Mrs. Singleton to these qualified excesses was a belated rush of sexual optimism. Valerie was too young to understand that her mother who, to her, seemed an exceedingly mature person, did not, to herself, seem other than a woman who, though of course past the first flush of her youth, was still attractive to men, and eminently marriageable. Mrs. Singleton, though she was not in the habit of admitting it to herself, had long realised sub-consciously that her precipitate elopement with a husband so much her senior had not been the most satisfactory way in which to have disposed of her life; Henry's death had given her a possible second chance for happiness, and she determined, consequently, in the few effective years which remained to her, to do her best to seize it. Hence the frivolity which, to the earnest, serious, self-regarding mind of the young Valerie seemed merely foolish, callous and unsuitable. Hence the staying in hotels, the giggling with casually-met men, the general irresponsibility of their joint proceedings for the few months which immediately succeeded the funeral.

Mrs. Singleton justified the hotels, as indeed she justified the giggling, by saying that now the girl had no father and no fortune to speak of, it had become her bounden duty to see that she made a good marriage, and, since eligible men were hard to come by, the only thing to be done was to go where they

might be found. Unhappily, the men, when found and passed as eligible, did not conform to Valerie's standards; they were for the most part middle-aged, and rich, and uninteresting, and they looked her plump body and her smooth pretty baby-face up and down as though she was, she declared, a pig at the market. During this brief spell of extravagance they danced a great deal, both Valerie and her mother, and it was unfortunate that, whereas Valerie was a very good and graceful dancer, her mother was quite the reverse, for Henry had disapproved of married women dancing and she had had no practice for twenty years. This had meant that, in effect, Valerie got all the attention from people she couldn't stomach, while her mother, who in her present mood could have stomached almost anyone who was reasonably genial, got hardly any at all; and was furious to see her daughter flinging away chance after chance which she herself would gladly have accepted.

During most of this period they stayed at a rather expensive hotel in Bournemouth, and Mrs. Singleton justified the expense to her cousin, who was her trustee and had charge of her affairs, by saying that Valerie had had such a dreadful time during her father's last illness that she felt bound to give the girl a change; and she also hinted, discreetly enough, that she thought it would be a good thing for her to have the chance of meeting some nice men. But still, still, the nice men failed to materialise, and the trustee, who knew that his cousin's means really would not stand all this nonsense, at last grew fractious and told her plainly that her extravagance would have to cease or she would find herself penniless. He said, moreover, very sensibly, that Valerie was still only a child; she was very pretty; and there was plenty of time. "You'll be a fool, Annie," he had concluded, "if you force the girl into a marriage that she'll regret when she is older."

After the secluded life they had lived at Weymouth, Bournemouth appeared to both of them to be very gay and even cosmopolitan; and when the question arose at last of selling the house and moving into a smaller one, they both decided it would be pleasant for the smaller one to be in Bournemouth,

which was well removed from the often painful associations of their late home. Besides, being so much the bigger town, there seemed sure to be in it more scope for Valerie to acquire that employment which it was manifestly necessary for her soon to find.

Long and earnest were the discussions held by the mother and the daughter on the subject of this job. Valerie had had no particular training for any career; her school record was mediocre rather than brilliant; and she had no especial aptitudes save for classical and ballroom dancing, for which, at school, she had secured several diplomas. Because of this she would have liked, if it had been at all possible, to take up the career of a dancer, joining perhaps in the first instance a ballet-school, and graduating later, no doubt, to the glamorous role of *opremiere danseuse*. There was something in her, her mother's Welsh blood, perhaps, or the tinge of French which she had inherited from her father, which, at this period of her life, caused her to yearn passionately for distinction, admiration, acclaim. She saw herself in the full centre of the stage, sunk in the last abandonment of the Dying Swan, being pelted by a rapturously appreciative audience with rose-petals—oh, and all sorts of pleasant things! It was, of course, a dream; and she knew it. Her figure was right enough, so was her height; but she was too old, miles too old now to catch up, to make any sort of figure in ballet, other than a third-rate one. And to do her justice, she aspired either to the first-rate or to nothing. And so, regretfully dismissing this pleasant dream, the pair turned again to the consideration of those other jobs which a young lady in reduced circumstances can honourably perform while remaining, to a greater or lesser degree, still a young lady. She might, then, be a receptionist to a doctor or a dentist; she could be a receptionist at a good hotel, though scarcely at a second-rate one; she could, for some esoteric reason, be a receptionist at any nursing-home, whether first-rate or otherwise; or at a really high-class photographer's; she might even work with her hands in a very very good flower-shop. These, having regard to her limited aptitudes and total lack of training, were about all the situations they could think of that con-

formed with the social prejudices of that particular year of grace; and when her mother asked Valerie which of these alternatives most appealed to her, she puckered up her charming nose in a grimace, and said they all sounded about equally nauseating, and she had no choice.

Matters then were advanced from the stage of theory to that of practice, and a post was speedily secured for her as receptionist at a first-class—indubitably a first-class—photographer's.

3

The house at Weymouth was sold without much difficulty, together with a part of the heavier furniture; and mother and daughter moved into a neat little house in a neat little row of houses in a quiet street that led directly off the Wimborne Road in Bournemouth. From here now, each morning, Valerie set forth to her new post at the photographer's, where her duties consisted, principally, in looking decorative and persuading customers to have more, and larger, and more expensive photographs of themselves, of their children, or of their dogs, than they had intended. The decorative part of the business was not difficult, since she was rapidly developing from a charming girl into a really quite exquisite young woman. Her mother had been pretty enough in her day—as Henry Singleton had found—and the daughter had inherited from her the fine, delicately-modelled bony structure of her face, and her graceful figure. But, in addition to these, Valerie possessed what her mother had always lacked: a sort of kindling intelligence and brightness of eye, a vivacity of manner, a quickness and a gaiety of mind, which derived, no doubt, from her quick-witted and restless father. Whereas Annie's pretty eyes had always been clouded to the really perceptive beholder by an almost fish-like lack of expression, Valerie's, though not in themselves so beautiful either in shape or colour as her mother's, were always ablaze with vitality and intelligence. There was something else, too: her solitary, her rather frightened and subdued childhood, crowned as it had been by the agonising months during which she had tended almost

single-handed her heartrendingly mad old father, had set a mark on her face—of sadness, of spirituality—which made her mother's greedier, more self-satisfied countenance seem commonplace beside it. She had high-arched nostrils, and a mouth that seemed to respond in tiny changes of its curvature to every least mood—of solicitude, of gaiety, of recklessness—that passed through her mind. It was a thoroughbred face; one that could not easily conceal the quick workings of the sensitive mind behind it.

To all this must be added the fact that, though still plump with the ravishing plumpness of her teens, she was fining off, and her plumpness now confined itself to her face and her bust. She had long, well-shaped legs, sturdy because of her dancing; and beautifully modelled, though rather helplessly and appealingly small, hands. She was immensely vain of her appearance, as is only natural with young girls, and she spent a vast amount of time and all the money she could afford on her clothes. Her taste was not very certain, but she had the sense to be aware of this, and dressed, as a rule, very quietly, leaving it to the long lines of her figure to set off her plain, well-tailored costumes. She would, rather wistfully, have liked to possess any amount of jewellery, but she wore none at all, as she didn't think it the correct thing for a young girl.

So, then, she appeared in that distant springtime: a young woman of nineteen, at the splendid beginning of her sexual prime, a perfect object which contained a mind and a soul as timid, unsure, irresolute as the wind: walking the broad pavements of the Wimborne Road under a sky quite ridiculously blue. Few contrasts can be more extreme than that between the outer perfection of such delicate creatures and the inner turmoil of doubt and uncertainty which racks them: Am I pretty? am I desirable? they seem so diffidently to ask themselves. Shall I find the partner of my dreams? Shall I be worthy of him?

Oh foolish ones! who would be worthy of you if you *were* as you *appear*? Look in your mirrors when you return home, and consider that, for a brief year or two, you are a miracle; and try to be worthy of that miracle! Yes, indeed, they cry in

return: and who shall then ensure for us that we secure our deserts before the miracle is past? Who indeed?

So, at all events, she was; and so she went her ways, thinking her confused, unsure and painful thoughts; and so there fell upon her outward perfection the globular and curious, but withal kindly eye of Mr. Eli Tobias, as cursorily mentioned earlier.

Mr. Tobias was a grotesque and froglike little man, if one can visualise a frog with a dark toothbrush moustache and gold-rimmed spectacles. He was so short that he barely came up to Valerie's shoulder. He was thirty-five years of age; a bachelor; and the proprietor of a good-sized jeweller's shop in the town. He was a man who, like so many of his compatriots—for he was a Jew—had a passion for beautiful things, and a really unerring instinct for finding them. He was also a gentleman.

He was standing at the corner of the Wimborne Road, waiting for a bus, when he first saw Valerie. He was wearing a bowler hat and carried a silver-mounted walking-stick. As she clicked past him on her rather high heels, he had the impression that he was looking at an angel, an angel perhaps rather naive and unsophisticated, but had one any reason for believing that angels should appear otherwise?

Hastily relinquishing all aspirations for his omnibus, Mr. Tobias fell in behind the angel and tracked her from a decorous distance till she vanished from his view behind the shop-door of the photographer's: for it was midday and she was returning from her lunch-hour at home. Mr. Tobias removed his bowler hat and wiped his forehead with a large pure white silk bandanna handkerchief; then he wiped the band inside his hat and put it on again. And waited. He was, he admitted, shaken to his inmost core.

Being a man of thirty-five, well-to-do and possessed of a strong appreciation of beauty (in which is included female beauty), it would be idle to pretend that Mr. Tobias was innocent of all knowledge of the world. He was, in fact, as he would most cheerfully have admitted in his more confidential moods, altogether the reverse; which was the precise reason why the

shattering effect that Valerie had had upon him came as such a great surprise. So great a surprise, in fact, that he simply couldn't understand it at all. It was, however, one not by any means to be gainsaid. Mr. Tobias, thinking she must be a customer of the photographer, waited, rooted to the pavement, because there was simply nothing else that he could do.

He went on waiting. He had appointments in his own shop; people who wanted to buy engagement-rings and all manner of lucrative transactions; but he couldn't help that. He was, if necessary, prepared to wait until nightfall.

At last, however, the brilliant thought came to him that the angel couldn't possibly be a customer, because she had by now had ample time to have had her glorious face photographed fifty times over. He had waited two hours by the clock. If she was not a customer, then what could she be? And presently the idea struck him that she must be one of the staff.

Blushing furiously for all his frog-face and his thirty-five sophisticated years, Mr. Tobias reverently lifted the shop latch that She had raised, and made his way into the shop, determined, if need be, to ransack the building from attic to cellar. He had no need, however, for there, in a plain black frock with white collars and cuffs which set off to the best advantage her admirably proportioned figure, sat Valerie behind a limed-oak table-desk. She rose at his entrance and assumed her sweetest professional smile. She had at the best of times a sweet smile, and her professional version of this, though perhaps a trifle exaggerated, as indeed is inevitable when one really has nothing to smile about, was very successful, particularly with the nervous children who, dragged in unwillingly by their fond parents to be recorded for posterity, formed a large and by far the most difficult portion of her clientele.

She smiled again, and this time her smile had in it nothing that was forced, since it seemed to her so very quaint that this odd frog-faced little creature should aspire to have his features reproduced even by the best photographer in the whole town.

Mr. Tobias raised his hat, and he smiled too. He looked full at her, for he had previously only caught a fleeting side-face glimpse of her. Oh! he thought, this is incredible! Perfect!

And to his extreme horror found he wasn't able to articulate a syllable.

"Can I help you?" cooed Valerie in her kindest professional voice.

Help him! *She* help him! "Look here," said Mr. Tobias in a sort of strangled gasp, "you take photographs here, don't you? I mean . . . one gets one's photograph taken ..." He stopped, and regarded her imploringly. Surely she must understand!

"Yes indeed," said Valerie calmly, secretly amused by the little man's strange agitation. "What kind of photograph would you require?" And she set before him a book of samples, and started talking incomprehensibly of cabinets, cartes-de-visite and all manner of technical matters.

"I'll have one done like that," gasped Mr. Tobias, taking a random dab at one of the pages of the book she was turning over before him, was actually turning over for him with that white miracle which was her hand. "Where do I go? When?"

"Through here, please," said Valerie, and she preceded the utterly overwhelmed Tobias through a door into the rear part of the building and handed him over to a dishevelled photographic artist with a few muttered words as to his requirements.

It would be kinder to draw a veil over the next few minutes, over the troubles which the photographic artist had with Mr. Tobias. "Never had a sitter like him before," he said afterwards. "And never want such another again. Like a chap who'd done a murder, he was. No oil-painting at the best of times, I shouldn't judge, and looking fair ghastly when he came in. Rolled his eyes, he did, wouldn't sit still, wouldn't hold up his head. Reckon he'll have a shock when he gets the proofs."

When at length Mr. Tobias was released from the studio, he rushed back along the passage to the shop as if the wolves were after him. But Valerie was no longer there. She had been called away to beguile and pacify a particularly arbitrary set of twins who were exhibiting their earliest charms upon a large sheepskin rug and couldn't be prevailed upon to stop writhing.

This was a bitter blow to Mr. Tobias, but he quitted the premises not utterly unsatisfied. After all, he knew where she

was to be found, and he had always a way of attaining the privilege of being permitted to address her, and of experiencing the miracle of hearing her speak to him. He could always, that is, go into the shop and have his photograph taken. The studio was an expensive one, but then Mr. Tobias was more than well-to-do. He had his photograph taken upon the following Monday, and the Thursday after that; then on the Tuesday and the Friday of the subsequent week. When he returned from his Friday sitting, Valerie was at her post, and he saw that her eyes were following him with frank amusement.

He went up to her desk and said, quite simply: "Miss, I don't know your name so I can't call you by it, but I admire you more than I can possibly tell you, and I should consider it the greatest honour and privilege if you would let me take you out to dinner. To-night, or any other night."

Valerie sat at her desk playing with her pencil, and for a moment she positively couldn't bear to look at him. To think that this was that which she was so ardently waiting for; and that he should look as he did! Then she shot up a quick glance at him from under her long lashes, searching for a moment his face with that strained questing expression with which a young girl puts to her heart the question, 'Is it he?' Her eyes dropped again. Manifestly it was not; but he seemed to be a gentleman, he had a nice voice and no one had ever asked her out to dinner before, not, at least, in a manner at once so affecting and so bizarre.

All at once she became very grown-up and sophisticated. Negligently patting into place a stray curl out of her back hair, she said: "Why yes, Mr. Tobias"—for she knew his name because of his numerous photographings—"I should be very much pleased to dine with you. My name is Valerie Singleton."

Mr. Tobias thrust out his hand and shook hers warmly. "And mine," he said, "is Eli Tobias, and I am ashamed of thrusting myself on you in this way. But there didn't seem to be any other way, and I wanted so awfully to know you. Will to-night suit you? At the *Norfolk*?"

Valerie was by now sufficient of the coquette to realise that it

would seem unduly precipitate in her to agree to that evening, though she had, to be sure, nothing on hand, save her usual quiet session at home with her mother. So she said: "Well, I can't manage it to-night, but to-morrow would be very nice."

"To-morrow, Saturday. I am really infinitely obliged to you. May I call for you and escort you to the *Norfolk*?"

Valerie, who was a little ashamed of her unpretentious home, said, smiling: "Oh no, I'm a big girl now. I'll meet you there."

"In the lounge? At seven sharp?"

"All right."

"Bless you, bless you, I shall be there"; and the odd little creature fairly rushed out of the shop as though he were demented. As indeed he was.

4

Mr. Tobias's behaviour during the ensuing three months was entirely ridiculous. He was in his place in the lounge of the *Norfolk* next evening quite a full half-hour before the appointed time, and, as he rose to greet Valerie, resplendent in her one best evening frock, he seemed to resemble a sort of miniature Santa Claus that bore in his short arms a preposterous plenitude of brown-paper parcels. There was a spray of orchids; an enormous box of chocolates; a large flagon of scent; a box of gold-tipped cigarettes (in case she smoked, which she didn't); and two handsomely-bound volumes of the works of Browning and Omar Khayyam.

Valerie, of course, said she couldn't possibly accept any of these things, but, on being pressed, agreed to take the orchids since they would otherwise only die; and then she found that, at her age, she was also unable to resist the chocolates; and then, later on, after much pleading on his part, took the scent as well, since he said he would otherwise throw it away, and she was perfectly certain that her mother would love it. This left the cigarettes, in the matter of which he gladly accepted defeat, and the works of literature, regarding which he made the most excellent point that, if she couldn't take them, there could be no harm in her borrowing them, to read. Valerie

conceded the justice of this, and at once the generous little man was contented, and basked and seemed to swell in the sunshine of her approbation, and in the glory of being seen in the company of the prettiest girl in the room, if not, as he was confident, in Bournemouth—aye, and the whole round world.

Valerie, who by this time had talked over with her mother the whole most singular business, was both circumspect and assured. She had laid down a line of conduct for herself, and knew that she would have no difficulty in following it. It was, consequently, the sophisticated Mr. Tobias, who was nearly double her age, that was the embarrassed and halting member of the party—needing reassurance and encouragement—while she was as calm and as confident as though she had been in the habit for years of spending her evenings in the society of gentlemen whose devotion to her person rendered them almost completely speechless.

Besides, though he was so manifestly impossible, Valerie couldn't but help being flattered by his attentiveness, his extreme deference and his abject desire to please her. She had, after all, never encountered anything which in the slightest degree resembled it, and, because, like all modest young women, she was really very unsure of herself and even of her attractions, she was grateful to him, and laid herself out to be as agreeable to him as she knew how. Fatal complaisance! Poor Mr. Tobias, reading into her graciousness some degree of tenderness for himself and for his ridiculous person, swelled and preened himself in the sunlight of her approbation; and his timidity, by slow degrees, began to wear off a little. Not on the first evening though, nor indeed for many similar evenings, since he was a really modest man with but few illusions and no conceit to speak of. In fact, it took him quite a long while before he dared to delude himself into thinking that Valerie's unfailing agreeableness implied any especial degree of regard.

But when, however, this conception had once entered into his modest and bashful mind, a change at once came over their relationship, which was by no means a change for the better,

Mr. Tobias, as we have said, was a man of the world, and, as

such, he realised only too well that the glorious creature who was permitting him to heap upon her his little presents, his succulent meals, was a virgin. So great was his appreciation of her that he did not desire, at any rate for the time being, that she should be otherwise, and he consequently refrained, entirely to Valerie's relief, from any attempt to—as she herself put it—'paw her about'. True, he kissed her hand, very respectfully (and like Mr. Fremantle) at parting, and, at times, in the discreet half-light of the cinema, would seize and press that same member with the most remarkable fervour. But all this did not seem to her unreasonable. It appeared to her so little to give for all the good things which he so unstintingly poured out for her pleasure. Before long, indeed, she grew quite attached to him in an entirely non-sexual fashion, for, beside his extreme generosity and his touching desire to please her, Mr. Tobias had also the very great virtue of being both highly intelligent and—after he had got over his first shyness—highly articulate. Valerie, who was young and consequently ignorant, enjoyed very much listening to his rapid and amusing flow of talk. Mr. Tobias was a great reader, and had, indeed, a passion for fine literature. He fascinated Valerie by telling her all about the books he had read, or was reading, of the interesting people he had known and the interesting places he had visited. It was all extremely diverting, and to her, with her naive and curious mind, really delightful. She had never before, save for her father, known a man even remotely so cultivated.

Toby—as she soon learnt to call him (for Eli, as they both agreed, was impossible)—Toby was a man of curious and eclectic tastes in his reading. He had a passion for the writers of splendid and marmoreal prose: Landor, Pater, the later George Moore: and he was in the habit of frequently spouting to her from memory his favourite passages. It was thus from him that she first learnt that 'Laodameia died; Helen died; Leda, the beloved of Jupiter, went before'; and of her that was older than the rocks among which she sits, and who had been a diver in deep seas and kept their fallen day about her. And with all this, for all his deplorable lack of physical distinction, poor Toby had a really very fine and resonant speaking voice so

that often, as he was spouting away to her, she would shut her eyes and, listening only to his voice, think to herself: "If only he looked as he sounds!" And he, thinking that she shut her eyes because she was carried away by the beauty of the words, would believe that she had a noble and distinguished soul that was utterly *en rapport* with his, and would grow quite imbecile with delight that he had found her and had secured her all for himself.

It was, of course, a thoroughly impossible situation, and one which held in itself all the seeds of its own destruction; but that this was so the poor infatuated Toby, after his first taste of triumph, resolutely refused to face. He had but one serious, though very understandable, fault from Valerie's point of view, which was that he was fantastically possessive and jealous; was, in fact, absolutely terrified lest his pearl might be reft from him by someone whose exterior was more pleasing to the eye. At first Valerie had found this quality in him merely rather endearing, and flattering to her vanity; but after a while his ceaseless, and, on the whole, quite untrue allegations that she was casting eyes on some personable young man, when she ought to have been concentrating on him, became rather a nuisance and rather a bore. No one, of course, can be crueller than a young woman to a man in whom she is not physically interested, and at length one day, when she was not feeling particularly well and was not, consequently, quite her usual tranquil self, Valerie decided to take him to task about it, saying: "My dear Toby, I do wish you would try not to be so fantastically possessive! I'm not your property, you know."

It was an error, since it was just exactly what he had been waiting for. "No, darling," he said. "I know you're not; and I want you to be—so very much. You know I adore you. I can't bear the idea of your having a thought for anyone except me."

Valerie, angry with herself for precipitating a crisis which, for weeks, she had successfully been fending off, took revenge on her own stupidity by flaring up at him: "Don't be ridiculous, Toby!"

He gazed at her with his great pathetic spaniel eyes. "I can't help being ridiculous," he said. "It's the way God chose

to make me. I know. I know perfectly well what I must look like to you. I'm not a fool. Oh, but I love you so dearly, Valerie. Will you marry me?"

"Oh Toby," she said, now deeply distressed that all her carefully constructed barriers should thus be dashed away. She put out her hand and took his: "Surely you know I can't."

"Can't you? No, I suppose you can't. I'm being very foolish, aren't I? I should know that an ugly old devil like me . . . and You. . . ."

"Oh Toby, darling, please *don't*."

"No. All right. I won't. I'm old enough to know better. But, by God, if you knew what it's like to know one looks as I do, and not to be able to do anything about it! To know that all heaven's there, for me, in you; and that I shall never get it, simply because of my blasted face. It is my face, isn't it?"

Valerie remained mute: she couldn't say No, and she wouldn't say Yes.

"You don't have to answer," he went on. "I've known really, all along, how it had to be, and I don't blame you a bit, you know."

"Dear Toby! We're great friends, aren't we?"

"Are we? God knows! I suppose so. I believe you do really rather like me. It isn't all just greed and vanity?"

Greed and vanity! So that was what he really thought. "Toby, how could you?" And yet she knew so well how much she took from him, how much she was, carelessly and thoughtlessly, prepared to take. His shaft had gone very close home: drawing blood.

He saw she was genuinely distressed, and at once retracted. His eyes clouded with tears, and he said: "Darling, forgive me! When one is hurt, one wants sometimes to hurt back. I'd no business to say that. It isn't true. You know as well as I do how infinitely much you give me: my only happiness. Far more than I could ever give to you."

But there are certain words that can't quite be taken back. She knew well enough how greedily she had accepted everything from him, while returning so little. She said chokingly: "Toby dear, I've been a nasty grasping mercenary little beast;

but I swear I never thought you were so serious. Tonight you've asked me to marry you. You're the first man to do that, and I shall never forget it; or you. I'm very touched, and very much honoured, my dear, and I wish to God that I could say Yes."

He stared at her, almost stupidly in his misery. "Perhaps if I were to ask you again in a year's time . . .?"

"No. It wouldn't be any use."

He laughed, and for the first time in their whole relationship made use of a coarse expression in front of her: "I suppose I must look an absolute b——to you?"

Valerie wasn't offended; in fact, in some way, she felt relieved, as though his word had broken the spell, lifting the whole affair off the impossibly high plane upon which it had gotten itself. "Not a bit of it," she said. "It's me that's the"—and she paused and then, in a desperate attempt to put herself on to his plane and to retain something of their fellowship, said it—"b——. I've been a little beast to you, and I promise I won't be one any more."

"You haven't. You've been an angel. Everything shall go on just as it's been going."

5

It didn't, of course; couldn't after the flame of his real passion had shown itself. Valerie now always felt shy of him, because she knew that he genuinely suffered on her account. On the same night as the conversation above had taken place, she had talked the whole thing over with her mother, who had, from its very beginning, followed the course of the affair with a profound, an almost vicarious, interest. She had long before asked Valerie why she didn't bring Mr. Tobias back home, a thing which her daughter had always flatly refused to do on the not unreasonable grounds that it would make him think she was taking him seriously. And now, when Mrs. Singleton learnt from her weeping and disconsolate daughter of poor Toby's proposal of marriage, she had promptly said, as all mothers do: "My dear, he's a gentleman, he has behaved ad-

mirably, and he's comfortably off: are you quite sure you are not making a mistake?"

"Oh, Mummy, you haven't seen him!"

"No, dear, but all men get to look equally revolting in time, and you don't really notice it much so long as they are good to you."

"Please don't, Mother, I couldn't bear it!"

"Well, dear, it's your life, and you know best, I'm sure; though I must say it seems a great pity."

Poor Toby! the next time they met after his outburst, he was quite different to her; and remained different. It wasn't that he was in any one particular less assiduous or considerate; it was simply that something had gone out of him, some zest, some snap, some—the word is grotesque but it really expresses it—some bounciness. It had been his hope of success with her that had made him so gay, so assured, so eloquent. Now there were long silences between them, dull sad meals together, and she knew that he suffered, and resented beyond all words that she should be the cause of it. He wasn't, and in a way that was the worst thing of all, he wasn't even jealous of her any longer; and when, as happened after they had been for nearly six months in constant daily intercourse, Valerie, as was inevitable since you cannot indefinitely keep under a bushel such a light as she then was, met and fell in really seriously style for Richard, the handsome Australian medical student whom she met one afternoon while bathing, poor Toby simply stood to one side and let her go without the tiniest effort to retain her.

So illogical is the feminine mind that she now rather resented the complete absence of fight in him; and, as it happened, this resentment came in very useful, as it enabled her to forget that she had treated him badly, and gave her the excuse she needed to concentrate all her energies on Richard, who, in the completest contrast with Toby, was, indeed, a most glorious specimen of humanity. In two days after their first meeting, she was quite mad about him; and Toby, seeing his number was finally and absolutely up, vanished with an endearing dignity.

Later, from time to time, she met him in the streets or the public resorts of the town, and, if she wasn't with Richard,

always had a gracious word for him, since she really liked him very much. But Toby was rather less accommodating. Because of her he had suffered more than she was then capable of understanding, and his manner was distant and even a shade ungracious: a thing so unlike him, as she remembered him in their best days, that it hurt her. She heard, much later on, that he had married a very attractive hospital-nurse and had begotten a family; and this, instead of pleasing, vaguely annoyed her. She felt then that a man who had loved her as deeply as Toby had done had no business with raising a family, but should have condemned himself, for her sake, to a lifetime of celibacy. Valerie had not at this stage of her career reconciled herself to the fact that life is a very long, exacting and wearying business, in which, if we are lucky enough to be able to, we proceed by shabby compromises and second-bests.

6

But all this, naturally, meant nothing to her while her passion for the handsome Australian endured. It was a curious thing, and it was really half Toby's fault, in that he had, by his devouring passion for her, awakened in Valerie a restlessness, an uncomprehended desire, which, since it couldn't be allayed by him, caused her desperately to cast round for someone upon whom she herself could bestow romantic yearnings every bit as deep as Toby's had been for her. It was almost as if her subconscious regarded this as his due, if only in extenuation of the way in which she had disappointed him. She felt that if she had done this because there was in herself no capacity for a love equal to his own, then she was to blame for his unhappiness; but that if she had done it because she was reserving her devotion for someone who *looked* quite different from him, then she was guiltless. And so she was half-prepared already for the coming of any man whom she could love without restraint; had, indeed, within herself the necessity so to love. It was, perhaps, this necessity to justify herself to herself that explains the extreme imprudence of her affair with Richard; for undoubtedly it was imprudent.

Richard was tall and dark and very good-looking in the beaky way of his nation. He was high-spirited and ebullient. He was good-natured, and, though not particularly clever, serious in a schoolboyish sort of way. Though he lacked utterly the real urbanity of Mr. Tobias, he too was addicted to poetry and the arts, and very soon after Valerie met him had bestowed upon her limp leather copies of the works of Rupert Brooke and Adam Lindsay Gordon.

Her affair with Richard was, throughout, of an utterly different kind from her civilised and sophisticated one with Toby. Indeed, the tragedy of poor Toby was that he had come into her life too soon, when she was much too young really to appreciate the good things which arose from their conjunction. For middle-age he would have been the perfect admirer; but with Richard she naturally reverted to youth, and at once everything was cruder, more makeshift, improvised. Instead of conducting her to dine with him at the *JVork*, Richard, who was always exceedingly hard-up, would stand her buns and coffee at a Lyons' tea-shop; instead of taking her to the theatre or the cinema, he would hale her out for long, arduous and inexpensive country walks; and, such is the nature of young people, she enjoyed all this much more than the other. What is even more significant is that, whereas she had told her mother the minutest details of her affair with Toby, she now concealed from her the very existence of Richard; and this often involved her in the most devious and difficult fictions to account for her evening and Saturday afternoon absences from home.

Richard was a native of Sydney, and he was studying in London for his degree of Bachelor of Medicine. He had been on holiday at Bournemouth, and when he had first seen Valerie emerging from the sea in her bathing costume it had struck him that she was an exceptionally pretty girl, and one that he would like to know. Consequently he had, in his frank and uninhibited colonial style, strolled over to where she lay on the sand, sun-bathing after her swim, and had immediately, and, as it seemed to her very naturally, engaged her in conversation. He was wearing nothing but a pair of bathing

trunks, and, to her eyes, wearied as they now were of the pathetic frog-face of Mr. Tobias—who of course never did anything half so virile as bathing because he knew that it was bad for his chest—he appeared a very splendid creature indeed. After a little preliminary badinage, Richard grew serious and told her all about his young days in Australia and how so much more friendly the people were there than in England, and how much he was looking forward to going back there to set up in practice as soon as he had passed his examinations. The poor fellow was dreadfully homesick and lonely, and Valerie found it all too easy to be kind to him. Richard suggested that they should have just one more dip together, as it was a very hot day, and then, perhaps, she would be sporting enough to go and have some tea with him? She wasn't meeting Toby till seven that evening, and she readily agreed.

Richard, like so many of his compatriots, was a superb swimmer. He looked wonderful in the water, and produced a really terrific crawl. Valerie, who was a good but not a first-class swimmer, was full of admiration for his prowess. His long dark hair fell over his frank smiling face, his vast shoulder-muscles glittered in the sun; and poor weedy Toby's stock fell with a hopeless thump.

After they had had a modest tea together, Richard asked when he might see her again. "I'm here for another month," he said. "I'm staying with friends of my people back home, but they're a couple of old fogeys, and it's awfully dull. It would be lovely if I could go around with you for a bit." He turned rather red; compliments were not much in his line, but at last he got it out: "You're about the best-looking girl I've ever seen."

Valerie, to her extreme annoyance, blushed; then, to conceal her embarrassment, indeed her elation, said: "I might be able to manage to see you next Wednesday evening, if you've nothing else on, that night?"

"That's a date"; and, as the star of Toby waned, the dates increased until, by the time that Richard's return to London became due, they were meeting at every spare moment that was possible. Richard used to wait for her outside the studio to

conduct her home for lunch; he would then take some sort of scratch meal himself, and be ready and waiting to escort her back in the afternoon. All the evenings she could possibly explain to her mother were his, and every week-end they bathed or took their country excursions.

And so, though the time they had together was relatively short, they grew to know one another. Richard was a naïf and lovable creature, and, though he would have been shocked if anyone had pointed it out to him, a little inclined to egotism. He talked endlessly about his old home-life and his parents, his little brother and his sisters, and he did not seem at all curious to hear of Valerie's affairs; and she, since she was naturally an equable creature, who preferred the tempo of a relationship to be set by the other party in it, didn't thrust her history upon him. Sometimes, though, she reflected a little on the extreme difference in this respect between Richard and Toby, because, whereas Toby's principal idea of bliss seemed to be to get her prattling about herself (unless indeed he were spouting Landor) and he was quite resentful if she tried to make him talk about himself, with Richard it was all just the other way about. Valerie, who had spent the greater part of her young life under the shadow of the superabundant egotism of her father, fell, as to the manner born, into the role of secondary and subservient foil to the other's dominant interest in himself. She was, in fact, happy in it, as if it were the role for which nature had intended her. Toby's deference and thoughtfulness had often seemed to her to put her in a false position, or, if it were not a false position, then at least one in which she was so unaccustomed to the part that she found it irksome, and didn't, so to speak, answer to her cues.

When the dreaded day came for Richard to return to his studies in London, Valerie for very nearly the first time in her life experienced a mood of tragedy. She admired him so very much; she loved him, she was certain, consumedly. Richard was sorry, too, to part, though he bore his sorrow with a flourish. Not so Valerie, who couldn't restrain her tears, though she was furiously angry with herself for them. Their country walks had long since brought them to the stage where they kissed and in-

dulged in little familiarities with one another, and now that she had grown accustomed to his very competent and exciting embraces, she didn't really know how she could be expected to live without them. Richard endeavoured to pacify her, quoting various relevant passages from their favourite Rupert Brooke, and adding: "London's not so far. Surely we could meet there?" And, as an afterthought: "Or I might be able to run down here some week-end."

The guard blew his whistle, and Valerie, terrified that he would lose the train, motioned Richard into his carriage. He kissed her in his masterful way that caused her legs to melt like wax from under her, and leapt into the now moving coach. In a moment his beautiful head appeared out of the window. "I'll write," he shouted. "Mind you write."

"I will," said Valerie, tears gushing out of her eyes as from a fountain. She was dreadfully ashamed of herself, and she was still more ashamed when she reached home to be charged by her mother with having been crying.

"Whatever is the matter, my darling child?" asked Mrs. Singleton.

But Valerie wouldn't say, and, pushing rudely past her mother, she went into her bedroom and locked the door, and lay on her bed and sobbed—noiselessly, because she knew that, if she were heard, her mother would insist on administering aspirin and other remedies. And there were no remedies just then for the evanishment of Richard.

7

For a week he didn't write; nor for a fortnight. Before it grew to be three weeks, Valerie, pocketing her pride, had written first. Her heart, she assured herself, was broken, though she made no reference to this fact in her letter.

Five days after her letter was despatched, she received an answer from him. For a long time she stared at it—for she knew it was his writing—and didn't dare to open it. When at last she did, she found it a most curious epistle, and not at all the sort of thing she would have expected from Richard. He,

who in real life appeared so smiling and self-possessed and insouciant, seemed, by the mere act of taking up the pen, to have assumed a quite different personality: one that was Hamlet-like and tortuous and irresolute. He feared, he wrote, that he was quite unworthy of her. He still loved her beyond all expression, and he could never forget the wonderful times they had had together. He would never be able to love any other woman. Nevertheless, he could not bear the thought of making her unhappy. There were things about him that she must know: he could do no more than hint at them: there was a certain unreliability, a certain aversion from settling-down; perhaps he wasn't the marrying sort. Would it not perhaps be best for her to forget him?

His letter naturally upset Valerie a great deal, since during their time together it had been tacitly assumed that they were as good as engaged, even though nothing formal had been done. Resisting her impulse to reply by return of post, she restrained herself for three days and then despatched to him her sorrowful little reply, in which she endeavoured to convey to him as lightly, as flippantly almost, as was possible her assurance that she did not wish to involve him in any entanglement that he found repugnant. But because she was young and inexperienced in the difficult art of concealing her feelings, she did not make a very good job of this, and the tenderness for him which filled her heart fairly oozed out of the closely-written pages in her rounded school-girl hand.

Richard's reply to this took the form of a highly emotional telegram, which he fortunately had the good sense to despatch to her place of employment and not to her home. He said it was imperative that he should see her; she must come at once.

This arrived on a Friday. He had thoughtfully made his wire a reply-paid one, and, almost before she knew what she was doing, Valerie had filled in the reply-form: "Arriving tomorrow afternoon. Love. Valerie."

It was easy enough to write this; what was not so easy now was to convey herself to London without awakening her mother's deepest suspicions. It is at this stage of the proceedings that the admission must be made that the despair into

which Richard's letter had thrown her had deadened any scruples she might normally have possessed. All that she could see for the moment was that she loved him, and was within an ace of losing him, for some reason which she could not fully understand. His summons had, at least, given her the chance to ascertain what was the real trouble that lay between them, and she was determined that a few lies should not deter her from taking this last opportunity of coming to an understanding with him. And so, though she was quite aware that it was indeed a very dreadful thing to deceive her mother, she invented on the spur of the moment a cock-and-bull story of having received an invitation to spend the week-end with a girl colleague of hers at the studio, who lived in Winchester, on the main London line. This done, the next thing was to acquire sufficient money to pay her fare and expenses. Quite shamelessly, she went to see Mr. Tobias in his shop, and asked him to lend her five pounds; which large sum he, admirable man! disbursed without a single question. She hated thus to make use of him, but there was no possible alternative.

The next day, Mrs. Singleton saw her off at the station by the London train, with a return ticket to Winchester. Arriving at Waterloo, she paid the excess on her ticket, and half an hour later was in Richard's arms. Enormous, utterly prodigious, conversations ensued. In the serious desperate way of the young they discussed for hours on end, ceaselessly, the problem of their personal relationship. They discussed it through the streets, in tea-shops, on the tops of buses, in Hyde Park, and upon the Victoria Embankment. Richard was very tall and strong and enjoyed walking; he found he was best able to express himself so. He elaborated at great length the principal themes of his letter: that he adored her, that there was no other girl in the world for him, that he was, nevertheless, he feared, a rolling stone, a restless creature, not a marrying sort of man, hardly the kind likely to make so marvellous a girl as she happy. He said that he suffered from wanderlust; he might have put it more accurately if he had said that he suffered from a total disinclination to accept responsibility. .

Valerie, for all that she was tall for her sex, had as much as

she could do to keep up with her eloquently pacing colonial. She trudged, she trotted beside him, listening patiently; and the longer she listened to his endless flow, the heavier grew her heart. He loved her, sure enough; but he loved his own freedom a great deal better. Her prey—though as a nice young woman she naturally did not think of him in this way—was escaping her!

Women, when they are desperate, fall readily to desperate remedies; and Valerie, who, it must be remembered, was not only violently attached to Richard but had also grown accustomed during his weeks in Bournemouth to thinking of him as her own especial property—her betrothed—, felt gradually rising within her mind the certainty that for her there was but one more last desperate card left that might transform defeat into victory. That card would have to be played that night, or not at all. Her mother did not expect her back until Sunday evening; now it was Saturday evening, and she had to spend the night somewhere. What if she should spend it with Richard? She had heard, she had read, that such a total capitulation had, before now, brought victory. With him now it was neck or nothing; she could lose nothing by giving herself to him, and might well win back everything she had so nearly lost. All the same, she could hardly be the first to make the suggestion.

She did not have to. Richard, who had by now presumably walked off most of his wanderlust, seemed suddenly to perk up, to lose for the moment his doubts, his mental reservations, and, calling her his own little bride-to-be, made to her the proposal that she longed, that she dreaded, to hear.

They spent the night together in a rather dingy little hotel bedroom in Bloomsbury. For Valerie it was a surprising experience. She had expected to feel utterly different after it, and found instead that she felt just the same. But Richard had been very sweet and quite devoted, and she thought she had achieved her purpose.

More, however, had happened to her than she was consciously aware of at the time, and the next night she found herself lying awake in her own bed at home, torn by a sudden and

entirely unexpected frenzy of desire for her lover, then peacefully slumbering some eighty miles away.

For the next few months after this, Valerie really learnt what it was to suffer. She had been unhappy before, but she had never suffered. But now her young and ardent body took command; and everything became very dreadful. Richard was her one thought. She went to see him whenever she could, and he managed to return the compliment and pay her a few hurried visits in Bournemouth; and every time he made love to her it augmented a hundredfold her tenderness, her longing, for him. And he—oh, he was devoted to her, was crazy about her, but there was always a certain vagueness in his eye, a certain evasiveness, a strange unwillingness to be definite. It is unnecessary to labour the point: Richard loved her, but he did not want her for his wife—just yet. She adored him, she did everything that lay in her power to make herself absolutely necessary to him, she withheld nothing; and he, he stroked her neck, and sat pulling at his pipe, and talked to her about the Great Victoria Desert, and the Barrier Reef, and the Blue Mountains where the koala-bears looked at you from behind the tree-trunks. Valerie exercised all her arts, but she was ignorant and unpractised; besides, she had played all her cards, and now had none left to play. She resigned herself to his will, for there was nothing else that she could do. Richard was still charmingly sentimental, and read poetry to her and called her baby-names, but he had ceased to talk of making her his wife. He preferred to adopt a star-crossed attitude of mind, and said gloomily that he should never marry. He also, to do him justice, had views equally determined regarding the responsibilities of paternity. His precautions in this respect were cumbersome and portentous, and Valerie, assuming that this was because of his medical training, forgave him, though it was the one part of their love-making that really shocked her. On one occasion, when driven to her poor wits' end as to how, at any cost, to secure him, she had said: "Darling, I don't mind. If you like, we'll risk it." Richard's reaction to this was grotesque and even comical, if she had had the detachment to see it. He had sat up on the bed and had there and then read

her a tremendous lecture on the perils of promiscuity, with special reference to the number of times people's lives had been ruined—totally ruined—by what he called criminal carelessness.

After that she gave it up, and, in a state of utter misery, with which alternated the few hours of extreme bliss when she was with him and in his arms, resigned herself to her fate.

This was conditioned by the factor of whether Richard should pass his examinations at the first attempt, or not. She prayed passionately and somewhat selfishly that he would not, but he did, in a safe and undistinguished way, round about the middle of the list. Each day then brought nearer the time of his sailing.

She went to the docks to see him go. She could not keep back her tears. At last, almost at the very last minute, she said the thing she had been praying she would have the strength, the wit, not to say: "Darling, I'll always be ready to come out to you if you need me". She could have killed herself as she heard the words come out of her mouth, but Richard did not seem to take them with any undue seriousness. Instead, he assumed a somewhat tragic expression, and said: "Ah, I shall never be worthy of such a woman as you. I don't deserve such happiness."

It had all been in vain. Richard, though very much attached to her, was too weak to put up a fight to secure her; and she knew now that it was all over. Her wound from now on could grow no deeper, and so she supposed it would heal. She saw him go almost with indifference. As she walked back from the dock-gates, she found that she was wondering why she had loved him so much; wondering, too, whether she wished it had all never happened. "Being made as I am," she thought, "it had, no doubt, to happen somehow, and as well with him as another. I shall miss him later." Then she thought that, after all, there were plenty of other men, and perhaps better ones for her. Then she thought of the way the hair grew on his neck, the gentle firmness of his hands, his beaky wistful smile. Life, she thought, is all arrivals and departures. What is so curious is not that one meets and parts, but that you yourself are always

there, never to be escaped from. Throughout all life, throughout a changing mass of relationships, we drag always that one common factor of ourselves; and it is in ourselves and in our own nature that is the lasting mystery. Why was she as she was? There were other girls who lived quiet and patient lives, not searching, not reaching out, as she did. What was it in her that was different? Her father's ebullient temperament? Her mother's Welsh blood? Or was it rather the fruit of her early days, of her early fears in solitude, and her desire to escape somehow, in love, in tenderness, from the desolation that had been then implanted in her by her dread of her father's rages? Sometimes she thought that, more than any of these things, it was her desire to give happiness: it was so difficult to be hard and unyielding! But in that she knew she deluded herself, for had she not been hard enough to poor Toby? That had not been difficult. No, it was simply that she was as God had made her, and she might just as well be reconciled to the fact. She regretted nothing. It wasn't any use. She didn't regret Richard. He was as he was; he had given her all that he had to give, and she would never quite forget him. And now the world lay before her again, empty and unpeopled; and because Richard had taught her her own true nature, she knew what she wanted from it. How, since he had taught her so much, could she do less than forgive him?

He sent her a picture-postcard from Colombo, and another from Sydney to say that he had arrived safely; to both of which she replied, receiving no answer. And that was the end of Richard, save for one letter, a long while after, to say that he had thrown up his practice, it had been stifling him, and had taken a farm way up in the bush; also, and in parenthesis, had taken to himself a wife. 'A wife of sorts' was the exact phrase he employed.

She scraped and saved from her wages until she had paid back to Mr. Tobias the money she had borrowed from him, though he protested goodnaturedly and didn't want to take it. And that was the end of Toby. She couldn't, with what she now knew of herself, palter away any more of her time in platonic flirtations.

Sometimes at night she still dreamt of Richard, and would wake up to find that she had been crying; but she never cried because of him when she was awake. Her conscious mind was engaged no longer with the past. Her first twenty years were over. Now her gaze was all forward, scanning anxiously the future.

BOOK TWO
THE MYRTLE AND THE IVY

The myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and-twenty.

*Stanzas written (by LORD BYRON) on the road
between Florence and Pisa, in November, 1821.*

CHAPTER ONE

BASIL

I

THE FUTURE did not, however, at once respond as anticipated. Everyone in their lives runs occasionally into long dull patches in which nothing appears to happen, and this was now Valerie's experience. After the emotional rate at which she had been living for the past eighteen months, she found this tedious; and, when several monotonous months had elapsed during which nothing at all agreeable had occurred, she began to think that the time had come for her to attempt to accelerate matters. With which end in view she joined, in quick succession, a Tennis Club and an Amateur Dramatic Society. It would be hardly fair to say that she became a member of either of these concerns with a conscious determination that she should derive from them fresh emotional stimuli. She joined them because she was bored and needed new interests and new society. What her sub-conscious mind had to say on the matter is not evidence; and indeed, at worst, she was doing no more than casting her bread upon the waters, and hoping for the best.

The tennis club, right from the start, proved a dead loss. There would seem to be a curious family-resemblance between all such organisations, wherever they may be; and this sense that you have seen and experienced it all, long ago, extends also to the individuals that go to form such coteries. To a general composite picture of nets and rollers and dirty white-painted pavilions, set against the green background of the worn and unnaturally shaven grass of the white-lined courts, was added for Valerie a kind of blended phantasmagoria of featureless and quite dehumanised Leslies and Reggies and Bills with spotless flannels and simple red faces, of Pamelas and Joans and Marys in snowy divided skirts, who, without being precisely non-

female, did not, save in their least guarded moments, appear to possess any of the specific attributes of their sex. Valerie liked tennis, though she did not play it particularly well, and she liked her fellow club-members in so far as they were genial and sportive and afforded her occasion to run about rapidly. Unhappily they did not, however, appear to her to be possessed of separate identities; she found herself quite unable to distinguish any one of them from any other; they were for her nothing but a large wedge, or chunk, of healthy gambolling young life which it was impossible to separate into individual components. She felt that if she played tennis with these people for a thousand years she would still know nothing about them, because there was nothing to know.

Now it may very well be remarked that Valerie's own personality at this time was also fluid and ill-determined; and that she had really no particular cause to believe that, in the matter of idiosyncrasy, she had an ounce of advantage over her fellow tennis-players. And this might have been true enough, but for one thing: which was the sense of extreme insufficiency, of a genuine personal inadequacy, which did, at least, pervade her whole being. So far as she could tell, none of these others felt anything of that sort; they were, on the contrary, curiously complacent and assured; they seemed solid, self-contained entities that stood up firmly on their own bases and were haunted by none of the dreads and doubts that were her so constant companions. In her case there is no doubt that the early impact upon her new and untried personality of the stronger individuality of Richard, to say nothing of that of Toby, had left scars which had not healed. After all, the first had seduced her; and, though it is not suggested that Valerie's entire life at this point was conditioned by the fact, it is, nevertheless, true that there is no single subject under the sun upon which a greater amount of cant is commonly enunciated than upon this of the plight of the healthy young woman whose perfectly normal desires have been aroused before marriage. Because it is not considered suitable that young unmarried women should experience such things, it is generally taken for granted that they do nothing of the kind; and should one of

them admit to the contrary, she is of necessity written down a loose, unprincipled and fundamentally vicious creature. With men, the standard is otherwise. It is this species of humbug which nowadays makes it often uncommonly difficult to draw an accurate portrait of a normal and nice-minded young woman that shall not be taken by indignant idealists, both male and female, for that of a wanton.

And besides, though she had not fully comprehended his drift, Valerie had, at least, acquired from her friendship with Mr. Tobias a certain poise and sense of civilisation. After him, the tennis-playing young men seemed to her quite unbelievably crude and limited. She wanted to like them, because she had a really desperate need to like somebody. She was now well into her twenty-second year, and it was becoming abundantly clear to her, even without her mother's perpetual reminders of the fact, that there was no way out of her predicament, financial as well as emotional, other than that of a successful marriage. It would be too absurd for her to continue for the rest of her life as a photographer's receptionist at an exceedingly meagre wage; besides, there wasn't the slightest need, since she had by now learnt, from Toby if not from Richard, that she had power, that her looks were more than adequate to secure for her a husband. The only thing was to make sure that there were no further mistakes and false starts. Richard had been a mistake; though he had taught her so much of her true nature that it was not a mistake which she felt she could, in any decency, regret.

Her dilemma, thus put, may seem a crude one. So it was; yet it is the dilemma which faces the great majority of English girls who have the courage to admit it. For a few brief years they have the power to acquire that which for them constitutes the good life: a husband who can support them and whom they can respect; a husband who can satisfy the quite normal aspirations concerning which, as ladies, they must never speak; a husband who will also gratify their not uncommon ambition to become mothers. No wonder, with a decision so momentous and difficult before them, that young girls have a habit of appearing harassed and pre-occupied!

The second string to Valerie's bow was, as we have said, the amateur dramatic society, which she joined in the autumn following her somewhat abortive tennis-season; and this at once provided a much more fruitful field for her instinctive reachings-out for companionship. Unlike the tennis-players, the amateur dramatic people were lively, unbovine, and inclined to exhibitionism of a simple kind which, to her uncritical mind, made them seem very delightful and original company. They met in a large hall in the suburbs, and produced two plays during their season, one at Christmas, and one in the spring. The men mostly wore loose and eccentric clothing, and the women were intense and did their best to appear very sophisticated. Valerie, who, in addition to her ability as a dancer, had a small but pure singing voice, was at once made welcome as an acquisition, and was given a small part in their forthcoming production of *The Gondoliers*. The society met three evenings each week for rehearsals, and, since the hall was a warm and comfortable one, the members as a rule stayed on some time after the rehearsal was over, talking among themselves, or listening to one or other of their number playing the piano or singing.

It was in this way that Valerie soon became friendly with her fellow-members. Very shy at first, her early visits to the rehearsals had been an ordeal for her, which she had only endured because she had instinctively felt that her isolation was not likely to last for long. And indeed, as time went on and she acquired assurance, her social talents flowered in the easy congenial atmosphere, and she was soon laughing and shouting as loudly as any of them. She was, in fact, growing popular, especially with the men of the company who, while they naturally appreciated her undeniable charms, appreciated even more her high spirits and her obvious desire to please and to amuse. In this way she soon acquired quite a number of what might roughly be termed admirers: men who took pleasure in seeing her home, who sometimes made a date with her for the cinema, and who, from time to time, experimentally as it were, she permitted to kiss her. Her self-confidence, which had been badly shaken by the defection of Richard, soon blossomed anew

in this agreeable and friendly atmosphere, and she felt that at any time now she might suddenly once more feel the familiar, not to be counterfeited thrill, and know that she was again in love.

It was, consequently, with some disquietude that, after several months of this—after *The Gondoliers* had been duly and triumphantly performed and rehearsals had well set in for the next production—she found herself obliged to admit that nothing of the kind had happened to her. She liked many of the men she met there; she knew that some of them admired her, temperately and without violence; and she knew equally well that none of them happened to have any vital appeal for her. The trouble with them was that they were *all* so nice, all so 'sporty', to use an expression which quite admirably summed them up, that there didn't seem any reason at all why she should prefer any one of them to any other. She liked them all equally, which was as bad as liking none of them at all; the only exception was the pianist of the company, a certain Basil Furnival, whom she was entirely unable either to like or to dislike because he never condescended to take the slightest notice of her, nor, for that matter, of any of the other women.

This Furnival certainly seemed to her rather an odd customer. He was, to begin with, a good deal older than the majority of the society's members; they were for the most part in their twenties, while he, though he did not look older than the others, was reputed to be over thirty. Basil was a tall and imposing-looking individual with a large quantity of soft wavy fair hair; he had big pale grey eyes and a long rather equine face with clear-cut manly features. He was a showy rather than a good pianist, but he was entirely adequate to their purpose, and, though he said but little to anyone, he passed generally as a good fellow and a popular member of the society. He had, in fact, been a member of it longer than almost any of the others, and had always been the pianist for rehearsals. Basil, when he could be prevailed upon to unbend, was able to release considerable charm. He seemed, as it were, to unbend, to uncoil, from a great height and to convey upon you the favour of his courtly smile and the benison of his rather elaborately

flattering tongue. He was by profession a clerk in an insurance-office; and though he was not, as will be seen hereafter, totally insusceptible to female charm, he was still at the age of thirty-one a bachelor, living with his mother.

For what seemed a long while, as we have said, Basil Furnival took not the slightest notice of Valerie, and she concluded that he disliked her or considered her to be beneath his notice. To this she was at first indifferent, but then, as more and more of the men fell under the spell of her personality, his continued disregard started to pique her, and she began, more for the fun of the thing than for any other reason, to try to thrust herself upon his attention. He regarded her manoeuvres coldly with his large pale eyes, and made no response. More sure of herself and of her power now than she had been before in the, bad days of Richard's pre-eminence, she redoubled her efforts, evolving for herself, in order to justify her coquetry, a mythical theory that Basil had experienced a cruel disappointment in love, and consequently regarded all women with fear and distrust. Having persuaded herself at last that this—which was in fact entirely incorrect—was so, she contrived successfully to make of him a figure in which her romantic fantasy could take interest, in a way quite distinct from that with which she regarded the other friendly and amiable members of the club. And so powerful is the imagination that she ended by persuading herself that he was by far the most interesting and sympathetic figure among them.

One evening it seemed to her that he was even disposed to take a faint interest in one of the other women, a Miss Keating. He had raised his eyes from the piano several times and had appeared to smile at her. Valerie perceived that her bosom was lacerated with strong and vicious pangs of jealousy. It was enough. She still knew so little of the ways of her own heart that she concluded that she could not possibly feel jealousy unless she was at the same time, all unknown to herself, experiencing love. She therefore treated herself to the momentous intelligence that she was in love with Basil Furnival; and started to behave accordingly. Whenever he looked at her, she blushed; she tried to avoid him and only succeeded in appear-

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ing for ever to be hanging about him; she prayed that he would address a remark to her, and then, on the infrequent occasions that he did so, would cover herself with confusion by making the most imbecile or inadequate rejoinder. Her state at length became obvious even to her fellow-members, and one of them casually mentioned it to Basil. He, being a singularly unperceptive man, said, "Good gracious! she's the best-looking girl we've got," and at once started to make himself more agreeable to her.

This, naturally, made it a great deal worse for her: when Basil switched his charm on, ruffling his wavy hair with his hand and flashing his large regular teeth, he seemed perfectly irresistible. It looked to her just as though Richard had turned up all over again, with the fortunate difference that this time there was no question of his dashing off to Australia, where she could never see him again. Basil was a local man, with a local job; and she decided that he was precisely what she wanted.

To which programme, however, Basil himself appeared to be the chief obstacle. Though he was ten years older than she, and though he now seemed at long last disposed to be amiable, he was not exactly what one could describe as an ardent suitor. It is difficult for one's love-affairs to progress in the middle of a crowd of people, and it seemed to be an undertaking of the greatest complexity to get Basil detached from his present company and out by himself. He didn't propose any way to do it; and she couldn't very well do so. It was a perplexing enough business in all conscience, since her instinct told her that he was by no means indifferent to her, even though in just what fashion he was attracted by her she knew too little of him to tell. It was, therefore, one of two things: either he was very shy or else he was very cautious! Naturally, deeming herself to be in love with him, Valerie paid him the compliment of assuming that the first of these alternatives was the true one.

And so there began a grim and silent struggle for mastery between Valerie's will, and what she so flatteringly described as Basil's shyness. Written thus, in cold blood, the statement may seem an unpalatable one, since, despite Mr. Bernard Shaw, it is a fact still not very widely recognised that—in

matters of the heart—it is the will of the woman which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, settles the issue. It is hardly a fact, when you reflect upon it, to render women any the less lovely or lovable. It is so vitally necessary for them to make haste to secure, while they may, what they imagine to be their happiness. It would, indeed, be strange if matters were ordered any differently.

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To explain this matter of Basil Furnival's alleged shyness, it is perhaps best at this point to regress a little, and to give a brief outline of the circumstances which, up to the period with which we are now concerned, had contributed to the shaping of his character.

He was, to begin with, the only child of rather elderly parents in a somewhat obscure line of life. His mother, who was well over thirty at his birth, was the proprietor of a small private hotel which was really a glorified lodging-house, in which his father, who was nearly twenty years her senior, was, because of his addiction to horse-racing, a sort of sleeping partner, who dealt with such minor details as the knives, the boots and so forth. A protracted course of these menial offices seeming to Furnival *phé* to distract his full attention from his life-work of backing winners, had, while Basil was still only quite a little boy, led at length to his sudden total and dramatic disappearance from the boarding-house. He had, that is, run away without leaving any clue to his whereabouts, conveying to his wife the task of single-handedly looking after the private hotel, and bringing up his only son.

Mrs. Furnival was a woman of strong and determined quality—indeed, had the absent Mr. Furnival been questioned concerning it, he might well have said too strong, too determined—, and she resolved, undauntedly, to make a success of both undertakings. A short, thick-set, pug-faced woman just under forty when she was thus deserted, she wrestled for years in uncomplaining silence with the running of the hotel, determined that it should be made to pay. And it did pay; it paid at

last so well that, eventually, she was able to buy the next-door house and so double, at a stroke, the size of her premises. By the time this became possible she had grown so inured to a life of unrelenting toil, rising at 5.30 in the morning and not feeling really finished until the last and latest lodger was abed, that she had come to regard it as normal, and, instead of taking on a servant as she could now well have afforded to do, insisted on running both premises by her own unaided efforts, banking, in the meantime, quite fantastic profits for the sole benefit of the rapidly growing Basil.

He, unhappily, hadn't been born quite late enough to benefit to the full by his mother's frantic activities. By the time he was old enough to go to school, she hadn't yet entirely recovered from his father's defection, and he was obliged to spend the first two or three years of his educational career at the local council school. This, which was of course no fault of his, was a matter concerning which he was somewhat unduly sensitive, particularly as, after this time, his mother's finances now being in good order, he was able to spend the rest of his schooldays at a seminary notably celebrated for educating only the sons of Gentlemen. This same seminary, or College, as it was called, bulked very large in Basil's subsequent career; he was the most vigorous of Old Boys, and didn't feel that he was properly dressed if he wasn't wearing the tie of his Old Boys' Club.

His mother, among her many other virtues, possessed that of having started life as a strenuous and militant nonconformist, and it was in this faith—in the Particular Baptist section of it—that Basil's tenderest years were passed. Because of this early training he was remarkable for the possession of a very strong sense of Sin, which, while energetic enough as it affected himself, was positively supercharged with energy as it affected other people. It must, we feel, be hazarded that it was from this early doctrinal training that he acquired a lifelong tendency towards that which others, less strictly brought up than himself, might well have called censoriousness. It was strange enough that this tendency should have lingered on so strongly in him, since, at a date not much later than his twelfth year, both he and his mother, having by now risen several financial rungs in the

social scale, had shaken off this early affinity and had become quite worldly, even to the extent of playing cards and backing an occasional horse. Yet so it was: it is perhaps doubtful whether anyone can be instructed constantly during their tenderest and most impressionable years concerning the Wrath of Jehovah and the Jealousy of God without something being left in them of a certitude that these things are really, after all, excellent in their workings; especially when it is other people that break the rules.

Mrs. Furnival, despised, deserted, rejected, had been a doting mother, and since she had really always wanted her little Basil to be a girl, she had brought him up during his earliest years in an atmosphere of quite feminine solicitude. She did not let him play with other children; always dressed him most beautifully; let his wavy hair hang curling down over the collar of his velvet coat until long after that of his contemporaries had been severely shorn. It does Basil the greatest credit that, with all this cossetting, he should not have turned out a milksop. Actually something quite the reverse happened, for, when he had gone to the Good School, he had reacted so violently from his mother's delicate and dainty ways that he had spent the whole of his energies upon 'rough* games, at which, even though he did not excel, he was quite enormously keen. It was, in fact, only his piano-playing that remained as the last vestige of his earlier refinements; and he kept this up less because he was fond of music than because he was fond of applause, and he found it an accomplishment that made for popularity.

When he left school he got a situation in a very reputable Insurance house, and, although he grumbled constantly about the dullness of his work, did not seem to find any other way to earn his living more congenially. Therefore he remained with the Company, and by slow degrees rose from his junior position to others more responsible. He continued to live with his mother, who continued to minister to him, fussing over his health (his chest was weak, she declared), cleaning his boots, warming his slippers against his return home, and generally providing him with all possible home-comforts. From time to time, out of the fastness of his comforts, Basil looked upon the

world and perceived that it was full of the most alluring creatures called Girls, concerning which all his fellow-clerks, and his contemporaries generally, exhibited the deepest concern. For himself, he was not utterly immune from a certain primitive curiosity regarding these creatures. He was not a completely frigid person, though his mind had a turn that was prurient rather than passionate. He sometimes amused himself in his daydreams by mentally undressing one of these pretty things, and then—just before matters really got desperate—something, that was perhaps his sense of Sin, would flame up in his mind and he would go off and play a healthy game of cricket or football, and tell himself that all that sort of thing was 'nasty', and not manly. Whence he derived these views it is not clear, though it is certain that his mother, who in her own married life had been disillusioned and disappointed, was not entirely guiltless. "Girls," she would say to him, "nasty, dirty, cunning little things! You be careful of them, my dear boy: there's not a one of them that's good enough to wipe your boots. If I see one as is, I'll tell you so soon enough!" Besides this, his mother was jealous, possessive: having lost her husband—and not through death but—how insultingly!—through his own volition—, she had no intention of losing her only son. She did not, with this end in view, scruple to fill the unfortunate Basil's head with grisly tales of the diseases he would be certain to incur if he were ever so imprudent as to meddle with members of what she called 'the opposite sex'. Basil, consequently, was terrified, and suspected every woman, particularly if she was attractive, of being a walking death-trap.

One evening when he was twenty-eight years of age, he was in London with some fellow-Old-Boys to watch an important football match, and after the game they had had a number of drinks, and some of the Old Boys had put forth the proposal that they should pick up some girls and go home with them. Basil's hair, so to speak, had risen upright in horror, but he was naturally much too much of a sport, in his present company, to make any demur. The girls had not been difficult to acquire, and to him had been apportioned a luscious brunette who confirmed his very worst suspicions by talking with what

seemed to him to be a French accent. His irresolution of mind as he had sat with her in her gaudy flat had been extreme; for he found that, now he had the chance, he much wanted to do the forbidden thing, and that, at the same time, he was absolutely terrified. She, not thinking him a bad-looking boy, had been agreeable to him; and finally, all against his better judgment, he had succumbed. On leaving her flat, he was convinced that the pangs of death had already got round about him, and he had rushed at full speed into a chemist's shop and purchased all the disinfectants and unguents that he could think of. He had treated himself with these for no less than six weeks, and then, to his immense relief, found that nothing whatever had happened to him. He then found himself at leisure to reflect that, if he had not been in such a tearing hurry to get to his medicaments, he would certainly not have given her five pounds. That rankled now; yes, indeed!

All the same, after this experience he regarded women with a rather more indulgent eye; and it is probable that if some superior power had offered him one for his own especial use and pleasure, who was guaranteed perfectly sound and understood to be without any contingent liability attached, he might well have accepted her. But for all this, he did not really like women, as such, as people. Many men do not, as many women find to their cost. He regarded them as temptations rather than as individuals; and if he found them temptations which the longer he lived the more they tempted him, why, he didn't like them any the better for that! Why indeed should he? His mother ministered to his every need, and she was well enough off now not to take a penny from him; he had his entire salary to spend on himself, precisely as he wished. Why then should he, for a slight unruliness of the flesh, tie a millstone round his neck?

Thus the fortress of masculine virtue of which poor Valerie, in her blind and instinctive craving for fulfilment, was planning the assault.

One is perfectly at liberty to believe what one chooses as to the reason for things happening as they do and not otherwise: you can say it is Fate, you can say it is Destiny; or Providence; or Blind Chance; or you can, if you prefer, fall back upon the explanation that there is a certain element of Waggy in the constitution of the Universe. In the long run, it all comes to the same thing: events occur and produce their effects, and whether there is any reason for it, or not, no one has the remotest idea. And, indeed, perhaps it doesn't matter. Napoleon spent a great deal of his leisure on St. Helena speculating what might have occurred if Grouchy had arrived in time on the field of Waterloo, instead of being otherwise employed some twenty-two miles distant. No speculation could have been more futile: Grouchy did not appear, and Bliicher did.

In the same way, to compare infinitely small things with those which the world agrees to call great ones, Basil might well have evaded his ultimate Waterloo if he had only chosen to turn to the left instead of to the right on a certain early autumn Saturday afternoon, nearly a year after Valerie had first set eyes upon him. He didn't, and so came smack upon her in the Square in the centre of the town, where she was standing irresolutely on the kerb, wondering what she should do to fill in the time until she went home to tea.

Basil raised his fine velours hat punctiliously. Valerie smiled sweetly upon him. For all her efforts to get to know him better, Basil had up to now resisted them stoutly, and now here, for the first time in their lives, they were alone together. Not alone, it is true, in the sense that no other people were in sight, for the Square was thronged with humanity; but alone in the sense that Basil had now for the first time lost the support and chaperonage of his fellow-members of the Club.

They stood chatting together on the pavement for a few minutes, discussing indifferent things, the prospects of the new season's play, mutual friends and so on, and then Valerie, with the courage that is the prerogative of her sex, determined to

stake all she had on a solitary throw, and said: "Well, I suppose I must be getting along! See you at the next rehearsal."

Basil regarded her slim figure as she walked slowly away, her skirts swinging slightly from the hips. She really was a deucedly pretty girl, and everyone said she was keen on him. His thoughts of recent weeks had, for some reason, run much on the luscious brunette of some four years ago, who had, after all, not stricken him with any mortal disease. An unaccustomed fervour stirred within him: the unaccustomed thought came to him that perhaps he was a fool. . . .

And then Valerie looked round—oh! for the merest instant, the most fugitive whisk of a glance. But it was enough. Basil started in hot pursuit.

When he caught her up, she affected astonishment, almost indeed appeared scandalised, though she had, of course, seen his reflection pursuing her in the shop-windows as they passed. "You again!" she said in a tone of polite incredulity.

"Yes," said Basil, attempting to appear immensely jocular about it all. "It occurred to me that I was at a loose end, and that if you were the same, as you appeared to be, we might do worse than join forces for an hour."

"That was very considerate of you," she said, quizzing him.

"You don't mind though?"

"No, I don't think so."

As they walked on, her mind raced furiously: how best to consolidate the initial advantage gained? how best to make this one hour of her first triumph with him so memorable that he should wish for more? Instinctively, her mind turned to the thought of a more romantic, more suitable, background. "I'm rather sick of these streets, aren't you?" she said. "We see plenty of them. I'd like a blow on the Front, if you're agreeable."

"It's all one to me," said Basil politely, and they turned down a side-street that led to the sea-front.

Well, the Front at Bournemouth is not the most romantic background in the world, but Fortune, or Destiny, or Luck, or Providence, or that element of Waggery of which we spoke, in this instance elected to come to Valerie's aid, providing, at just

the right moment, to soften the asperities of the familiar scene, a quite sensational sunset in scarlet and gold.

The asphalt glowed red beneath it, the wide waters of the bay flushed softly under it; the sky above the heavy sinking orb was lemon-pale and infinitely translucent. Basil was not a man to be influenced much by natural phenomena, but even he felt that the spectacle was rather an unusual one, and remarked upon it, saying: "Fine sky, what?" Valerie, who of course knew him very little, was not sure of her cue. Her instinct told her that it would be unwise in her to be intense, to 'gush' as he would probably call it, and she confined her comment to saying: "It's very beautiful", and walking on in silence.

Basil, by her side, kept peering at her profile that was sharply outlined against the brilliant sky. She wore no hat, and her dark hair curled over her head in a most attractive way; there was something sensitive about her high arched nostril, something capable—which pleased him a great deal more, since he judged that the first duty of all women was to be capable—about her firm full mouth seen in profile. She was wearing a dark green costume with a pale yellow scarf at her neck. Indubitably she was pretty. Yes—and in some indefinable way, what he called 'sexy', too! The hospitable brunette of four years before returned suddenly to invade Basil's wandering consciousness. For a moment he couldn't help setting Valerie, in imagination, in her place. What if she were willing; were, as his fellow-clerks were wont to designate it, 'hot stuff'? It would certainly be a great convenience for him; and a cheap one, too. He had never really got over the brunette lady's five pounds. To this, a vision of his mother succeeded, instructing him of the mortal perils of disease. "No," said his mother firmly, "you can never tell! It's often the very ones you'd never think it of as catches you!" . . .

But of course all this was fantastic, ridiculous! The girl was years younger than he. If she wanted anything she wanted a husband, and that was a very different matter. All the same, when you came to think of it, she was pretty free with some of the fellows at the Club—free in quite a nice way, of course, but that was only natural with lots of other people about. The

matter, he concluded, was one that required careful thought; very careful thought indeed. He decided that it would be most unwise to jump to any hasty conclusions either way, without giving the whole matter a great deal more consideration than was possible during a mere cursory stroll upon the Bournemouth sea-front. It might well pay him to investigate further this mysterious, totally unknown female who walked so demurely by his side, and seemed so resolutely willing and eager to please him. And consequently, when they parted, since Valerie was pledged to be home to tea, and since in any case he hadn't invited her to take tea with him, it was with some relief and with even more astonishment that she, who had been racking her brains for some way of advancing the situation and felt that she had totally failed to do so, heard him say, staidly and politely, "It has been such a pleasant stroll. *Most delightful!* Perhaps we might repeat the experience?"

"Why not?" she returned, smiling in a fashion which she endeavoured not to make appear in any degree triumphant.

"How about next Saturday?"

It was not ardent, but it was adequate.

They made their arrangements, and Valerie sped home, full of reasonable elation. True, Toby would indubitably have insisted on escorting her home; and even Richard—well Richard would probably have bundled her into Lyons' for a twopenny cup of tea; but Basil, being different, being perhaps a rare and sensitive and suffering creature, with all manner of fascinating secret sorrows that she had as yet to plumb, was different in his approach, and needed a different handling. And so, as we have said, she went home in the highest spirits, and spent the evening dreaming about him; or about someone entirely different from him, who yet precisely resembled him in all exterior particulars.

4

It is necessary to try to be fair. Valerie knew, or thought she knew, what it was she wanted. Basil did not exactly know what he wanted, but he was quite certain th?it he wanted something. Both of them were at a loose end, and both were prey to that

subjective delusion which causes all of us, from one time to another, to fill up the void in our own hearts with a creature of the imagination, designed to our own satisfaction, which we then, with a wild and a pitiful unreason, proceed to identify with some substantial creature that is near to our hands. It is really quite extraordinary to observe with what an extremity of tender care each of them, while really supremely ignorant of what manner of person the other was, yet strove, by lopping off an obvious excrescence here or by joining on a new characteristic there (and if such was totally out of harmony with the rest of the character, then so much the worse for the rest of the character!), to make the figure of the other conform to that ideal figure of their dream. It was, indeed, rather as though they, wishing to see a giraffe, had seen an elephant instead, and, because necessity had demanded for them a giraffe, had consequently hailed the manifest elephant as one. The thing was nearly as bizarre as that; is, in most cases, nearly as bizarre. Valerie, because her necessity caused her to do so, resolved to see in the cautious, over-mothered and self-indulgent Basil a potentially kind and loving husband; Basil, because of his, resolved only to see in the romantic and sentimental and immature Valerie nothing but a hard and sophisticated young woman who would accommodate him by becoming his mistress. They were, thus, at cross-purposes from the start, and for the eventual outcome neither can properly be held responsible. What was responsible was the incurable pig-headed human propensity for seeing only in a person or a situation just precisely that which one desires to see in it, whether it be there or not.

They met again the following Saturday, and Valerie wore her best outfit and did her utmost to be captivating. Basil, likewise, was charming, though it seemed to her that his charm a little lacked warmth, had, in fact, a bright glittering effect rather like electric-light; and seemed, moreover, to be switchable on and off in just the same abrupt style as that useful species of illumination.

They walked along the Front as far as Christchurch, and wandered up the avenue that led to the north door of the

Priory church. Valerie had her hand on the latch and was about to go in, though she knew the building well already, when Basil said: "Oh, you don't want to go in there, do you? They charge sixpence for admission."

So they turned back to the shops, and she expected he would soon say that it would be nice to have a cup of tea. He didn't, however; and she charitably concluded that he was, perhaps, not much addicted to tea, even though she herself was longing for a cup. This illusion, however, was dispelled, as they walked homeward in the twilight, by Basil saying suddenly: "Heavens, I'm dry. I could just do with a cup of tea! Pity those places in Christchurch make you pay through the nose."

Since Valerie knew of many places in Christchurch where it was perfectly possible to get an excellent tea in those days for one shilling per head, she found she couldn't help wondering a little what sort of price Basil considered *voasrft* paying through the nose. Wondering a little, but only a little, since the intimations that would have been abundantly clear to any detached or disinterested person were, for the present, dark to her. Her mind, fired by her own imagination, fed on the wondrous circumstance that she should at long last be walking in amity at His side. He excited her. His long silences, due to his having nothing particular to say, she took for the pregnant silences of wisdom. His remarks, when he uttered them, were generally rather crabbed and carping; and this in her infatuation she took for a cynical wit. He did not, as Toby had done, appear in the least curious as to what sort of person she was, or what her past life had been; he did not, on the other hand, seem particularly anxious, as Richard had, to enlist her as auditor to a long recital of the glowing escapade that had been his own career. He smoked an occasional cigarette through a long holder, and attained to a certain air of magnificence by appearing to sneer, comprehensively, at the universe. This attitude, to Valerie as she then was, seemed to imply his almost ineffable superiority to the general run of his fellow-mortals. Having satisfactorily persuaded herself that she was madly in love with him, she was more than content to take him at his own valuation.

As for Basil, apart from the fact that she excited his desires in a way that partly pleased and partly perturbed him, he hardly knew what to think of her. She had a quick, inconsequent mind and it seemed to him that she talked too much, and most of it nonsense. It was bound to be nonsense because he found he didn't understand half of it.

When they parted that evening, he decided he would work on his provisional theory that she was an abandoned creature, and try to kiss her. He wanted to do this for its own sake, but he wanted even more to do so because he thought he should be able to tell by her response what future prospects for him lay beyond. There was really no point in expending his time and his money on the girl if there were no future prospects.

They said good-night in a dark side-alley near the street in which Valerie lived. Basil, in a highly nervous condition, nearly lost his opportunity, and then, at the last moment, made a sort of clumsy grab at her, and found her quiescent in his arms. He kissed her maladroitly, though with vigour, and found that, in conformity with his theory, she returned his kisses. He thought it really very pleasant, and, since Valerie made no effort to escape, he remained as he was, feeling vaguely that some sort of utterance was expected of him.

Caution, however, forbade. He continued to kiss her in a proprietorial manner, but made no remark. She, while highly delighted that he should want to kiss her, observed with some dejection that his kissing lacked expertness. Well, perhaps it was none the worse for that. After all, in her mind she had designated him a possible husband, not a mere lover. A little clumsiness in a potential husband, was, perhaps, rather endearing.

Basil was growing a trifle too attentive, and rather rough. She disengaged herself, and pushed him away. His face at once assumed a sulky expression. "Darling," she said, "we must be good."

Her words, the first that either had spoken for more than a quarter of an hour, ought to have broken the spell. He ought to have started to tell her that he loved her, or something of the kind. He didn't, though. He was furious with her for the

power she had over him; that she should deny herself to him; that he should mind her denial. He had nothing to say in any way acceptable to ears polite, and he consequently said nothing.

Valerie stood and looked at him, a sulky lowering figure in the lamplight, terminated a shade grotesquely by his elegant velours hat; and for a moment she acquired detachment and saw that he was a stranger, of whom she knew nothing, and who, at the moment, was in a perfectly fiendish, though partially repressed, rage. Then the instant of clarity passed, and the mirage descended again: she saw him as the man she loved, the man whose love she was destined to win. She pressed his neatly-gloved hand, muttered a hasty, 'Good-night, my dear', and walked quickly away.

He made no attempt to pursue her. He remained perfectly still at the end of the alley, a seething tumult of emotions: of desire, of repulsion, of blank, unreasoning irritation that she should have the power so to stir him. He clutched his walking-stick, and, muttering to himself, "Women like that should be flogged," he strode away.

5

It would be tedious to retrace in any especial detail the curious, the almost incredible, wooing of this couple. For one thing, it went on, in much the way we have already described, for month after month. Valerie, with an obstinacy, as they say, worthy of a better cause, would not relinquish her picture of him; she spent all her spare time making allowances, inventing excuses, for his ungracious and parsimonious ways. She told herself that she did so because she loved him. It was false: she did so because she was unable to admit herself capable of having made a mistake, and because she lacked the courage to cut her losses and get out. It was not, of course, quite so simple as it sounds; it never is. There were stray times when Basil was feeling genial and radiated quite pleasantly whole segments of his celebrated charm; there were other times when she was obliged to admit that, for all the disappointment she felt in him, he did nevertheless physically attract her to quite an excessive

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extent; there was, worst and most deadly of all, the fact that there was no one more eligible ready to her hand, and Valerie, who saw herself quite preposterously at twenty-two an ageing and unwanted spinster, was desperately unwilling to throw away the dirty or any other sort of water before she was quite sure there was more to be had elsewhere. Bournemouth, she had once read, had a higher proportion of surplus women than any town in the whole country. Perhaps, in the long run, it is chiefly this factor of competition which causes so many highly agreeable women to mate with the manifestly extraordinary males they do; perhaps, since, but for this, the thing would be really inexplicable.

As for Basil, while he resented the demands which Valerie made upon his time and his purse—though Heaven knows the latter were small enough for she was not greedy, and, even if she had have been, with Basil this would have made scant difference—; and while he resented still more the alarming disturbances which her young beauty set up in his internal mechanisms; he couldn't steel himself to break away. This, primarily, was because, though circumstances had obliged him to adapt a little his original theory that she was a loose character, he was still not fully convinced that there was, as he rather crudely put the thing, 'nothing doing'. Valerie, though much attracted by him, was now much more sophisticated than she had been in Richard's day; and besides, she was flying higher and knew that, in the opinion of the circles in which she and Basil moved, the best way of securing a husband was seldom, or never, the way of surrender. Her behaviour, therefore, the more exigent he grew, became increasingly correct. Normally, this would have been enough for Basil, and he would have sheered off and tried his luck in another field where the going was easier. The thing, however, which prevented him from doing so was his instinctive certainty—based upon he knew not what, but very firmly based for all that—that, for all her appearance of prudery, she was no longer a virgin. It seemed to him, then, that, if another had succeeded with her, there could be no reasonable doubt but that, with time and patience, he should do likewise.

Basil, as we have said, had a prurient mind. He enjoyed talking to Valerie about dubious topics, and he frequently told her smutty jokes because he extracted pleasure from the process, especially if it made her blush. There was, she could not help feeling, something genuinely perverse about his whole attitude towards sex: it attracted him, but it repelled him still more. He hated it, and he hated women, as such; you could tell this by his fondness for stories that ridiculed women or which made them appear in an unfavourable or even a disgusting light. Valerie, in her pig-headed campaign of making excuses and finding explanations for him, decided that this aspect of his character was due to excessive sexual repression, and she quite frequently toyed with the notion that it was her duty to relieve him of his repressions, and so convert him into a healthy member of society. She would, she thought, have done so gladly, since her own desires were often clamant, had it not been that she feared too much thus to lose him as a possible husband.

So, as month added itself to month and no progress ensued (and why should it? since what she sought was diametrically opposed to what he was seeking), a great wall of tension and repression and unspoken, or only partially spoken, animosity was built up between them. Basil grew daily ruder to her, more and more surly; while she began to visualise with dread the possibility that she might lose him altogether. Feeling that she could never, in the way she had set out, make sure of him (and oddly enough still wishing to), she began to wonder more and more whether she would not be wiser to accede to his so obvious desires, and give herself to him, trusting then to his magnanimity, his sense of gratitude, to bring about the end which she desired. While her mind was engaged with such thoughts, Basil, one day as they were walking in the country, suddenly, for no reason in the world that she could see, unleashed upon her a violent diatribe against what he chose to call her mock-modesty. He worked himself into a tremendous rage, waving his arms hither and thither, until he was as alarming as her father had been at his worst. There was a soft spot in Valerie, set there in early childhood by that same frantic

father of hers, which rendered her terrified of any excessive exhibition of temper; and when suddenly Basil turned upon her and said, seizing her by the throat, "I've a very good mind to throttle you here and now!" and looked as though he meant it, she, utterly panic-stricken, cried: "Oh, Basil, I suppose I've been wrong! I'm sorry."

"What d'you mean, you're sorry?" he growled.

"Well, perhaps I've not been fair to you." She was thinking of the theory of excessive repression which she had evolved.

"No, you haven't," he said, taking his hands from her throat, "but if you're able to see it differently now, we'll not say any more about it"; and he led her impatiently into the heart of a wood that lay just off the track they were following.

She followed him meekly, half-willing, half-frightened. As he threw himself down on the brown beechmast by her side, he said, with quite extraordinary venom: "And I bet this isn't your first time by a long chalk."

The remark was unpardonable, but she quickly forgot it, hideously divided between the repulsion she felt for Basil as an individual, and the desire she felt for him as a man.

6

After that, of course, there was no holding him. It is curious that once a woman has given herself to a man there seems no way of withdrawing her gift. Basil, with the exception of the solitary case of the brunette, had held himself in check for over two-and-thirty years; and now he had let go, he let go with a will. Valerie, since she, as ever, was happy to please, would not have minded so much if the process had seemed to give him happiness; but unfortunately it appeared to do nothing of the kind. He desired her, and he resented that he should desire her, and whatever she did now seemed positively to enrage him. If, for instance, when he now made love to her, she showed signs of reciprocity, he called her a dirty little slut; if, on the other hand, she did the reverse, he abused her as a frigid bitch.

Valerie realised that she had never before been so unhappy, and did not see what she could do to break the spell.

She tried, first of all, talking reasonably with him, but when she did this he told her that, if she didn't shut up, he'd go and tell her mother all about their *affaire*, and that, if that wasn't enough, he'd throw in their friends at the dramatic society as well; and she believed him. The odd, the very odd thing was that now that Basil, by reason of his persistence and surliness, had come to possess her, his great line of grievance against her was that she had pursued him, ensnared him, led him on. Nevertheless, he said, if she thought she had landed him, she was vastly mistaken.

Valerie, her lower lip trembling and tears starting to her eyes, would say: "But I'm not trying to 'land' you, Basil! I'm not, really I'm not, if you don't want me."

"Good!" And then he would pull her towards him, and it would start all over again.

There is perhaps no better indication of the abject and idiotic state of panic which, at this time, reigned in Valerie's mind than the fact that she automatically assumed to herself that, just as Richard had done, so must Basil at least be taking all adequate and necessary precautions. True, he made no parade of them as Richard had, but then the latter, being a doctor, had had, no doubt, a different way of looking at the thing. Basil was, after all, very prudish, almost old-maidish, in some matters. He did not, for instance, like Valerie to see him when he wasn't properly clad, and so he would shout at her, "Turn away, don't be so damned immodest", which is, perhaps, rather a singular way in which to address a woman with whom you have just been making love.

Wherefore, as we have said, she permitted herself to make the assumption that everything, in that respect at any rate, was 'all right'. Consequently, the realisation that everything was, on the contrary, all wrong, was, when by degrees it came to her, one that she had the greatest difficulty in crediting. In fact, she didn't and couldn't believe it, until there was no longer any least possibility of her being mistaken.

When she was quite certain what had happened to her, though half-frantic with apprehension of what his reaction might be, she told Basil.

They were sitting on a seat in the Pavilion Gardens, and, keeping her voice as level as she could manage, she said, "Basil, dear, I'm sorry, but I think I'm going to have a baby."

"You *think*—What? Nonsense!" said Basil very loudly. "I don't believe it. I'm too old a bird to be caught by that yarn!"

"All right, then. I know I am, if you prefer it that way."

It was at this point that Basil rose to perhaps the highest pitch of his peculiar stature, for he turned and faced her, and said, fussily and excitedly: "Well, even if you are, don't you dare to try and mix me up in it."

She just stared at him. She couldn't speak. Then it seemed to her so funny that she laughed. "Not mix you up in it, my dear Basil! Who else should I, then?"

"I don't know, my good girl," said Basil. "I'm not aware of whom your associates may be. I don't flatter myself that I'm the only pebble on the beach."

Valerie simply couldn't believe her ears. "You don't *what*?"

"Don't believe I'm the only one; eh, not likely!" said Basil with enormous jocularly, though he was dreadfully pale. "I keep my eyes peeled, you know. I'm no fool. I've seen the way you carry on with those fellows up at the Club—Tom and Reg and Leslie. Why, for all I know, it might be any one of them!"

She was too wretched to be angry. She simply couldn't believe it, and, one by one, big tears started to fall from her eyes.

"Now for God's sake don't snivel," said Basil. "That won't do you any good. Anyhow, it's your own fault, whoever else's it is. I should have thought that you, of all people, would have had the gumption to take precautions. You're a woman of the world, aren't you?"

"I, Basil?"

"Yes . . . of course."

"Then you didn't . . . do anything?"

"I? Good Lord, why should I? I don't understand anything about that sort of thing! You're a woman of the world. You weren't an innocent girl when I met you, and don't you pretend you were! I naturally expected you to see to all that. If you didn't, I'm afraid it's your funeral!"

Valerie couldn't permit herself to be any further humiliated. She got up and walked straight out of the Gardens to her home. She felt quite certain that she could never be happy again; wondered if she had not better drown herself. Her mother found her locked in her bedroom, crying. Mrs. Singleton, who for some while had felt that all was not as it should be with her daughter, thumped on the door so loudly, and threatened such horrible things if she were not let in, that Valerie finally unlocked it, and, being at the end of her courage and feeling that she hadn't a friend in the world, told her mother everything.

Mrs. Singleton, though sadly shocked and troubled, was quite angelic about it, for, after all, she loved her daughter. She clutched the sobbing girl to her and said: "Don't cry, my darling, don't cry! It's not the end of the world. You're not the first, and you won't be the last"; and at once her ingenious mind began to revolve plans of how they might best get over their trouble.

Meanwhile, the devious Basil, who was rather more seriously perturbed than he had shewn himself to be, had returned home, and, also locking himself in his bedroom, so that his mother should not be able to spring upon him unawares—for if *she* were to get to know of it he didn't know what might happen, and he might even lose the legacy she proposed leaving him—, he started to compose a very judicious and business-like letter; to Valerie; couched as follows:

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Re the information you have to-day imparted to me, I have to make it perfectly clear to you that I disclaim all responsibility, and can in no circumstances accept liability.

At the same time, I am more than sorry concerning your little trouble; and if you would be good enough to post me a line (per registered post for preference) confirming your agreement in the matter of my initial paragraph above, I shall be glad to do what I can to help you, even though, as you know, my resources are very limited.

With regards,
yours truly,

B. F.

Basil, who had spent some six months of his earlier career, after his sojourn at the Good School, in attendance at what is called a Business College, was very pleased with this egregious document, which seemed to him, at once, to rid him of all responsibility. All now would be well, so long as nothing reached the ears of his terrible mother. As a further safeguard, he registered his letter, and, walking away from the post-office with the receipt safely stowed in his wallet, he felt that he had conducted his part of the business with real astuteness and *sang-froid*. And the quite astonishing thing is that, in conformity with the practice of the great majority of his fellow-members of the human race, he really believed the story which, because it suited him to believe it, he had evolved from his own inner consciousness: to wit, that Valerie was a wanton, and that, if she were pregnant, then it was just as likely—no, no! more likely, *much* more likely—to be by another than by himself. And he certainly wasn't going to be the mug, and take all the blame for another man's fun! A few pounds, of course, that was different. He'd have to help—with the others, of course; with the others! He sneered: The others! Damn them, he hated to think that there were others! Perhaps there were none? But of course there were; or where was his story, his peace of mind? Basil's peace of mind was precious to him: he disliked anything whatsoever that in any way interfered with it. For which reason, he disliked not a little the reply which arrived the following day to his so cautious, so proper, so business-like letter. It was written in an unfamiliar sprawling hand, and Basil turned it around unopened, a little irresolutely. Could it be from a solicitor? No, no, it was handwritten: a woman's hand. Well, he must face it; it might be her mother. It was. Mrs. Singleton, with Valerie's full agreement, had simply sent Basil's letter back to him, with a note pencilled, in her large bold hand, on the foot of it: "You can go to Hell and take your 'limited resources' with you."

Mrs. Singleton had enjoyed writing this, for she was a woman of spirit. It was the only part of the whole dismal business that she did enjoy. Even Valerie, who thought she knew Basil well enough, had been surprised at the juvenile and

pompous folly of his letter. For some reason, the thing in it which had wounded her most deeply was his use of the adjective 'little'—"your little trouble". Good God, she thought, what then could be his idea of a great one? Something, she opined, that wrung the withers of Basil himself.

Well, that was all over now, and what came next was in the hand of fate. It was, she supposed, all there, written, ordained, that this was the sort of thing which, for some purpose, or for no purpose, had to happen to her. She found herself hoping that it was, at any rate, for some purpose, even if it were a disagreeable one; since, to be obliged to bear all this for no reason at all was more, almost, than she could endure. She did endure it, however; there being nothing else to do.

CHAPTER TWO

COLIN

i

MRS. SINGLETON, in this emergency, really shewed the stuff she was made of. She was entirely wonderful. She addressed no single word of censure to her daughter, and refrained altogether from asking her embarrassing and mortifying questions which could in no way assist the issue, while, at the same time, taking upon herself the arranging of all details that were necessary to see the matter through in the manner least damaging to the credit of Valerie and of herself. Setting forth early the very next morning, she returned home late that same day with her whole programme mapped out to the last inch. She had been to Devonshire, where a former maid of hers was now living, married to a farm bailiff in a small village not far from Exeter. She had told this woman, a Mrs. Parminter, what had occurred, and had asked her to take Valerie into her cottage as a paying guest until her 'trouble*' was over. Mrs. Parminter, who, as a village-woman, did not regard the circumstance as anything very much out of the way, had

readily agreed to the proposal. She had known Valerie since she was a small girl in short frocks, and was fond of her. "Maids will do it," she had said to Mrs. Singleton. "Us might ha' done it ourselves if us hadn't been lucky ones. I'll see she comes to no harm wi' we."

Mrs. Singleton had thanked her and had then gone off to pay a visit to the local doctor, to whom she hadn't been quite so frank, providing Valerie, for form's sake, with an absent husband quartered in Malta. The doctor, who, whatever he thought of her story, was tactful and a man of the world, readily agreed to keep an eye on the patient. "She's young, you say, she's healthy: then there's nothing in the world to worry about; it's a natural process." And he had promised to have a word with the district nurse. Most of the women in the village had their babies in their own homes, and he saw no reason why Valerie should not do the same at Mrs. Parminster's, whose cottage was very clean and quite reasonably spacious.

And so it befell that, within a week of her conversation with Basil, Valerie, wearing an old wedding-ring of her mother's, and elevated, for the time being, to the status of Mrs. Singleton junior, was sitting in the express on her way to Exeter, feeling rather sick, and very forlorn, and quite sure that she had ruined her life. She had given up her post at the studio; her mother had duly bruited abroad to the small world of their Bournemouth acquaintance that she had temporarily accepted a job in London; and no one, save Valerie and her mother and Basil, had even the remotest inkling of what had really happened, Mrs. Singleton had handled the matter with quite consummate skill. Fortunately, the girl's shape, though already a little altered, was not yet sufficiently changed to be at all noticeable. She was tall and held herself well. When she left Bournemouth, though she was nearly five months enceinte, not a soul could have guessed that anything was amiss.

Valerie sat looking out of the window, watching the fields and the hedgerows speeding past. She had not been feeling well, and she had been consumedly wretched. Now there was something agreeable in being alone, and in being out of her old

atmosphere. It was springtime; the fields were studded with clumps of primroses; and here and there the young lambs were preposterously skipping. Her spirits, which for so long had been at their ebb, started to revive a little, and she began to try and count her blessings.

The first was, manifestly, that, thanks to her mother's vigilance and care, she had, so far, managed utterly to escape the least breath of scandal. No one, outside the closed circle of her mother and herself, *knew*, save only Basil; and he, she reflected bitterly, was unlikely to spread the good news. Her mother's plan was that she should stay with Mrs. Parminter until her time came, have the baby, nurse it for a while, and then set about having it adopted. Then, when it was in a good home, she could return unabashed to Bournemouth and take up her life as before. Though the scheme was all her mother's, and not her own, she found little amiss in it; and, although she felt curious and, in a way, rather proud concerning the unborn child that she carried, she as yet felt not the slightest affection for it. It was impersonal, remote—a nuisance, what people called 'an accident'. She did not see why her mother's plan should not go forward successfully.

Mrs. Parminter met her at the station, and drove her in an antiquated trap to the cottage. It was a perfectly lovely day, and a cream-tea was waiting, ready laid, on the kitchen table. Valerie, instead of feeling that she was in disgrace, suddenly experienced a quite unregenerate sense of being on holiday. The cottage was so quiet and peaceful; Mrs. Parminter's husband, George, was such a pleasant homely fellow; and there were two delightful children, Derrick and Anna. To all of these Mrs. Parminter had loyally recounted the face-saving myth that Valerie's mother had imparted to the doctor, so she was able to face them without any sense of shame.

This bright day, this mood of elation, set the key to almost the whole of her sojourn in Gilbrook, as the village was called. It was a singularly fine and lovely spring, and Valerie, though she daily found herself growing heavier and more clumsy, spent her time in long and healthy rambles in the neighbouring lanes and fields. She had been instructed that plenty of exercise was

good for her and for the baby, and it conformed with her own inclinations that she should take it.

It was curious, she thought, that, as she took her solitary walks along the lanes that were now all springing with new life, she should feel so tranquil and so unperturbed. She had, as she knew quite well, done the one thing which, for a woman, is unforgiveable; and the odd thing was that she didn't appear to mind. At least, the only part she minded was that it had been Basil that had started the process. Of him she thought as little as she could. His behaviour which, though it had been a shock to her, had not really surprised her, had had upon her the effect of making her wish utterly to forget him and the part which he had played in her life. This he rendered it easy enough to do by a policy of silence. Ever since he had received Mrs. Singleton's very rude reply to his surely so gracious letter, Basil had sulked and considered himself aggrieved, and had, by a process of concentrated auto-suggestion, succeeded more and more completely in convincing himself that, whoever might be the father of Valerie's baby, it certainly wasn't himself. At times he toyed with the notion of writing to her, for he had learnt from a mutual acquaintance that she had gone away; but he was able to excuse himself from doing this by the fact that he didn't know her address. And then, one morning, he was rather scandalised to find in his post a letter in the dashing hand of Mrs. Singleton, which said: "Valerie's address is so-and-so; in case you feel you'd like to write to her."

The reason for this approach was as follows: Mrs. Singleton was in the habit of paying her daughter a fortnightly visit at the week-end, and, on the last of these, when Valerie's time was close at hand, she had found the girl in unusually low spirits, and had concluded, not unnaturally, that she was grieving because she had heard nothing from Basil. He, on first receiving this letter, was very much in two minds as to what to do about it, since, though he had succeeded in lulling most of his fears, he still suspected a trap, and was very loth to put anything at all in writing that might subsequently be used in evidence against him. And so, with great magnanimity, the weather being unusually fine, and there being a motor-coach

service between Bournemouth and Exeter, he decided that he would combine pleasure with the practice of virtue, and go in person to pay her a surprise visit.

He turned up on a Sunday, just after the family had finished their midday meal. Valerie was upstairs, putting on her outdoor things for the afternoon stroll. She was very big now, but she still continued her walks because there was really nothing else to do, and she knew they were good for her.

Mrs. Parminter poked her head up the narrow stairway, and shouted: "There's a visitor for you, my dear: a Mr. Furnival."

Valerie was thunderstruck; then rather touched; then suddenly almost pleased. She looked in the glass of the wardrobe at her great stomach: well, there was nothing she could do about that; she confined her activities to making her face appear as pleasant as possible, and then down she came to where Basil, tactfully left alone to greet her, was sitting in an armchair with his back to the staircase. Because of the way he was placed, the first thing she saw of him as she descended the stairs was the top of his head. She gazed hard at this for a moment, and realised, with a sense of relief, that she neither cared for him nor disliked him. She was completely indifferent.

When he heard her footstep, he got up, and, holding out his hand, came towards her with a gracious smile on his face, as though he was about to present the Sunday-school prizes. When, however, he saw her clumsily bulged figure, his smile subsided somewhat. Basil had got used to possessing Valerie, and it is not impossible that his visit to Devonshire had been as much directed by the vague hope that he might resume his possession of her, as by any other motive. He was a thoroughly stupid man; it simply hadn't occurred to him that she would be changed. Even her face, it seemed to him, was changed; less delicate than before. He wished he hadn't come. The coach-fare had been more than a pound.

Valerie received him calmly, and with as much dignity as she could muster in her then handicapped condition.

"I was just off for my afternoon walk," she said. "You'll join me?" She didn't want to indulge in a long conversation with him with the Parminters in the next room, even if, as was their

invariable Sunday afternoon habit, they were both taking a nap.

"Gladly," said Basil, offering her his arm.

She ignored this, and he wasn't sorry, for she was decidedly tubby and seemed to him even to waddle a little as she walked.

They passed through the village and into the field-path. Basil, reflecting that his fare had been more than a pound, thought that he might at least try to get some value for his money, for, though he didn't much like the look of her in her present state, she was, at any rate, still female, and he had been starved of all female contacts since her departure. So he put his arm round her waist, and said: "Shall we sit down?"

Valerie laughed, a touch of hysteria in her tone. "My dear Basil," she said, "you surely don't imagine——"

"I thought perhaps you'd be nice to me," said Basil. "After all, I've come a long way to see you."

She looked at him, reflected that she had once managed to persuade herself that she loved him, and was astonished at her capacity for self-deception. He was nothing but a greedy prurient child. She felt suddenly so infinitely older and more experienced than he, as to be quite sorry for him. Was this what all men were? If so, then Basil, she supposed, was no worse than the rest. She took his hand: "Darling," she said, "you *can't possibly* want to make love to me when I'm in this state!"

He muttered something indistinguishable, and, just like the greedy infant she had pictured, his hand fumbled at her breast.

Valerie realised then that she didn't hate him, didn't even dislike him, only despised him; and concluded that in despising him she despised all other men.

Basil only stayed for a couple of hours, as otherwise his return-ticket would have become invalid. He remained cautious to the last, making no remark that might in any respect be deemed to compromise him. When they parted, he wished her good luck, and it seemed to her that he was tacitly reconciled to believing that her baby was also his. He didn't, that is, say anything which implied he believed otherwise. This, in some curious way, was a comfort to her, since it was certainly no-one else's.

Some ten days after Basil's unexpected visit, the child was born: a little boy who weighed seven and a half pounds and was given the name of Colin. He was a beautiful and a healthy baby, and, though the birth was not an easy one by any means, it was straightforward and without complications.

Three days after Colin's arrival, while Valerie was sitting up in bed, nursing him and admiring his incredibly perfect finger- and toe-nails, his red creased face and his mat of soft short dark hair, her mother came to see her. She had intended to be present at the confinement, in case anything should have gone wrong, but she had been prevented by a sudden chill.

She greeted Valerie, removed her hat, held out her arms for the baby, and took him up and examined him. "He's a nice little chap," she said, waving a finger before his large wide-open blue eyes. "What do you call him?"

Valerie told her; then said, "Mother"—and stopped.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Mother, I've been thinking."

"Yes, my dear: what?"

Valerie swallowed. It was desperately difficult after all that her mother had done for her, but she knew she had to say it, had known that she would have to say it ever since she had first seen her baby—"Well, dear, it's like this—He's so awfully sweet.—I want to ... Can't I keep him?"

Mrs. Singleton sat down, a look of exasperation clouding her whole face: "Keep him, the baby, in Bournemouth? Nonsense, of course you can't!"

"But, Mother . . ."

"Don't argue, dear! I've seen you through your trouble this far, and I can see that he's a dear little chap. But you must be sensible, dear. How can you explain him? How can you keep him? I can't afford to support you and him, as you should know very well. Besides, it's all been agreed, and I've already notified the adoption-society."

"Well, you could write and tell them we've altered our minds."

"Yes, dear, I could; and then what about your future? How can you ever expect to get a husband to look after you if you've a baby—and if I may be permitted to say so an illegitimate one—tagged around your neck?"

"I don't want a husband. I want to keep my baby." And Valerie started to weep.

Mrs. Singleton, who was really brim-full of the best intentions, was at her wits' end. She knew the girl wasn't herself yet; didn't want to make her ill by thwarting her; didn't, at the same time, want her to think for one moment that there was the slightest chance of her wild-cat scheme being permitted to materialise. To this end she called in Mrs. Parminter to her aid. The two women reasoned and remonstrated with Valerie for four hours. She merely lay back in her bed, a frail figure in her white nightgown, and the more positive they grew upon their side of the question, the more positive she grew upon hers.

Mrs. Singleton was genuinely alarmed. She knew that she couldn't force her daughter, quite against her will, to give up the child, since her signature was necessary before any adoption could be valid. Besides, she was puzzled: Valerie had always been a tractable and obedient child; she had never before ventured to cross her mother's will in anything that seriously mattered, so that, now the dissension had come, Mrs. Singleton didn't know in what manner she could best deal with it. So much, indeed, was she at the end of her tether, that she determined to pocket her pride and to call in the only potential ally she could think of—Basil, of whose visit she had heard, and in whose consequent repentance she was, therefore, somewhat optimistically, disposed to believe.

Wherefore she sent him a brief note on her return to Bournemouth, saying mysteriously that unforeseen circumstances had occurred which rendered it imperative that she should consult him; would he be so good as to come without delay to see her.

Basil, that same evening, full of disquietude and panic, rushed round to her house, a vision of affiliation-orders dancing hideously before his apprehensive eyes.

Mrs. Singleton was so distressed about her daughter's obduracy that she was quite gracious to Basil, whom she had

never met before, and whose gentlemanly demeanour impressed her; and Basil, when he knew that it wasn't affiliation-orders, was so relieved that he, in his turn, was quite nice to her, whom previously he had dreaded to meet. Besides, they were both so utterly in agreement, and that always makes for harmony. Nothing, they decided unanimously, nothing could be more completely idiotic than for Valerie to dream of keeping the child. Her life, which her mother's vigilance had just succeeded in saving from total ruin, would then be ruined indeed; and quite unnecessarily.

Basil, moved by Mrs. Singleton's deference to his vehemently expressed opinions, actually became quite rash: "If you think it would be any help, Mrs. Singleton," he said, "I will myself go and see Valerie, and try to shew her how foolish she is being."

"You will? Bless you!" cried Mrs. Singleton impulsively, by now convinced that Basil was really not at all impossible.

And it was forthwith agreed that he should travel down to Devonshire on the following Sunday, to see what effect his eloquence might have upon the new young mother, and on her pig-headed determination to ruin herself.

Before Basil left, Mrs. Singleton offered him a whisky-and-soda. She decided he was worth cultivating. Despite all that had happened. Young people were always young people. She even said to him, just before they parted: "You know, Basil—you don't mind me calling you Basil, do you?—Valerie, for all her headstrong ways, is a very good girl, a pretty girl, and a capable girl. . . You might do worse—if you're the marrying sort at all."

Basil had graciously blushed. For some reason, the social superiority of Mrs. Singleton's home over his own had awakened within him conceptions that were not dissimilar.

"Well," he said. "I don't know . . . Perhaps . . . But the first thing is to get her safely over her present piece of folly. After that—well, there's plenty of time!"

"Dear boy," said Mrs. Singleton, gushingly. "Do your best with her, and let me know as soon as you can what happens."

Thus it was that Basil made his second visit to Gilbrook. All the way down in the coach, he rehearsed his speech. He was a fluent conversationalist, and rather prided himself on his powers of persuasion.

In the meanwhile, Valerie's love for her son, as was only natural, had increased. She was a woman with a strongly developed maternal instinct, and if she could have been left for the rest of her life to bring up Colin in Mrs. Parminter's cottage, she would, she thought, have been perfectly content. She had, on this occasion, been apprised before-hand of Basil's arrival, and she awaited him in a mood which fluctuated between apathy and boredom. Her whole life now was centred on the child, and she had but little emotional energy or interest to spare for others.

All the same, his diatribe oppressed her. She had, for a few brief moments, at his first arrival, hoped that he had come because he wanted to see his son. In pursuit of this theory, she had proudly shewn him the little puckered face, sleeping hooded in his blanket. Basil had looked at it once, with an expression of cold horror, and had plunged straightway into his prepared oration.

Valerie sat and nursed her baby, quite silent, hearing his voice proceed on and on, interminably. She caught the general sense of his careful discourse, but did not pay much attention to the various components into which it was divided. Her mind was already quite made up, and he might just as well have addressed his remarks to the walls. She was not going to part with Colin.

From time to time, when Basil permitted her to get a word in, she said: "He needs me, and I need him. And that's the end of it."

"But what's to happen?" cried Basil frantically. "You must be sensible, you must be *realistic**. You can't stay here for ever. Your mother can't afford to go on paying for you. And you certainly can't bring the child back to Bournemouth: think of my feelings, if you've no regard for your mother's!"

Valerie couldn't resist the dig. She said: "I don't really see where *your* feelings come into it, Basil, if the child, as you say, has nothing to do with you."

"Don't you? Well, I do! People know we're friends. People talk. I don't want people to talk about me. My mother might get to hear something."

"Do you mean she knows nothing—about us?"

"Good God, no! Of course she doesn't."

"You think she'd be annoyed?"

"If you mean you're thinking of sneaking to her, I would advise you not to."

"Indeed!"

"*7 would advise you not to!*" roared Basil, standing up and looking most menacing, just as if he saw his patrimony being snatched by Valerie right out of his hands.

Really, she thought, he looks quite wicked. Murderous! A pang seized her that it should be his blood that, with hers, flowed in the baby's veins. Well, with her help, with her upbringing, she would see to it that such aspects of him as derived from Basil were trimmed, pruned, kept in proper check.

Basil returned to the assault. He said: "What do you propose to do?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought."

"Well, just run through the possibilities one by one: you can't stay here for ever, can you?"

"No, I suppose I can't."

"Right! You don't intend to march back to Bournemouth with the babe in your arms, to make a general laughing-stock of yourself?"

"I don't think a woman with a baby is really such a funny sight, Basil; but I'll admit that, lacking moral courage to the extent I do, it isn't a prospect that appeals to me."

"Right; now you're talking sense! You know you can't stay here, and you know you can't bring the baby to Bournemouth, Well now, I've got a proposition. Suppose you come back to Bournemouth, and the baby stays here?"

"But the baby can't stay here alone. You appear to forge I'm his mother."

"I forget nothing. Plenty of babies have been brought up by foster-mothers. Suppose Mrs. Parminter were willing to look after him?"

"Oh, but she wouldn't be."

"We could ask her."

"No. It wouldn't be right."

But Basil in a frenzy of activity had already rushed out in search of Mrs. Parminter, before whom he laid his scheme, which, very roughly, was that, though there was no sense to be got out of Valerie now that the baby was actually in her keeping, it might very well be possible, if they could once be separated by some such device as he had suggested, to bring up anew the project of the adoption at some later date, when she had got used to being without the child. The question was, would Mrs. Parminter oblige?

Mrs. Parminter, because she was very attached to Mrs. Singleton and to Valerie, said that she would; and Basil returned in triumph to Valerie to deliver to her, there and then, a long exposition of all the numerous advantages of his scheme. "You can come and see him any time you like," he said enthusiastically; "he's still your baby. If you find you just can't do without him, you can always come and fetch him. And in the meantime you can be thinking of what to do. You might, perhaps, even get employment where you could have him with you!"

Valerie, worn out at last by the torrent of his eloquence, and conscious, indeed, that some fresh arrangement would eventually have to be come to, promised that she would think about it; and the more she did think about it, the more convinced she became that it was, for the time being, the best scheme that could be evolved. She had the utmost confidence in Mrs. Parminter, and she was sure that from her the child would receive every attention; and secretly she determined that, though the project was not an easy one to fulfil, she would do her very utmost to find some job where she could soon have Colin back to live with her. All this, anyway, was a scheme that marked time, and so was a vast improvement on the so final, so inhuman solution of the adoption.

And so, as soon as it was possible for her to leave Colin, she packed up her things, confided him with many injunctions and with many tears to Mrs. Parminter, and returned to Bournemouth to resume her old life and to look for a job.

Every fortnight she came back to Devonshire for the weekend to see her baby, who appeared to thrive; and for two months after her return, during which time she succeeded in getting for herself a reasonably well-paid stop-gap post as non-resident receptionist at a nursing home, she really felt that all had been for the best, and that Basil's advice, for once, had been sound. The adoption party, sensing that her affection for the child was not, as they had hoped, starting yet to wane, decided that they must bide their time, and not stampede her by any premature disclosure of their plans. Everything seemed as nearly perfect as was possible, in the circumstances; and every contingency seemed covered. Every contingency, that is, but one. When Colin was just over six months old, he fell ill with a mysterious stomach disorder. It seemed nothing very much, but Mrs. Parminter wired to Valerie; who came at once. But she came too late: Colin had died in convulsions some couple of hours before, and his little body, waxen and doll-like already in the pallor of death, lay remote and quiet on the bed upon which, a few months earlier, she had given him life.

CHAPTER THREE

PEARLS, POETRY, PROTESTATIONS

I

THERE ARE depths of sorrow of which it is indecorous and unnecessary to speak. Valerie, after all she had recently endured, seemed stunned by this final catastrophe. She did not cry much. Her son was buried, and all seemed as though he had never been. Basil did not even trouble to disguise his relief at the turn things had taken. "Poor little chap," he would say oracularly, quite patronisingly fond of the child now that it was

safely out of the way and could never stand up and accuse him of its paternity, "best thing for him, really! A happy release." And all this just as though the child had been stricken in years, and suffering from a mortal complaint. He did not scruple to talk in this fashion even to Valerie, because, since she did not trouble to tell him otherwise, he concluded that the sentiments he voiced coincided with her own. What was even worse was that Mrs. Singleton adopted a tone much the same. True, because she was a woman and a mother, she was able to comprehend a little how Valerie must feel; but because, at the same time, she had, from the very first, set her heart upon the adoption-project which her daughter's obstinacy had so nearly defeated, she could not find within herself any real measure of sympathy. The only difference between her and Basil was that, whereas he didn't even suppose that Valerie grieved for the child, her mother knew that she did.

In this grief of hers were two factors which rendered it, at times, almost insupportable. The first was that she had no one in the world with whom she could share her sorrow. Everyone who had ever known Colin—even the good Mrs. Parminter—was glad that he was dead. Basil flatly said so; her mother couldn't help shewing that she thought so; and even Mrs. Parminter, once the first natural shock was over, had emitted complacently such observations as: "Well, dearie, 'tis all for the best that the dear Lord should take the little lamb to Himself!" Valerie was alone with her grief, which stretched, an endless sea, to the very confines of her world.

And the second thing, which was almost harder for her to bear, was her absolute certitude that, if she had remained with him, Colin wouldn't have died. Everyone argued with her about this, and said that, of course, it could not have made the slightest difference; but no one convinced her, because it was a point upon which she was incapable of conviction. And so, to the knowledge of sorrow that she was forced to bear alone, she added the conviction of her irremediable guilt; and day after day, for many long months after Colin's death, these two spectres were her unceasing company.

Naturally she began to alter. By the time she reached

twenty-five her first bloom had faded, and the gaiety, which as a young girl had made her so charming a companion, was hers no longer. In place of her gentleness and complaisance there had now come a certain hardness, a certain resolution, and, though she was in many ways more attractive to men than she had ever been, she found that she was no longer able to inspire in them those rapturous moods of self-abasement and self-abnegation which had, for example, rendered so remarkable her distant interlude with Mr. Tobias. Men tended now to regard her more as an equal, as a good fellow who wasn't averse to a half-pint of beer, and a game of darts, and an amorous scuffle up a back-lane. It was very natural, no doubt, for, though they were not aware of the fact, Valerie, as a mother, and a bereaved mother at that, was not, could hardly be expected to be, the same Valerie that she had been before. And, though their minds did not know this, their instincts did.

The sad part of it all was, she thought, that she did not, in herself, feel any different. She still wanted men to worship and respect and revere her as Toby had done; felt she was still the same person as then, and that, if she had in those days, with her empty head and her general ignorance of life, been at all worthy of such an approbation, then now, because of all she had endured and all she had learnt, she was ten times the more worthy of it. She did not, that is, really care to be regarded as a 'good sport', a sort of Rugby-football-player who happened to wear skirts instead of trousers; even though she saw that now, for reasons over which she had no control, such was her almost certain, her destined, fate.

Because she was really desperately unhappy, she now threw herself into any affair that cropped up; and they were mostly pretty tawdry ones, which she hated. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed to her that even Basil had been an improvement on the kind of men with which she now foregathered; quite forgetting, of course, that what had given significance, and even a sort of retrospective beauty, to her time with him had not, by any means, been the manner of man he was, but, rather, the manner of woman she herself had been; and was no longer.

Her new job at the nursing-home gave her endless oppor-

tunities for meeting men, 'getting off' as it is called; and on the whole she took full advantage of it. She felt herself obliged to adopt any course that would enable her for a little while to forget the face of the dead child that she was so confident her own neglect had killed. These men, as we have said, were a mixed lot, and mostly they insisted on treating her as a 'good sport', and giving her really as good a time as they knew how. There was not much harm in any of them, and, though they might incline towards dullness, they were, one and all, a great deal more considerate for her than Basil had ever been, and did not persecute her with their sexual deficiencies when once they found she wasn't interested in them. Since she had had her baby, indeed, her life in that respect had greatly modified. She still experienced desire, it is true; but her desire now was not for intercourse, but for the result of intercourse. What, in short, she wished for, and what, in one way or another, she was determined to have, was another child; so that she might atone to him for the irreparable wrong which (so she convinced herself) she had done to Colin. But this time, having experienced to its last dregs that sense of being an unwanted, a tiresome and a nauseous nuisance, which is the lot of the unmarried mother in the middle-classes of this day and age, she was determined that her next baby should be orthodoxly and securely born under the full seal of wedlock. In that haggard and wretched period, Valerie would cheerfully have married almost any reasonably decent man who had asked her to, and the wonder is that none did, since she was still, for all that she had undergone, very lovely indeed, a not utterly incapable housewife, and a charming companion. But Bournemouth is the town of surplus women, as she had reflected earlier, and perhaps the male inhabitants of it get rather above themselves; perhaps, also, in addition to all this, the principal impediment to her making at that time a reasonable and mediocresuccessful marriage was still Basil, and his curious, indeed his most grotesque behaviour relative to her. This was a thing so odd, so difficult to explain, one ultimately so important to the general outcome of events, that it had better have a separate section to itself.

When Valerie had come back to Bournemouth, leaving her baby behind in Devonshire, her relations with Basil had been strained but still in existence. He was very much part of her life, not only in that he was Colin's father, but also because he was almost the only person in Bournemouth who knew of the child's existence, and had seen it. This, because Valerie naturally wished often to talk of her baby, gave to Basil, despite the abominable way in which he had treated her, despite the infinite contempt which she felt for him, a very definite status in her life. And so, for those two months while all had seemed to go well, the pair of them had met at times, a little uneasily, to be sure, since Basil was for ever trying to re-establish what she felt sure he would almost like, had he dared, to describe as his 'rights' over her person, while she was equally determined that all that must be regarded as ended. Still, they had met, and they had conversed. Basil was very pathetic and quite eloquent on the subject of his plight; he said he had become used to her; that his health was suffering, and so on; and no-one who was aware of Valerie's gentle nature and inability to stand up against continuous and concentrated nagging could have said how it would all have ended, if there had not then fallen the thunderstroke of the child's death.

This changed Valerie utterly. She had no time now any more for Basil's nonsense. If he had expressed grief, if he had even openly admitted that the child had been his and that he was sorry it was dead, it would, in her then open and wounded state, have brought them infinitely closer; but instead of this, Basil, as we have seen, now went about singing, as it were, paeans of relief that he was definitely and for ever out of the reach of all possible affiliation-orders. And so Valerie, the new, harder Valerie, told him one night just precisely what she thought of him, and informed him that she didn't want to see him again, ever.

The effect of this pronouncement upon Basil was remarkable; astonishing; utterly not to be expected. He had for so long regarded her patronisingly as his own especial property that he

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was as deeply affrojited as if the door-mat, say, had suddenly leapt up off the floor and clouted him. He stormed; then found that was no good and essayed a softer note—almost a coo. Nay, more, he did next what it had never even occurred to him to do before, and deluged Valerie through the medium of the parcel-post with an absolute wealth of little gifts—boxes of chocolates, bead necklaces, copies in purple leather of the works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. All to no avail, however, since she posted them back to him, and continued to disport herself, with loud and rather mirthless merriment, with the mediocre males referred to in the last section.

Basil, thereupon, began to exhibit an even more grotesque line of action. He became conspiratorial, followed her, wrote letters to her in which he threatened to take his life, once even produced a knife, which he brandished in highly unprofessional style. What was worse, he spied upon her, and, she knew, did his level best, sometimes with some success, to deflect from her course the men with whom she happened at the time to be associating. One of these was a patient at the nursing-home, a pleasant fellow, an incurable consumptive very much older than Valerie, with whom she had struck up a friendship out of sheer compassion. Perceiving one day that he appeared to be trying to evade her, she had asked him point-blank his reason for doing so. "Not quite the thing," he had said. "Not playing the game, you know!"

"I don't understand you."

"Oh dash it all, when a girl's engaged. You ought to have told me so, 'pon my word, you should."

"But, my dear Mr. Marriott, I am not engaged," said Valerie.

"Fellow said so," said the patient his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"What fellow?"

"Oh a damned funny-looking chap with a horsey face and glaring eyes—like the blokes you read about in the paper who are wanted for doing girls in. He came up to me the other night after I'd been to the pictures with you and had left you in the Square waiting for your bus. 'Look here,' he said. 'I've

seen you a lot with Valerie Singleton lately, I don't like it, and I won't have it!

" 'Indeed,' said I, 'and who are you, may I ask?'

" 'Never you mind who I am. She's my fiancée, and that's good enough for you. Get it!'

" 'My dear sir, I was not aware that she was engaged, and, even if she is, it is not yet a crime to take an engaged young woman to the cinema, especially if you are a man of my mature years.'

"Well, you'd hardly believe it, but I really thought the fellow was going to hit me. He glared at me and said: 'Anyhow, you've been warned! Watch your step!' and dashed off into the crowd."

This conversation explained a great deal to Valerie which had previously been obscure: the sudden cooling-off or vanishment of quite promising and pleasant young men to whom she had been mildly attached; the mysterious and unpleasant remarks which others had made to her, to which, before, she had been unable to attach the proper significance. It seemed to her that the situation as it stood was an intolerable one, a persecution, no less; and that a showdown was called for. She had not wanted to meet Basil again, but such a meeting now seemed inevitable. She wrote him a note, and he duly presented himself, looking particularly wolfish and glaring.

"Look here," said Valerie, coming straight to the point. "What's your game, following me and interfering between me and any men who happen to be decent to me?"

"Only this," said the incredible Basil, "that you belong to me."

"To you? You're mad! You don't love me."

"No, I don't; but you belong to me all the same, and I'm sick and tired of waiting for you. When can we meet, somewhere quiet?"

"I'm never going to meet you, like that, again."

"Oh yes, you are! If I can't have you, no one else shall. I'll see to that."

"Oh, Basil, for God's sake don't be such a fool! You talk as though you were my husband."

"I might be one day, for all you know," said Basil grimly, in the tone of one who utters a threat.

"I must say you've taken a very long time to come to that conclusion," said Valerie. "So long that you've missed your market."

"Don't you be too sure."

And the extraordinary thing about it was that she wasn't sure! Basil's insane conviction that she, in some manner, was his property made her feel that perhaps, in some sense, she was. After all, as father of her child, he had cast an indestructible link between them. If he were determined to prevent any other man from taking an interest in her, if, as he had now done for the first time in his life, he was starting to speak of himself as her possible husband, why then, perhaps it might be for her a solution, and, though a wretched one, perhaps the only solution. So, at any rate, would she be able to beget the baby who was essential to her if she were ever to forgive herself for her desertion of Colin. After all, she was not getting any younger: the eligible men were being snapped up now by girls much her junior. . . . Yet, for all this, the thought was too grotesque to contemplate: not only did she despise Basil, she hated him. More than all, more important than all, she was terrified of him: terrified of him as she had been of no one since that father who had so early snapped her nerve.

3

Now the fact of the matter was that Basil, when he had enunciated to her, as though it had been a threat, that word, so unfamiliar in his repertoire, 'husband', had been indulging for some considerable time in what passed with him as the process of thought. When Basil thought, he visualised the thing he wanted to happen, and then made up the most excellent reasons why it should so happen. In this particular case, the matter which had increasingly obsessed him was his desire that Valerie should once again physically become his property, should be subject to his power. Without loving her in the least,

without even liking her, he found it impossible to believe that the favours he had once enjoyed from her should for ever be withdrawn; found that he couldn't face the prospect of their being thus withdrawn; found, moreover, the prospect that they might one day be bestowed upon another, utterly unthinkable. La Rochefoucauld has a very perceptive axiom to the effect that jealousy lives a great deal longer than love, and it was precisely this discovery that Basil was now making for himself. Hence his persecution of Valerie, his watching and his following her, his determination to interfere with and render nugatory any other relationship in which she might be disposed to enter. So strong, indeed, was now his resolve that she should once more be subjugated to his will, that the thought had at length come into his mind that, if he could not attain his purpose without marriage, then he would be willing to abandon his principles even to the extent of marrying her. He had several valid reasons for this change of heart: the first and strongest was that set down above: he had grown used to her; he was a slow starter, and shy in his arrogant fashion, he shrank from the trouble of wooing anybody else and rendering them familiar with his ways. And his second reason was that, ever since he had met Mrs. Singleton, with her social superiority, he had come to the conclusion that it might well count as a step up for him in the world if he should become the husband of her daughter. His third reason sprang from a remark that his mother had let drop. She was ageing now, and one day she had said to him earnestly: "You know, my dear boy, I shan't always be with you to look after you. Pm getting on in years, and it may please our dear Saviour to take me to Himself at any time. I wonder you don't start thinking about getting a nice young woman to look after you." This, coming from her, who had always before violently discouraged any such aspirations on his part, had shaken Basil considerably. He had never faced the point before, it had never occurred to him to regard his mother as mortal; but when he now did so, and reflected that she was already nearly seventy years of age, he perceived at once the justice of her observation. Besides, the very fact that she had made it shewed that her grip on life,'always previously

so tenacious, and upon him—which was for her much the same thing—was loosening. She might go at any time.

Consequently, his surprising use to Valerie of the word 'husband'—a word which, years before, she would have been entranced to hear upon his lips—was not made without due design and consideration. He was, in fact, willing now to take her almost on her own terms, if he could only cause her to forget, and of course forgive, his own share in their deplorable past.

And it is here that, perhaps, the most difficult portion of our story arises: the part, that is, which is the hardest of all to make seem credible. Until now, the sequence of events, commonplace as they have been in the main, and not unduly edifying perhaps, have at least conformed to some normal standard of probability; but now we have to recount, and if possible to make seem reasonable, a happening which, having regard to all the past circumstances, has the inherent appearance of quite fantastic unlikelihood. It is hardly sufficient merely to state that it so happened, and to leave it at that; for, though human actions are seldom founded upon the purest principles of logic, they are, at least, generally founded upon the rough and ready principles of common-sense.

For the fact, for example, that, a few days after the events occurring in the last section, Basil wrote an immense letter to Valerie—in itself a most unusual event, since he was, generally speaking, most wary of committing anything of importance to paper—and that this letter should culminate in the proposal that they become formally engaged, we have our explanation already prepared, as set down in a preceding paragraph. What we have not so ready to hand is our explanation of Valerie's reply to this egregious document; and it is here that our crux really comes. For she, while not precisely saying Yes, did not either say No; but suggested that it would be a good thing for them to meet and talk it over. This reply, having regard to the experience she already possessed of Basil's ways, is the matter which we have to elucidate, if we can. It is not an easy thing to do.

Of course, it would be simple enough to say that, despite his

singular behaviour to her, she had really loved him madly all the time, and was only too willing to forgive him. That would be a very happy solution. And another, nearly as happy, would be the suggestion that with her now it was a case of any port in a storm, and that she regarded the prospect of Basil as a husband as better than the prospect of no husband at all. There is nothing in the world amiss with either of these solutions ; except that they do not fit the facts. Neither immediately before their engagement (for they did become engaged) nor after it, did Valerie exhibit any least sign of being passionately devoted to him, and, since she was a woman of a particularly demonstrative and affectionate disposition, it would, to say the least, have been strange indeed for her to have concealed such an emotion, at such a time, if she had actually felt it. While, as for the theory that she accepted him because there was no one else, and she was desperate—well, there again, the facts simply fail to bear it out: she was still attractive, she did have, even in Bournemouth, that citadel of the surplus woman, her 'admirers', several of whom, but for Basil's devious machinations, had had every appearance of being entirely serious in their intentions.

In fact, the whole matter is so singular that one inclines to fall back on to the belief that she accepted him out of obstinacy, out of a desire to assert her will, almost because of a desire for revenge, because he had so long eluded her. She knew him so utterly, she despised him from the bottom of her heart, she held him responsible for the death of her child; and she accepted him. She was determined to have another child to atone for the wrong that she thought she had done Colin, and she knew that he could, at any rate, give her such a child. And perhaps, God knows, she shrank from offering to any other man what might so easily seem describable as Basil's leavings. She felt, we surmise, that she could not marry another man without telling him of this episode, and dreaded so much both the telling and the possible effect of it upon that other that she preferred Basil, to whom, at least, as to no other man in the world, such a confession was not necessary. They had, willy-nilly, though entirely incompatible, shared misfortune; and this bond seemed

to her at that time of more importance than any merely pleasant compatibility of taste and habit. She was tired, and baffled, and rather frightened. She felt that she had wasted the best years of her life, and wished to begin to live. Besides, she had an ingenuous and a forgiving disposition, and perhaps she thought that Basil had suddenly started to love her, and had ceased to love himself quite so much, and that matters thereafter, including his entire character, would at once become entirely different.

There are no pure or singly motivated actions. For several, or for all of these reasons, or for none of them but for others entirely different and too deeply hidden for us to guess at them, Valerie did as we have said: she agreed to become the wife of Basil Furnival at some future, some totally unspecified, date.

4

As soon as this was settled, Basil speedily made it clear to her that their being engaged did not imply any difference in the relations between them; save, of course, for such as were purely physical. He still reserved to himself the right to be quite as high and mighty as ever, and, though he did present her with an engagement-ring which he had acquired as a great bargain from an acquaintance of his whose fiancée had just broken her engagement, he did not speak of their eventual marriage as of anything other than an excessively remote and somewhat disagreeable contingency. Why, indeed, should he? since he now possessed her as he wanted, and had, moreover, the right to ward off from her all other possible suitors. He was now quite contented as he was, and the only factor in the situation which it seemed to him necessary to observe with the greatest of care was that of the state of his mother's health. So long as that good lady shewed no signs of breaking up, he was really quite unable to see what useful purpose would be served by his getting married. But once the first crack were to shew in that rock-like structure—ah! then it would be different, and he would be obliged to set things in train.

Valerie now, of course, had at long last to be presented to her

potential and future mother-in-law, of whom she had heard a great deal, concerning whom she was not a little curious.

This was an event for which, in Basil's opinion, she required careful coaching and preparation. After all, he had first made Valerie's acquaintance when she was twenty-two, he had had a child by her when she was twenty-four, and was now, her age being almost twenty-six, engaged to be married to her. This meant, so far as his mother was concerned, that she was required to conceal from her the whole of her complex relations with Basil during a period of nearly four years, and was, instead, to conform to a legend that he had evolved out of his inner consciousness whereby he had met her at a dance only some six weeks anterior to the date of her presentation to his parent. "You see," he kept instructing her, "it would never do for Mother to know I had known you so long without saying anything about it. She would think this deceptive, and it would prejudice her against you; and if she didn't like you that would make things very difficult for me, and very awkward for our engagement."

Valerie, who naturally thought all this exceedingly foolish, said that she would do her best not to seem unduly familiar with him; and was, in consequence, when he was satisfied that she really knew her part, favoured with an invitation to Sunday tea.

That afternoon she took special pains with her toilette, because, being a sensitive girl, she wished to make a good impression, both for her own sake and for the sake of Basil. She did not, however, put on her most spectacular clothes, since she feared these might have an adverse effect upon her prospective mother-in-law, who was, Basil had warned her, inclined to be old-fashioned in her views. Then she made her way to the little side-street off the sea-front in which the Furnival boarding-house was situated; found it to be a couple of dingy red-brick villas in the front garden of which stood a large notice board reading MON PLAISIR. GUEST HOUSE. TERMS MODERATE; and rang the front-door bell.

The door was opened to her by a dumpy old woman with a

straggle of corkscrew curls hanging around her face. She wore a bright blue apron with a bib top, and her head was covered with a high-crowned magenta felt hat.

Valerie rather shyly announced that she had come to see Mrs. Furnival.

"H'm," said the old woman, "you're this Valerie person, I s'pose?"

"Yes. Mrs. Furnival is expecting me, I think."

"You're right," said the old woman. "I'm Mrs. Furnival and I am expecting you. I want to have a good talk to you."

Valerie, as she hoped successfully, tried to conceal her surprise. Basil's mother was almost as broad as she was high, which was peculiar in one who had so well set-up a son; and, in addition, she possessed a quite striking resemblance to some figure very familiar to Valerie in her youth, that she wasn't able there and then, in her discomposure and nervous flurry, to place. During tea, however, it came to her, and really the resemblance was so remarkable that she nearly choked herself with the tea she was drinking, in her effort not to break out laughing: for Basil's mother was the very image of Mrs. Tiggy Winkle, the laundress in Beatrix Potter's story, so much so that she almost expected her at any moment to produce, over the tea-cups, her celebrated boast: "I'm an excellent clear-starcher"; and to curtsy.

But since this identification did not come until later, she was for the present obliged to dismiss the random thought that troubled her, and to concentrate all her attention on the painful business of creating a good impression on Mrs. Furnival. She soon saw that this was not going to be easy. Basil's mother was very properly suspicious of young girls who laid siege to the precious affections of her only son, and this was especially the case with young girls who were as attractive as Valerie, and who, in Mrs. Furnival's opinion, were also so flashily, so extravagantly clad. The old lady eyed her from top to toe several times in silence, and then gave a little grunt that was perfectly in keeping with her hedgehog-like appearance, and said: "You'd better come in."

Valerie was ushered into a large gloomy room full of heavy

mahogany furniture and oil-paintings in gilt frames. The walls were papered a dark red, and the mantelpiece was ponderous in grey marble. And there in an armchair by the fireside, Basil was reclining in his slippers, with a newspaper spread over his chest: *The News of the World*. He was enjoying his after-Sunday-dinner nap.

"Bas," said his mother, "here's someone to see you!"

Basil woke up with a start, rose to his feet, and nervously began to exude charm. He hustled a chair up to Valerie; said, "Won't you take off your coat, or would you rather sit down as you are?"

"I'll sit down, thank you," she said nervously, feeling that the removal of her outer garments was a step altogether too definite before Mrs. Furnival had made up her mind whether she was at all a suitable person to be allowed to remain in their society.

As she sat down, Basil's mother did likewise, and, turning her sharp pig-like eyes full upon her, said: "Well, my young lady, I hear that you and my Bas 'ave come to an understanding."

It was a vulgar phrase, but the meaning, at least, was clear. Valerie nodded.

"My Bas," resumed the old lady, "is an only child. He has enjoyed every care that a mother could give 'im. He is a delicate boy; his chest is weak. Looking after 'im will be a great responsibility."

Valerie laughed, perhaps a little inopportunist. "I expect I could cope," she said.

Mrs. Furnival looked at her shrewdly, though not altogether unkindly: "You will not find me a bad friend, my dear, if you do. It is only natural that I should be fond of my Bas since he is all I have and he 'as been a good boy to me. If I am able to feel that when I go he will be left in good 'ands, you and I will get on very well; if not, I shall do everything in my power to prevent you 'aving him. Time alone will show what you're made of. When I know you better, I shall be able to say whether I approves of you or not."

Basil shuffled uneasily in his chair. "Now then, Ma," he

said, "the poor girl has only just met you. Give her time to get used to us!"

"Basil," said his mother, "the sooner Miss Singleton learns that I am a plain woman and used to speaking my mind, the better it will be for all of us. I'm a plain woman and I say what I think. You understand that, my dear, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Valerie, who was really feeling excessively uncomfortable.

"That's a good girl, I was sure you would.—Now, my dear, come close to me and let me 'ave a good look at you."

Valerie, fascinated, got up and went and stood in front of the old woman, who regarded her coolly and dispassionately for some moments. When she had quite completed her scrutiny, she turned to her son and addressed him precisely as though they were the only people in the room. "She is really very pretty, Basil," she said. "I congratulate you on your taste. At the same time, you knows my views: it's very seldom that the pretty women are the good 'uns."

"Oh really, Mother," said Basil, "please——"

"Very well, my boy. Come here, child," she added to Valerie, "let me kiss you. That's to show I have no prejoodice against you, until I find I 'ave reason to"; and, throwing her short arms round the girl's neck, enveloping her in her own peculiar aged, musty smell, Mrs. Furnival glutinously saluted her, twice, on the cheek.

When she had done this she relaxed, and sat back, and said suddenly to Valerie: "Do you like my hat, dear?"

' 'Yes—of course—very much."

The old woman tittered. "Very nice of you to say so, my dear child, for I have 'ad it this past twenty year. Basil, my boy, I very much doubt if your pretty friend is quite sincere!"

It is unnecessary further to particularise the events of this tea-party in that heavy sombre dining-room, to speak of the copious and indigestible tea with its accompaniments of tinned salmon and jelly, to dwell upon that acutely embarrassing moment when, Basil suddenly having quitted the room for a moment, Mrs. Furnival had suddenly leant over to Valerie, and, breathing hard, had confided: "My boy's not badly

breeched, my dear; every penny of mine will be 'is one day". It is unnecessary because, in the sample already given of the conversation is, or should be, implicit the remainder of it. Valerie, as an isolated individual, had found herself suddenly pitchforked into close proximity to a kind of offensive-defensive alliance of mother and son, wherein the mother constantly took upon herself the most peculiar pains to trap her into some rather damaging or foolish observation, which, once made, she then proceeded to exhibit and display to the son, who, sitting mumchance, made not by any means the least motion to enlist himself on the side of the girl with whom he was supposed to be planning to spend the rest of his life.

When Valerie got back home again, her mother asked her what Mrs. Furnival was like.

"Well, dear, she is rather grotesque; and she smells peculiar; and is perfectly certain that the sun rises and sets uniquely on Basil's behalf. And she calls him *Bas'. She was rather rude, but I daresay she didn't mean to be. She is one of those people who explain their rudeness beforehand, by saying that they are blunt and believe in speaking their minds—as if rudeness was no longer rude when you say that you know you are being rude!"

"Did you like her, dear?"

"No, not much."

"Are you quite sure, darling, that you are doing the wisest thing?"

"No, mother, I'm not, but there doesn't seem anything else to do."

Mrs. Singleton moved to one side of the couch on which she was sitting, and patted the vacant seat by her side: "Come here, my popsy!"

Valerie did so, and her mother put her arm round her. "Darling," she said, "I know it isn't easy for you. I want you so much to be happy. I don't believe you'd think twice of Basil if it hadn't been for that silly business of the baby. Can't you forget that?"

"No, dear, I'm afraid I can't."

"It ought to have made you hate him."

"In some ways it has; yet all the same, it's made me feel that he and I are hopelessly linked together."

"You wouldn't feel like that if there was someone else?"

"Well, there is no one else, and there never will be while Basil stays around; he'll take good care of that."

"My dear," said her mother, "you remember the Brents that used to live next-door when you were a little girl? I heard from Mrs. Brent only yesterday. Her father-in-law has died and left quite a bit of money to her children. You remember—no, I suppose you don't—their little boy, Philip? He must be your age now—older than you, I think. I wish you could have met him. They're such a nice family."

"Wicked mother! because they've come into some money."

"Money isn't to be despised, my dear."

"No. I'm aware of that. Mrs. Furnival boasted to me of Basil's expectations."

"Did she indeed! Several hundred pounds, I don't doubt. Now with the Brents——"

"No, Mummy, it's no good! I *couldn't* do my stuff just because there was money to be got by it. I'd feel I was selling myself. Besides, the poor boy would be taking a pig in a poke if he had me. Second-hand goods, you know!"

"Don't be so bitter, darling! He might like you all the same."

"Well, I don't suppose I should like him. I expect he's rich and vulgar!"

"You could let me try, dear."

"Well, I shan't, and that's final. You'll be suggesting introducing me to the Prince of Wales before you've done? No, Mummy dear, I've made my bed now, and I've got to lie on it. It might be worse."

5

Valerie continued to lie on her bed for yet three and a half years longer, in the role of Basil's bride-to-be. Mrs. Furnival's health continued excellent, and Basil said flatly that he couldn't afford to marry; they were better off as they were. And, of course, strictly from his point of view, they were.

An endless period, as it seemed then, ensued; during which Valerie became bridesmaid, in succession, to the whole of her contemporary female acquaintance. Sometimes Basil came to the weddings as well, in his capacity as her affianced, and genteelly drank champagne and ate chicken sandwiches, with a carnation in the buttonhole of his hired morning-coat. But the spectacle of these other nuptials never seemed to have the effect of making him desirous of accelerating his own. Why indeed, should he? when he possessed all of Valerie that he required, and she was being fed and clothed by her own exertions, eked out by the help which she received from her mother.

Naturally diffident, she could not endure the humiliation even of mentioning to him that their engagement was attaining to quite mammoth length, that people were talking, that the years were passing, that they were growing older, that everything between them was becoming as flat and stale as a bottle of champagne that has been left open overnight. Considerations of this kind did not affect Basil in the least. He was not romantic by nature, and he had no sympathy at all with Valerie's foolish, if natural, romanticism. He had, indeed, no sympathy, either, with her very normal desire that she should be starting to live her own life, in a place* of her own, with the child that she so passionately desired. Why, again, should he have? She was engaged to him; wasn't that enough? He was tied down; he was completely faithful to her, and not like some loose-living fellows he could mention; she had a good steady husband in prospect, some day. What earthly grievance could she have?

Thus Basil in all sober seriousness to Mrs. Singleton when she, voicing the thoughts that her daughter was far too proud to put into words, from time to time tackled him on the subject.

Valerie's twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth years had flashed past, stagnant abortive years. Her face had now quite lost its first freshness, was lined, and a little petulant; she had grown thin, and the bones of her shoulders becoming too visible had necessitated in her a preference for high-necked frocks. Besides, and what was much worse, Basil's em-

braces, which had at one time compensated her for much of his otherwise general unsatisfactoriness, had now become habitual to her, and stirred her no longer. In effect, she was to him as a wife of six year's duration, but without the auxiliary compensations of home, of family, and of the self-esteem which properly belongs to the married state. True, in one respect, Basil was a changed man. Realising that the arrival of any further offspring would completely wreck his strategy, he did now, in the most condescending and nonchalant fashion in the world, arrange that she should be protected from any such eventuality; and it is a curious fact that his very prudence in this respect was now the thing which finally turned away from him whatever vestiges of physical tenderness she had still retained. Nevertheless, grimly, obstinately, doggedly, with her hand set upon the plough she continued to push it, never doubting that such was her destiny.

In the summer of 1936, when she was in her thirtieth year and Basil just ten years older, the cracks in the solid structure of Mrs. Furnival attaining at last to what appeared serious proportions, she obtained her reward. Basil said one day that he had heard of a little house in the neighbourhood of Poole that was falling vacant; the opportunity was too good a one for them to miss; and he thought they might as well take the plunge.

Valerie heard his announcement with relief, if without rapture. She believed that once they were married and actually living together, all might yet be well between them. She was of the romantic species which believes that it is proper for a wife to love her husband, and she wanted—oh, so passionately—to love Basil, since it was clearly her destiny that he should be her husband; and with a fervour that was even greater she longed that he should love her.

The wedding-day was finally fixed for June. It was more than six years since they had become lovers; and five since Colin's birth, and death.

BOOK THREE
LILIES AND VIOLETS

*Now bring the Bryde into the brydall bowres . . .
Lay her in Lillies and in Violets.*

EDMUND SPENSER.

CHAPTER ONE

HOME IN ANOTHER HEART

1

THE WEDDING took place at the local registry-office. Valerie, being essentially feminine, would have preferred it to be at a church, with all the usual panoply of lace-veiling and orange-blossom; but Basil said that it would be too expensive, and absurd as well in the circumstances, and that what her mother saved on the actual nuptials she could very well add to the amount of the cheque she had promised to give them as a wedding-present.

Valerie agreed that, as the mother of a child who would, if he had lived, now have been five years of age, such splendours as she desired were not for her; and made the best of it by arraying herself in an exceedingly smart coat and skirt, and arranging for a very jolly reception at the caterers that dealt with such matters, with a positive plenitude of champagne and ices and cold chicken and jelly. But all the same, in her secret heart, she regretted bitterly that her great day should thus be maimed.

There were, nevertheless, a great many guests, and everyone was very jocular and threw confetti and slippers, and there was an enormous cake quite smothered with little silver horse-shoes. No one at the reception, if they had not known the length of the engagement, would have dreamt that the bridal couple were other than the most fortunate pair on earth—for Valerie looked charming, and Basil extremely handsome and gracious. That everyone present *did* know the duration of the engagement did, however, a little mitigate this effect. The presents, which arrived in great numbers, were not, so to speak, the kind of presents that are rushed out in celebration of a rash and hasty love-match; they had an air of premeditation about them, as if they had been prudently purchased, long

long ago, when the donors, foreseeing that one day such a gift would be expected of them, had nobbled something which they thought, laid down in store, would prove a great bargain. One of the very few presents from a person who did not know the whole long history of the couple came from their old neighbour, Mrs. Brent, now widowed, to whom, a few days earlier, Mrs. Singleton, in restrained triumph, had despatched a note proclaiming: "Dear little Valerie—you remember her?—is to be married on Saturday next to such a nice young fellow who has a very good situation in an important business-house in the town." This present, which naturally bore about it the air of speedy purchase and entire non-premeditation, was a little early-morning tea-set: a pretty but inexpensive thing since Mrs. Brent had not, after all, seen Valerie since she was a girl in her teens.

When all was accomplished: the guffaws, the drinking of toasts and the other usual accompaniments of Christian marriage: the happy couple was riotously escorted to the railway-station by a select company of their brighter young acquaintance—fellow-members of the dramatic society, Basil's fellow-clerks—and deposited in a first-class compartment en route for their honeymoon, that was to be spent at Dawlish.

Valerie was tired and a little tearful. It seemed so strange after all these years of being Basil's mistress to be suddenly promoted into being Basil's wife. It was what she had wanted—at one time passionately wanted—and now she had got it she seemed, for the time at any rate, totally empty and void of further objective. Well, she thought, I am married now. He is my husband, and I love him. She was determined to love him; and really, in his smart going-away suit, with his clear-cut haughty features, it did not look as though this ought to be difficult. Shyly she took his hand, and said: "Oh Basil, aren't you glad that it's all over?"

Basil, who had been gazing rather uneasily out of the window, turned and looked at her. They were alone in the carriage. "Over?" he said. "Oh yes, rather! Very glad." And then, for some reason best known to himself, he commenced a long diatribe about the wedding-presents, what a

mean lousy lot of stuff they were. The reception, he said, had been stinted in nothing—and that was true, for Mrs. Singleton, as is customary, had paid for it—and yet, with all their hospitality, some people had thought it good enough to give them such beggarly things as oak biscuit-barrels and merely plated butter-dishes! "Mean skunks," growled Basil. "*Tour* friends! Those uncles of yours! Whoever was it that insulted us by sending that gimcrack morning tea-set?"

Valerie, aware that it was now her duty to love him uncritically, took no notice, but only clutched his hand the tighter. Basil, taking her silence for agreement, proceeded with his monologue, which soon expanded into a general dissertation on the fascinating subject of Money.

It was really quite extraordinary that he should now have proceeded to address her at such length and with such fervour on this admittedly highly important topic; and what rendered it all the more remarkable was that, though she had learnt during her previous seven years association with him that he was what is called 'careful', she had never before been favoured with his precise views on the matter. She did, rather timidly, put this point to him, as one seeking for enlightenment, saying: "You see, Basil darling, that I hardly know how to answer your questions."

But Basil only brushed her interposition brusquely aside, remarking somewhat testily: "Surely, my dear girl, there is no mystery about it! Since you are now my responsibility, it is only natural that you should be acquainted with my views, and I with yours, if you happen to have any. It is, I would remind you, you that would suffer if we found we weren't able to make both ends meet."

Yes! no doubt he was right, though she couldn't help feeling that the very beginning of their honeymoon was just a shade premature for such business-like parleyings.

Basil, however, was not a man to be deterred by considerations such as these. He was of the species whose wisdom is ready codified for it in the shape of useful and obvious proverbs and adages that may not be gainsaid. "The better the day, the better the deed", he might have said, if his motives had been

closely questioned; or, perhaps, "One should begin as one means to go on." It was perhaps not so much that Basil was 'careful' meaning parsimonious, as that he was 'careful' meaning fearful. His salary, though now entirely adequate to support two people, was not large, and it was his desire at this, the beginning of their honeymoon journey, to make Valerie, if he possibly could, commit herself definitely as to the absolute maximum that she would require for the housekeeping expenses. What he had forgotten was that, though far from being a child in years, she was still, in respect of matters such as these, a complete child, since in her life before marriage her mother had run the home, held the purse-strings and done the house-keeping, so that Valerie had really no more than the vaguest notion of what she would require to do the job satisfactorily. And as Basil kept on and on pressing her to give an exact figure—"I don't want, my dear, to put words into your mouth, it would be so much better if you were to give me your own idea first"—she, fearful that he would think her ignorant and incapable if she refused a direct reply, finally committed herself by saying brightly, with a hopeful smile that would have charmed the song-birds off a tree: "Well, dear, what about four pounds?"

Basil's lantern jaws fell apart, and his face assumed an aspect of absolutely crucified surprise. "My dear Valerie, surely I didn't hear you aright! You mean four pounds *a week*!"

"I suppose I did, dear."

Basil was started upon the process so soon to become quite fantastically familiar to her, of working himself up into a frenzy. He drummed his fingers on his knees, gnawed his bottom lip, looked grave and noble and severe and heart-broken all at once.

"Oh Basil, *darling*, please don't look like that! I'm a little fool, I expect. You say what you can afford, and I expect I'll manage to make do on it."

Basil raised a stately head. "No," he said. "No! The thing can't be permitted to pass like that. You have named a certain sum, and you should be prepared to justify that sum, with details, chapter and verse, as—butcher, so much; milk, so

much; baker, so much; and so forth. That is how my mother sets about it, and I don't myself see how else it can be done."

"Well all right, my love. I will. I'll think about it. Really I will! I'll think about it hard, and write it all down, and then discuss it with you."

Basil only looked sad. "No," he said. "You say that you want four pounds, and no doubt, since you're presumably a reasonable being, you have your reasons for wanting it. /can't afford it, of course, but that's beside the point at the moment. What I want to know, and know right now, is how you arrive at this preposterous figure. If I've had the misfortune to have married an extravagant woman, I might as well know first as last."

Such was Basil's way: a subject once raised he was quite incapable of letting it alone; he harped; he probed; he perambulated for hours around his central theme, like a horse tied to a peg in a field. He was simply unable to drop any topic whatever, once he had involved himself in it, until he felt that every vestige of meat had been stripped off the bone; and then he could only with the greatest difficulty be restrained from mumbling the bone. Valerie, who knew quite enough about him already to be aware of this peculiarity, took refuge at this point in a small feminine subtlety which had before, she found, served her turn. She made no reply, but started quietly to cry, and eventually, through her tears, raising her chin defiantly, she trumpeted with the air of a scared but resolute child, determined at all costs to make its point: "I'm *not* extravagant, and it's cruel of you to say I am when you don't know!"

Basil looked at her with distaste. "My dear girl," he said, "for God's sake stop snivelling, and be your age! You're a married woman now. I don't want to seem unkind, particularly as it is our wedding-day; but really you are behaving very foolishly."

"I'm so sorry, darling," she said. "I expect I'm tired. Forgive me"—and then, coaxingly: "Why don't you tell me what I ought to spend? You know how ignorant I am about such things."

Basil, since it was his wedding-day, resolved to be mag-

nanimous. "All right," he said, "I will." And he proceeded forthwith to provide her with a very lucid and exact summary of his views on housekeeping and all expenses ancillary thereto, which all led to the conclusion that the figure of her estimate had been just exactly double what it should have been. So engrossed did he grow in his theme, that it lasted him all the way to Exeter.

Valerie, who, when he had suggested Dawlish for their honeymoon, had not liked to appear difficult and so had not reminded him that her baby had been born, had lived his brief life, and died, in that part of the country, dreaded seeing again the landscape which was the background of her private tragedy. And so, as she gazed out of the window and watched all the familiar landmarks swing into view, quite unchanged it seemed for the passage of the past six years, her husband's voice droning away into her ear seemed less and less to make sense.

"Soap," he was saying, "now what should be the average weekly expenditure on soap in a small household?"

No reply.

"Valerie, you're not listening to me!"

"Yes, dear, what is it?"

"Oh damn you, you're hopeless!"

Valerie, her mind full of recollections of the little Colin, needed words far less harsh than these to reduce her to tears. Her eyes filled. Would she ever love another child as she had loved him? Would she ever have another chance to love one? Perhaps she didn't deserve to.

Basil glared at her. "Oh Christ," he said, "you're impossible! Blubbing again. What in Hell's name's the matter with you?"

2

They reached Dawlish at last, and, after a wash and some tea, Valerie felt better, indeed quite cheerful. She looked with pleasure at the new wedding-ring and reflected with satisfaction that she was now at last entitled to wear it, and really entitled, too, to register as Mrs. Furnival in the visitor's book without the dreadful feeling that some one would come up and

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write Liar against it: a feeling that had afflicted her on the several previous occasions upon which she had stayed for a night at an hotel with Basil. So gratifying to her was this reflection that she started to sing.

Basil's cold horse-eye regarded her with a stare of astonishment. "What sort of a row do you call that?" he enquired. "I've got a headache."

"I'm so sorry, darling. Have an aspirin?"

"Thank you. I usually take them with water, if it isn't too much trouble for you."

Meekly she brought him the glass of water, and Basil, staring moodily out of the window, swallowed the pellets. "What a lousy hole this is!" he said suddenly, with unexpected ferocity.

"Oh darling, whatever do you mean? The place? The hotel?"

"Both. Look at these sheets: they're patched! Look at that Front out there! What business has the railway got to be running along it!"

Valerie, who loved going anywhere fresh, and adored any place that was new, was dashed. She said: "Well, darling, I think it's lovely, but if you don't like it I daresay we can go on to somewhere different."

"What! And get stung here for the rooms we haven't used! Catch me; not likely!"

After which Basil, because of some secret necessity in his soul, set in for an evening's grumbling. He grumbled about the town, about the scenery, about the hotel, the dinner, the drinks before dinner, and the drinks after dinner. He grumbled about Valerie's new red evening-frock which she had chosen with infinite care, and of which she was inordinately proud. "Showy," he called it. "Drawing attention to yourself. Might be a tart."

It may well be—it is in any event to be hoped—that his grumbling eased his own soul somewhat; it certainly plunged his wife into a cavernous depth of gloom, and, once she was safely immured therein, he reviled her because she wasn't more cheerful. "You're as bright as a wet week, I must say," he observed. "What's the matter with you, eh? YouVe got what you wanted, haven't you?"

Yes; she had got what she wanted, and now it appeared to be Basil's deliberate will and pleasure to take it from her, and, tearing it, petal by petal apart, to shew her that each single petal was a tawdry cheap imitation of the real flower. Perhaps in thus tormenting her he also tormented himself. It is possible that in thus tormenting himself he fulfilled some secret need of his own nature; perhaps, even as he tormented her, he regretted bitterly that he did so, but couldn't help himself. It is possible that his sickness lay very deep, in the knowledge that she had once loved him, and now, though his wife, loved him no longer. If this was so, he certainly didn't go out of his way to alter the state of affairs. It may be that this was because he knew that he could not do so, and was too proud to try and to fail. Human relations between persons who have experienced such vicissitudes as these two are infinitely complicated, and the most one can do is to state the shape the relations assume, and now and then, very tentatively, to express a conjecture as to why they assume such shapes—such Gorgon-horrors, such squalid unhappy contortions. . . .

Not that Valerie, who, though it was much battered, had still contrived to keep intact her capacity for enjoyment, failed altogether to find pleasure in her honeymoon. The weather, for one thing, was superb. Hot cloudless day succeeded hot cloudless day; and there was the sea she loved, and the blue arching sky, and the distant hunched shapes of the far-off cliffs. In fact, if only Basil had permitted her, she would have been very happy, in her unreflective fashion, just sitting around on the beach in her pretty new bathing-costume, and dashing from time to time into the pleasantly tranquil sea. But here, almost at once, had arisen a crux. Basil was no swimmer. It was bad for his weak chest to sit about wearing a bathing-costume, and so he decked himself instead in immaculate white flannel trousers and a blue coat with brass buttons, and sat in a deck-chair pretending to read a thriller. Because of this, because of the generally superior decorousness of his pursuits, which, having regard to his ten years seniority, was natural enough, he soon found it necessary to take exception to what he deemed Valerie's juvenile boisterousness. And when ulti-

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mately he perceived that she was indulging in aquatic sports with a number of young men who were throwing a large coloured rubber ball to her in the water, he really became furious, and made agitated signals, and, when she came running to know what the matter was, said sharply to her: "You're my wife now, and I won't have you making an exhibition of yourself with a lot of dirty-minded young men! Besides, your costume is immodest. Look at your breasts sticking out a mile! Everybody can see them."

"But, Basil dear, everyone knows women have got breasts. It isn't only me."

"Don't argue! Put on your wrap and be your age. God knows you look moth-eaten enough. You're no chicken, however much you pretend to be one."

After which it became tacitly understood that Basil frowned upon the beach as a place for recreation, and they took instead to long moody solitary country walks, during which Valerie's breasts were, at least, not exposed to the public view, and Basil was able to instruct her in the art of housekeeping, a matter in which, as day succeeded day, he found, to his despair, she was more, infinitely more, deficient than he had even believed possible.

The best time, almost the only really good time, of their fortnight's honeymoon was one evening when, under a stupendous moon, they attended a concert-party in a tent on the green open space in the middle of the town. Basil, though his wife was not aware of the fact, had had several drinks by himself at the bar of their hotel while he had been waiting for her to dress, and the result of these had been to make him amorous, and, for once, non-critical. He had held her hand, had complimented her on her appearance, and had seemed not even to mind when he had caught other men looking at her with admiration. "By God," he had kept saying with great intensity, in the intervals between the turns, "you're damn pretty; *damn* pretty!" Poor Valerie, though not quite understanding what it was all about, had liked it, nevertheless. It was, roughly, as she had felt it ought to be. To be admired gave her assurance, and assurance was the one thing she lacked to make her really beautiful.

There was now about her, had been for some years since Basil's regime had set in in full vigour, a sort of cowed, abject quality which detracted gravely from the total impression she made. Given admiration, even of the distinctly crude kind that he contributed that night, she regained at once her verve, her sparkle, her gaiety. She was a woman who needed to be loved to attain to completion. The assurance, sapped so long ago by her father, sapped now, as a rule, by her husband, was again hers for a few brief hours that night; and in those hours the child she longed for so ardently was conceived.

3

It would, Valerie had told herself throughout the honeymoon, it would all be different and much better when they were in their own home. She had read a great deal in the women's journals to which she was much addicted of the so-called art of 'home-making', and she was desperately eager to put her wide theoretical knowledge into practice.

The house to which they returned after their fortnight at Dawlish was a detached modern villa-residence in a long street of exactly similar villas, each of which, however, had a different name upon its front-gate, to avoid natural confusion. The name upon their gate was *Sunnyside*. Even before the wedding they had taken steps to get into position such furniture as they had bought, or had received as wedding-presents, or had had given to them by their respective parents; and the result was that they came back to a house which, though far from being in apple-pie order, was at least habitable. It was deficient, chiefly, in the minor details, such as curtains and carpets. Valerie still had to make the former, for which the material had already been purchased; while as for the latter, they were in the house and only needed to be laid.

The day of their return was a Saturday, and, as Basil did not have to go to his office until the following Monday, Valerie suggested over their Sunday morning breakfast that they should devote the day to getting these carpets into position, and, after that, set to staining the floor-margins around them.

Basil said: "Oh bother! Laying carpets isn't a man's job. Besides, I've got to wash my hair."

She did not know then what she was to know all too well later, that Basil, who was immoderately proud of his luxuriant flaxen locks, *always* washed his hair on Sunday mornings. It was his habit, and he was not the sort of man to permit the mere fact of marriage to interfere with his habits.

Consequently, while he shampooed his hair, Valerie, to the best of her ability, laid the carpets herself. All Basil said when, his head enswathed in towels, he returned from the bathroom, was: "You're in a hell of a hurry, aren't you? And anyhow, the dining-room one is crooked."

In the afternoon he suddenly evinced a great desire to go and see his mother; and he took his golf-clubs with him because his mother's house was not far from the golf-links, and there might be the chance of his getting a game. He asked Valerie whether she wouldn't like to come too, but she, full of her new importance as housewife, said: "No, dear. I've a lot to do, and I'd rather stay and get on with it."

"Please yourself," said Basil; and he banged off and did not return till nine-thirty, to find a very pale and weary-looking wife waiting for him, and, keeping hot in the oven, a supper which he described *as just* not uneatable.

Next morning he went to the office, which involved the pair of them getting up at seven o'clock. He caught the 8.15 train at the station, and he was home again just after six for his dinner. And this continued, from one day to the next. At the week-ends he mostly went into Bournemouth, to see his mother and to play golf. Usually he asked Valerie to accompany him on these excursions and sometimes she did, though, since she did not play golf herself, it involved her being left for hours on end to converse with Mrs. Furnival in her gloomy red-walled parlour.

The old lady, now that the die had been finally cast, had decided to make the best of Valerie, and treated her kindly, though she was always full of good advice on the important theme of how to look after Basil, or, more generally, How to Make a Man Happy. Her advice was sound, if limited, and

consisted of two heads only: first, to give him plenty of good nourishing food, tastily served; second, to cross him in nothing, to bear always in mind his superior male status, and to defer to his views in everything.

Valerie, in the first few months of this regime, was by no means unhappy. It was fun making her home spruce and ship-shape, and she had the visits of her mother, who came over twice each week to spend the day with her, to look forward to. Between them they made *Sunnyside* very neat and pretty, with clean bright curtains, brightly polished brass, glossy furniture. Basil said that they could not possibly afford any domestic help, and indeed Valerie found that she could manage very well without it. There were only the two of them and they did not make much mess; and, after all, she had always been used to working, and it was so very much pleasanter to work for oneself than for somebody else.

Besides, beyond everything, she held within herself now her glowing secret of the new baby, concerning which, though she confided in her mother, she said nothing at all to Basil until she was quite certain. At last, one evening, she decided that the great moment had come, and, after she had fed her lord, and he had installed himself by the fireside with his slippers and the evening paper, she put her arms round his neck, and, in time-honoured fashion, as she had herself seen the thing done over and over again at the cinema, whispered her secret into his ear.

Then she drew back to watch the effect of her announcement, which her researches at the cinema had instructed her, should be a pleasant one.

But Basil merely laid down his paper and stared sombrely into the fire, and said nothing.

"Darling," she said at last, bitterly disappointed, "aren't you pleased?"

"Oh, Christ," said Basil. "You *would*, wouldn't you!"

"But, darling, it was only to be expected. For God's sake say you're glad about it!"

"How can I say I'm glad when I'm not?" asked the truthful Basil.

Valerie started to whimper. Basil, with elaborate unconcern, picked up his newspaper and began once more to read it.

There was a long silence.

"Well," said Valerie at last, "*I can't help it, can I?*"

"You could have done if you'd wanted to."

"I didn't even know you wanted me to."

Basil rose. "My dear good girl," he said, "be rational, and be adult. You know my salary as well as I do; you know it's as much as we can do to manage with things as they are. How the hell do you think we shall get on with three mouths to feed? To say nothing of clothes; and education; and doctor's bills. Oh! it's Damnable!"

"Well, I'm sorry if you feel like that about it, but the mischief's done, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure about that," said Basil, looking grim.

And that, for the whole of the remainder of that evening, was all he could be prevailed on to say on the subject. Valerie, who had begun already to feel far from well, cried herself to sleep that night, but cried silently, which is always more painful, because she was afraid that if she made a noise Basil would wake up and accuse her of disturbing his repose.

The next evening, however, a totally different Basil returned home to dinner. It was he that this time exhibited an unwonted eagerness to be agreeable, as though it were now he who had a delicate confession to broach. He had even brought her a present, some flowers; and Valerie, as she arranged them in a vase, did so with a heart that overflowed with happiness, because she thought that his gift must mean that he had regretted his harshness of the preceding night and was now glad because of her news.

But when dinner was over, the real reason for Basil's ebullient agreeableness and generosity soon became apparent. After somewhat uneasily beating about the bush for a while, in a manner which completely bewildered Valerie who couldn't think what he was driving at, he at last said bluntly: "I contacted a chap to-day who'll be able to fix that baby of yours."

She thought he meant the doctor for her confinement, and

said: "Oh, Basil, I'd rather have Dr. Gore, who has been Mummy's doctor ever since we came to Bournemouth."

He stared at her. "Oh," he said, "he's not that sort of a doctor. You really are devilish dense! I mean a chap that'll put a stopper on your being pregnant."

"Basil, you don't mean it!"

"Of course, I do. I told you I couldn't afford it. It's entirely your own fault, and if you're a sensible woman you'll do as I propose without any further argument."

She glared at him. "I think you must be quite mad," she said.

"And I think you must.—Still, look here, I don't expect you to agree right now. I know how you feel about it all. Later on, I daresay, when I'm in a better position, it'll be different. We've plenty of time. All I ask you now is just to think over the idea. It's only early days as yet."

"I don't need to think it over," said Valerie. "I know what I think already. I'll see you and your damned quack friend in hell before I do anything of the kind."

"Oh, indeed! Well, we'll see."

What Basil meant by 'seeing' soon became apparent. A protracted campaign of moral blackmail ensued. In his propensity for harping upon a single theme until he got his way, he, on this occasion, utterly excelled himself. For the whole of the time that they were together, he gave Valerie no respite. He argued all round the subject, back and forth, hither and thither, over and under, till her poor head swam. When he was not able personally to be present, he delegated duty to his mother, who paid Valerie daily visits, and took up the thread where Basil had left off. Valerie, who had no allies but her own mother, who naturally supported her but rather lacked in ferocity and determination, was beleaguered and beset for a fortnight; and all that she had to set against the copious, endless flow of reasoned argument provided by the two Furnivals was her own flat denial and her intuitive knowledge that their proposal was a blasphemy against all in which she believed. It was, she argued, intolerable that she, who had seen the matter through and born her child when it was out of wedlock, should

now be deprived of the child that was reputably and orthodoxly conceived within the bonds of the law. Basil conceded that it was all very unfortunate for her, but adhered rigidly to his point; said that there was positively no danger involved; and added kindly that he would, of course, pay all the necessary expenses. "We're not," he added, "quite so green as we were in the old days."

It would be easy enough to call Valerie weak and worthless in her ultimate capitulation. Anyone who may do so has, perhaps, never experienced the effect, while in an enfeebled state of health, of so consistent and thorough a barrage of abuse, reprehension and cajolery as that to which she was subjected. For she did at last crack and capitulate to Basil's will; and was duly by him carted off like a farm-animal to an obscene little back-room where, with nameless indignities, she was deprived of that which would so have imperilled Basil's economic stability.

For a little while she felt too ill and too wretched to care what had happened to her, and she sank into a state of apathy which, even to her husband, appeared alarming. And so he, magnanimously inclined because he had gotten his own way, brought home for her one night, as a sort of consolation-prize, a small red setter puppy. This dog, whose ridiculous name was Tiger, was small and frightened and pathetic, and Valerie for a while forgot her own wretchedness in cossetting and consoling him. Soon she grew deeply attached to Tiger and took him everywhere with her, while he, in his turn, adored her, and greatly irritated Basil by positively refusing to treat him, as he was supposed to do, as his Master.

4

Now this was ugly enough, and squalid enough: this matter of the operation: but Valerie was still young and resilient and capable of getting over most things, so that it is probable that, if Basil had realised thereafter that he had treated her shamefully and had taken some pains to mend his ways, then she might have forgotten it, and forgiven him. What really set the

seal on her relations with him, however, was the fact that, incredible as it must seem, this sequence of events did not remain an isolated one, but was (and the subject is one so distasteful that it is best to get it stated and done with as bluntly and briefly as possible) repeated not once, but twice more, during the three years that followed. On three separate occasions, that is, Valerie, after the same initial resistance and the same process of wearing down, was constrained by her lawful husband to submit herself to the ignominious ministrations of the quack doctor. The point really seems to have been that, once Basil had discovered that the process worked and was not an unduly expensive one, it simply did not occur to him that the repetition of it made matters any the worse. Besides, he now bore a profound grudge against his wife, because he believed that her successive pregnancies were deliberately engineered by her, as, of course, they probably were.

This unpleasant series of incidents is here adverted to, not by any means for its own sake, but because, without so doing, it would be quite impossible to understand the relationship between our two protagonists, and the general course of their further life together.

And the odd thing, the very odd thing about it all was that Basil, the more often he thus succeeded in imposing his will upon Valerie, the more genuinely attached to her did he become. He was not a demonstrative type of man, and he lacked to a quite extraordinary extent the warmer human affections, but he was of the species which so greatly appreciates the exercise of power, the bending of another's will to one's own, that he had now, in his own way, grown really fond of her. She is, he thought, a good little thing, and does what I tell her now without a lot of silly discussion. And, in addition to all this, she had by now got over her earlier gaucheries in the great business of looking after him and keeping his house, and had become a skilful, economical and intelligent domestic, who knew his tastes and likings and did her best to gratify them. Also, she was still very attractive to him. Though cold-hearted, Basil was warm-blooded, and Valerie did not cease to satisfy him. Only one thing about her,' indeed, in some sort

disquieted him: which was that she now never said that she loved him, and, at times, though it was difficult for him to believe it, he even rather doubted whether she did. This, he thought, no doubt was because he had, so far, prevented her from having the child that she wanted. And Basil here made a mental note for the future that, when his salary should reach a given point, he would indulge her in this desire also; and then, beyond question, all would be well again, and, in addition to so admirably running his home, she would love him once more. The fact that at present she did not appear to do so, though it occasioned him no great sense of loss, annoyed him; because Basil, in his own peculiar way, was conventionally-minded, and deemed it proper that a wife should love her husband. If she didn't, always assuming that he was steady, faithful and not given to disseminating his substance in riotous living, then patently it meant that there was something the matter with her.

And indeed, there was, he thought, something the matter with Valerie, who did not appear to him to be as cheerful as formerly. She never complained, but she seldom smiled, and, except with the dog, seemed always to be reserved, to be holding something back. When he asked her about this, as he would do sometimes in indulgent mood, she would reply: "Oh no, Basil, there's nothing the matter with me. I'm quite all right, thank you."

As if she were a small polite girl at a party.

Sometimes, indeed, Valerie would put the same question to herself, and in that case the answer would come pat enough: that what was amiss with her was simply that life had turned out to be entirely different from what she had imagined it would be. Just that. Basil, she supposed, was never precisely cruel to her, but he appeared to ignore her, to regard her as some sort of inferior animal whose sufficient joy and pleasure lay in doing what he supposed to be her duty. He never, for example, took her out now, to places of entertainment, or even for an annual holiday; and he never dreamt of taking her out for a meal. His mother had not been accustomed to such diversions, and, in the circles in which he had been reared, it had been considered all sufficient for a woman that she should

have her own little home, and a steady man to supportit. I hat was, after all, Basil's great card: he was so steady! Valerie, who in her early days had been gay and something of a gad-about, was now by him assumed automatically to have lapsed, upon marriage, into a comfortable and contented replica of his mother. Because she knew that this was what he expected of her, she did her best to appear so, outwardly; but it was the feeling that she had not, likewise, done so inwardly that—for he sensed it without positively knowing it—so gravely, at times, displeased Basil. He couldn't imagine, really he *couldn't* imagine, what more it was she wanted; and he feared greatly that she must be of a fundamentally discontented disposition.

Valerie was now thirty-two, and the year 1939—that spring when everyone, and Basil not the least, was still quaking over the glimpse which Munich had afforded of the probable future. She was still slim, and her face was still pretty, though sadly lined and with a mouth that now down-drooped a little at its corners. She had had a baby that was dead, and three arranged miscarriages. She possessed a house, a husband, and the now mature Tiger, who had grown into a handsome and stately creature. She supposed she ought to be contented. It might, after all, be that what she had expected of life was nothing but a pack of silly, girlish imaginings. She found that most of her neighbours, whose lot was not greatly dissimilar from hers (except that the majority of them were at least permitted to possess children), thought themselves well off. She had her mother, too, for her standby, and, what was almost as delightful, her mother now had a motor-car which, since she couldn't drive it herself, she permitted Valerie to drive. Basil, who did not hold with this motor-car, which he considered an extravagance, tried to stop her doing this; but he did not try very hard since he realised that it was Mrs. Singleton's property, and, as Mrs. Singleton had a little money which she would eventually be obliged to leave behind, he did not think it expedient to fall out with her. And so it was, during this period, this same motor-car which, more than anything else, reconciled Valerie to her lot, since it gave her the opportunity of slipping away with her mother to the seaside and the country

places that she loved—to the Purbecks, and the great Dorset commons, and the high bare hills at the back of Blandford. She never went there with Basil now: Basil in the old days had only one use for the country; and now that they shared a double-bed his interest in scenery had ceased. There was only one sort of scenery which he now seemed to appreciate, and that was the scenery of a golf-course, or a tennis-court. The older he grew, the greater seemed to grow Basil's zest for playing healthy ball-games.

And then, finally, to crown all, in this same year of 1939, Basil's salary at length reaching the altitude that he deemed suitable, he at last relented, and graciously announced that the time had come when, if she insisted, she could really have her baby.

A period of frantic anxiety followed for Valerie, in which she feared lest, through the long process of cheating them, her natural functions might have turned recalcitrant and stubborn; but at long last the familiar signs reasserted themselves, and she was happy. She was happy at last. She was so happy that she almost failed to notice that the Second World War had broken out.

CHAPTER TWO

WANDERINGS IN A WORLD WAR

I

FOR THIS negligence on her part, Basil, however, made ample amends. He, now aged forty-two, and far from martial by disposition, was as gravely perturbed by the occurrence as if it had been specifically and maliciously directed against him, personally and alone.

On the Sunday when the news came through, he was engaged in painting the staircase. In recent years he had become immensely house-proud, so that, on all such occasions as he was not disporting himself in the pursuit of a ball, he was sure

to be discovered actively engaged upon interior decorations. Valerie didn't mind this, as it kept him quiet and amused, even though his zeal was such that the painting of *Sunnyside* rather resembled that of the Forth Bridge, in that, so soon as one portion of it was finished, another previously completed was found to need fresh attention, with the result that the entire premises stank continuously of paint. Which would not have been so bad had not Basil, at the same time, grown so extremely pernicketty as to scratches and other blemishes upon what he was now wont to call 'my paint'. When these inevitable casualties occurred, occasioned by brooms or other domestic instruments, he would rabidly summon Valerie to the scene of the offence, and, with a shaking forefinger, would cry out, somewhat in the manner of Tweedledum in *Alice* indicating his broken rattle: "Do you see *that*?"

But to return: to Basil, painting the staircase at *Sunnyside*, came the radio-voice of Mr. Neville Chamberlain proclaiming the outbreak of war; and Basil's sense of outrage at once became extreme.

He rushed into the kitchen where his wife was placidly preparing the Sunday joint, and said: "Look here, this is damned serious! We must get out of Poole at once!"

"Why, dear?"

"You've ears, haven't you? That egregious ass Chamberlain has just declared war on Germany."

"Oh God! That'll mean my cousin Frank"—for her cousin was in the Navy.

"Oh damn your cousin; he's a professional sailor. It's his job. It's what he's paid for. It's we civilians I'm concerned about. It ought not to be allowed!"

"Well, darling, we can't do anything about it, can we?"

"Can't we? You just wait."

And the following morning Basil approached his manager with an earnest request to be transferred to a country branch of the Company.

The manager looked at him curiously, with something that nearly resembled a smile. The reason for' his smile was this. For years now, the Company, which believed in shifting its

staff round as much as possible, so that they might gain experience, had been imploring Basil to accept a post—a better, more highly-paid post—elsewhere; and Basil had as consistently refused. His real reason was that Bournemouth suited him, he was used to it and found it a simple and uncomplicated town, wherein he knew where all the best playing-fields and golf-courses were to be found. He was not, however, willing to give this reason to his superiors for preferring to be left in peace and at his lower salary, so he had invented the excuse that it was impossible for him to leave the place while his aged and dependant mother remained alive. And now here was this so recalcitrant Basil, on the very day after the outbreak of war, pleading to be given the move which he had previously so often rejected, against the advice, even against the supplications, of his wife and his mother-in-law, who wanted him to get on and make more money.

"Well," said the manager, "we might still be able to manage Birmingham, though you've turned it down God knows how often."

"No, not Birmingham" (centre of armaments production, thought Basil): "that wouldn't do me."

"Very well, I'll see, but I think I can say for certain that there are no other senior posts open at the moment."

"I'll take a junior one, then."

The manager raised his eyebrows.

"The fact is," said Basil hurriedly, "my wife's dead scared about air-raids. She's going to have a nipper, too."

"Oh," said the manager, "well, in that case we might stretch a point"; and in a few days time the news came through that Basil had been transferred to a junior post (at a reduced salary) in the branch office of the Company at Sherborne.

When triumphantly he returned home to break the glad tidings to Valerie, she wouldn't, at first, believe him. "What!" she said, "leave here when we have everything so nice, and all got ready for baby."

"Fat lot of good it'll be having it nice when the bombers come!" said Basil. "Now you be a good girl, and don't argue. Pack up your traps as quickly as you can."

Valerie, on the verge of tears, went out of the room; and Basil, reflecting that Sherborne, as a fair-sized town and a road-junction of some importance, was not really so safe as he would have liked, proceeded with alacrity to pack his many suits with quite pedantic care into a large cabin-trunk.

2

When, on a day late in October, they at last reached Sherborne, Basil, who had forgotten what the place looked like, was appalled by its comparative size, and said: "We can't possibly stay here: it isn't safe"; and at once dragged Valerie off into the country, where they at length found accommodation, at what he considered a ruinous price, in a small village inn, five miles from the town and destitute of every possible modern convenience. Then Basil bought a bicycle upon which to ride into Sherborne. Every morning as he left home, he now kissed his wife regretfully, and said: "You may see me back, or you may not. There's one thing: the raids, when they do come, will probably be by night rather than by day, so that you may live to thank me for bringing you out here."

Just as they were fairly comfortably settled in at *The Falconer*, as the inn was called, the Air Ministry, as it were deliberately, to spite Basil, started to construct an immense aerodrome right outside the very back-door of the place; and they were obliged hurriedly to deracinate themselves and seek safer shelter elsewhere. Valerie, who was now heavy with her child, hated all this uproar and confusion; she longed for the peace and quiet of her own home, and she grew dreadfully depressed in the dank autumnal countryside, with no-one in the world to talk to, and hardly anything to do to pass her time.

After various frenzied and expensive dashes around the neighbourhood in taxicabs, they at length found fresh accommodation at another inn, more remote, more expensive, and, if possible, even more devoid of modern conveniences. Here they had a couple of furnished rooms, and Valerie did all the cooking for them on a single shaky Primus stove. Here also Basil was visited by the brilliant conception that, if their two mothers

could be prevailed upon to join them, this would both save those ladies from the certain wrath to come, and also just halve his expenses.

Mrs. Furnival, when approached, exhibited an iron firmness and said she could not possibly desert her boarding-house; but Mrs. Singleton, who, in any event, was perturbed on Valerie's account and anxious because she wasn't able to visit her, jumped at the idea, and was duly installed in their lodgings, at a figure which, carefully worked out in advance by Basil, precisely halved their total expenses. Valerie, who took no part in money-matters, had no idea either of what Basil was paying or of what he was charging her mother, so she was quite at a loss to understand why he appeared to be so cheerful at the addition to their party, particularly as she was aware that his disrelish for her mother's society was only equalled by hers for his.

It was in the cross-fire, as it were, of these two opposed forces that the final weeks of her pregnancy were spent. It was an atmosphere hardly conducive to her peace of mind. It would not have been so bad if they had had occasional outbursts of animosity, followed by periods of relative tranquillity. The trouble was that they bickered, gently, as it were, all the time; each afraid to go too far. Basil because he did not wish to lose the financial alleviation of his mother-in-law's presence; she because she dreaded that, if she spoke her mind, he would make it impossible for her to stay and succour her daughter, who now really needed her support.

In those dark months of the winter of '39-'40, when the war seemed incapable of starting and the black-out was the chief topic of polite conversation, the mother and daughter, who had now been apart for more than three years, drew closer together once more. In her teens and in her twenties, Valerie had often been headstrong and wilful, and had seemed to her mother sometimes very little better than a fool; but now, with three years of concentrated Basil, coming on top of seven years of partially diluted Basil, Valerie was a fully adult, perhaps too fully adult, person. She had grown staid, sober, sadder. She had learnt not to expect much of life. Years of submitting to

Basil's inexorable decrees had robbed her of much of her spontaneity and gaiety, and yet, in some strange way, they had not robbed her of a certain sort of grave sweetness, nor—oddly enough—of a quite enormous suppressed sense of fun. Mrs. Singleton had always been young for her years and inclined to frivolity, and now the odd circumstance arose that it was her frivolity that set alight the latent flame of humour in her sadder and seemingly older and more responsible daughter. Valerie, though in many respects she felt years more mature than her mother, was yet intensely grateful to her now for her silly light-headed ways, because, through them, she was able to find release; and, between them, they contrived to discover a great deal of amusing material in Basil. In their happy league they now laughed all day over his preposterous ways, and in this laughter something slipped out of Valerie's heart that had been crushing and stifling her. She had never dared before to see him as merely funny. Once you can laugh at a thing, it no longer maintains its menace; and, because her mother had taught her to laugh at Basil, she found suddenly that her life, which she had thought finished, was merely unsatisfactory. She was able now to accept the fact that her marriage had been a failure, without at the same time accepting herself as a failure, or holding herself exclusively responsible for its collapse.

And in this happier mood of renascence, her baby was born in the spring.

3

It was another boy, not so large in size by any means as his predecessor, but adequate. In her new sense of release from the dominance of Basil, she dared to suggest that he should be named Richard, after her first lover. Basil, though he knew of the existence of a first lover, did not know his name; and he agreed, though with a poor grace, because, as he said, he had naturally thought she would want to call the child after him.

"Oh but, darling," she had said, "it would be such a bore to have two Basils in the same house! Why not make it his second name? Richard Basil Furnival: that sounds all right, doesn't it?"

"Very well," said Basil, who did not really mind one way or the other. "If that'll please you."

"Thank you, dear."

She loved her little Richard a thousand times more than she had loved the man after whom he was named; and yet she loved him all the more because he and she, as it were, held the two ends of a secret that was for ever hidden from her husband.

As the spring days lengthened, and a cold March climbed to a delicious April, Valerie, accompanied by her mother, would push the baby in his pram along the leafy Dorset lanes. She was so happy at last; she hadn't a care in the world. The war and all its wicked ways was infinitely remote: a sort of crazy male perverseness which she had been led by her observations of Basil to feel as characteristic of men in general. And Basil, except for the fact that he continuously made a loud noise, and required to be fed morning and evening, and at times insisted, rampageously and wearily, on sleeping with her, Basil had totally ceased to exist. She was utterly free of him at last, her whole being centred on the little Richard, with one small corner still reserved for the beautiful and affectionate Tiger, now in his prime and a great robber of the Dorset hen-roosts.

Basil vaguely perceived her remoteness from him, and vaguely permitted it to trouble him; not much, however, because his vanity was a great deal too healthy for him to be able to entertain the conception that she had really withdrawn herself from his masterful orbit. Besides, she continued to sleep with him in a manner which he deemed perfectly satisfactory. "It is natural," he thought, "for girls to get a bit stuck on their kid; especially when they have waited so long as Valerie has."

In addition, Basil had now plenty of other matters to occupy his mind. Though well stricken in years, he was exceedingly perturbed by the prospect that a military career might lie ahead of him, to seek solace from which disturbing idea he took to dosing himself heavily with patent medicines, in the belief that his health was dangerously deteriorating. It may have been the medicines, or it may have been simple fright, but his health did, in fact, sufficiently deteriorate for the cup to be withdrawn from him; and when, at a much later date, he was

described by the doctors who examined him at his 'medical' as 62, he, with a total lack of logic, grew furious, said that he had always led a clean life and kept himself fit, and that such was the duty of every decent man. To which end he then bought himself a pair of dumb-bells and a set of Indian clubs, and did exercises with them, in his pyjamas, before breakfast, in the garden of the inn, to the great delight and enjoyment of passing farm-hands. That is, of course, when the morning was fine. When it was wet, he did his exercises in the bedroom, and Valerie was absolutely terrified that the club would one day slip out of his hand and brain the blameless Richard as he lay sweetly slumbering in his cot.

But these calisthenics were rather of the future; for the present we have, in the middle of the picture, Valerie, her baby and her mother, with Tiger sauntering close behind; and a detached and isolated Basil, not at all realising that, with his paternal function safely and honourably accomplished at last, he is not any longer part of the central scene. And overhead, with bizarre and singular inappropriateness, the Battle of Britain raged in a cloudless sky.

4

It is, as may already have been divined, not the purpose of this narrative to provide the earnest and zealous reader with a sort of abbreviated history of our times. One mentions the war, in passing, because it was a phenomenon of a size not readily to be overlooked. During this summer it drew so near to our protagonists that they were obliged to take cognisance of it. But when once more its tide receded, they forgot it again—not actually, of course, but essentially—and reverted to their own absorbing personal interests.

It is, perhaps, salutary to make this point, because posterity has always a way of assuming that human beings who have the misfortune to live through the midst of such embroilments never, by any chance, think or talk about anything but the embroilments aforesaid. It would, no doubt, be very proper in them to do so, and the patent fact that they do not shews, very

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likely, how limited and parochial and egoistical is their outlook. At the same time, it is only because people are like this, because they habitually regard public affairs as a great nuisance and a great infringement of their own individual lives and liberties, that the human flotsam of such world-cataclysms manages as well as it does to retain its sanity and normality of outlook. It is a point perhaps somewhat overlooked by all politicians, war-lords and governmental busybodies of what species soever, that the common man and woman are not really even interested in the affairs concerning which they do so furiously, and so continuously, rage; and that all which the human kind, in general, requires is a little space in which to look around it peaceably, and to transact its own absorbing concerns in quietude. Naturally, when world-affairs directly hit them, they express aggravation, and can hardly be expected to do less; but otherwise the poor, patient, long-suffering human race is healthily petty in its interests, and few indeed of its members, if normally constituted and over the age of five-and-twenty, take, or would take, any notice at all of public affairs, if they could by any means contrive to be allowed to ignore them.

But to return to our little party at the *Pack Horse*. It is unnecessary to describe in any very great detail the lives which, during the next two years, were led by the women, since they were based absolutely upon an utter self-subordination to the interests of Valerie's baby. Richard, who was a healthy but in no other way remarkable little fellow, was the focus and centre of their joint existences. He was fed, given airings, exercise, regular periods of sleep; and in due course he miraculously, though hardly abnormally, responded to this treatment by performing such feats as waving his arms, cutting his teeth, crawling which led to walking, and gibbering which led to talking. These two years were, for them, telescoped into one long and fascinated attendance upon these early achievements; and this meant, naturally, that, while on the one hand was the solid trio of child, mother and grandmother, supplemented by the faithful Tiger, there was, on the other, isolated and uneasily conscious that the moment his back was turned they forgot all

about him and had even the bad taste to make fun of him: the magnificent Basil.

He, to do him justice, now that the child had actually arrived, was far from being a bad father to it. It seemed to him a nice little thing, and, while he didn't exactly love it, he was, nevertheless, always excogitating the most grandiose plans for its future: it must be given the best of educations, and all the advantages that its father had not enjoyed.

No one, we suppose, thinks of themselves as other than, on the whole, virtuous and well-meaning; and in this Basil was certainly no exception. To himself he appealed as being a genial, clean-living, good-natured and indulgent person. Guiltily conscious, from time to time, that Valerie imagined that she had a grievance, or grievances, against him, he couldn't really, for the life of him, see any reason for it. He had invariably treated her precisely as the men of his class always treated their women; he gave her as large a proportion of his income as he thought he could afford, and he never even wanted to be unfaithful to her. He regarded himself, therefore, as an excellent husband, and her as a peevish, dissatisfied, unduly romantic, rather hysterical creature. He was not himself, he thought, incapable of romanticism; indeed, had he not wooed her zealously for seven long years before he married her? but he believed that, once a woman was married, romance and all that kind of thing should come to an end, and be replaced by a firmer and steadier bond, whereby, if the man supported the woman, the woman, in her turn, looked up to and admired the man.

A concrete example may best give his point of view. Basil, as we have said, was much addicted to manly sports and games, and had, on coming to Sherborne, at once become a member of the local hockey club. He rather fancied himself at this exercise, and indeed did not play it badly for a man of his years. Every Saturday in the season, therefore, he donned his shorts and took up his hockey-stick; and what, thought he, could be more natural than that his wife should wish to come and watch him play, and admire from the touchline his undoubted prowess. Because she was a good woman, and really wanted to

be a good wife to him, Valerie, when the games took place on his home-ground, acceded to his wishes in this respect, and, as may readily be understood, suffered hideously in the process. For, after all, though hockey-fields are, no doubt, excellent places for the fortunate twenty-two who are disporting themselves thereon, they are grey, dank and dismal for the shivering few who stand on the touchline, unless they happen to be violent partisans or expert judges of the finer points of the sport. Valerie merely found that her feet got wet and her toes chilblained, as, with a blue and unsightly face, she stood rooted by the side of the field and watched her lord's apparently interminable gambols. And when at last she begged to be excused, Basil was at first hurt, and then he was angry. He said: "I really *can't* understand you! A fine healthy game like hockey. There must be something wrong with you; you must be *decadent*, I think!"

"Oh, but I get so cold, Basil."

"Well, the other fellows's wives don't seem to."

"Perhaps they're differently made, dear."

"No, it's you that are different. There's something *unhealthy* about you. Besides, you ought to *want* to see me play!" and off to the bar would stamp an outraged Basil, to return an hour later, manfully full of beer and very cross.

This bar was now his great resource: the one place in which he could get away from the preponderantly feminine atmosphere of his household. He was what is called 'a good mixer' and greatly enjoyed playing darts with those whom he patronisingly dubbed 'the locals'. He now spent quite a deal of money there, because he liked to enjoy the reputation of open-handedness; and the result of these expenditures was that he seldom had any cash left over with which to buy Valerie or her mother a drink. This annoyed them, for it was dull in their little sitting-room after the baby had been put to bed; and they envied Basil as he roared and racketed in the bright and cheerful bar.

For as well as Valerie's sad defection in the matter of watching his hockey, Basil now had another grievance: which was that, since he no longer had his own house to paint and to fuss

over, he found often that he hardly knew what to do with himself to employ his leisure. His wife read a great deal, but he did not; couldn't somehow, as he said, find a book to interest him; with the result that he was always badgering her to play cards. And then, when she had played cards with him for nights on end, and said that she would really like to read for a change, he told her that she was selfish, and said that all the wives he had ever heard of were only too glad to play cards with their husbands, whenever the latter wanted. He had a curious fashion of thus generalising about other people, though actually he knew little or nothing of the way in which other members of his own class lived. He had few friends or even acquaintances; he was not, in fact, popular among men of his own sort, because, for some reason, he had the faculty of rendering them uneasy, of putting them upon their guard. The geniality that he was able so admirably to exhibit in the public-bar seemed somehow to desert him when he elevated himself to the company of the saloon, and he shewed among his peers as stiff, dogmatic and even rather quarrelsome.

Valerie, who was aware of this, also regretted it; for she knew that he was lonely and would have liked him to have friends, if only because such friends would have a little mitigated his often so excessive concentration upon her and her affairs.

One evening when she was having a drink with one of his fellow-clerks who had cycled over, by invitation, to play a darts match with Basil (in whose honour she had, incidentally, been permitted to go down to the bar, so that she could have the pleasure of watching her husband throwing his darts), she had been bold enough to say to him, since he seemed a sympathetic type: "I wish you would come over and see us more often, Mr. Lang, for Basil loves company and doesn't get much."

Mr. Lang, who privately admired her enormously and had made the journey solely for the pleasure of looking at her, mumbled a quite inaudible reply, and Valerie had continued: "Won't you, to please me?"

"Oh, I'd do anything to please you, Mrs. Furnival!" said Mr. Lang, with a most devoted look. "But the fact of the matter is, you know, your husband makes me feel so uneasy."

"Uneasy? Heavens, how absurd! Why ever do you say that?"

"I don't really know. I think it's because he makes me feel small."

Valerie laughed. She couldn't help it. After all, how well she knew that feeling! "Oh no," she said loyally, "I'm sure you're quite mistaken."

"Well, if you say so then I'm sure I am, Mrs. Furnival," said Mr. Lang, gallantly. But she could see that he adhered to his original opinion.

Ultimately, it was this shortage of playmates, this sense that he was excluded from the main interests of his own family, which led to Basil becoming immersed in what turned out eventually to be the abiding passion of his middle years: his betting on horse-races and on football pools. He took up these sports languidly at first, and as a distraction; but they soon gripped him, and more and more of his spare time and money was devoted to them. He had never done a hand's turn in the house, because it was against his principles to do so—that is, he did genuinely believe that such unpleasant things as washing up and doing out grates was a woman's job (had not his own mother always uncomplainingly performed them?)—, and now gradually he became so absorbed in his computations, his combinations and his permutations, that he hardly stirred from his chair by the fireside, and even ate his meals with a football paper propped up by the side of his plate. He had the misfortune to win about sixty pounds in the early days of his endeavour, and this really clinched matters. Gambling appealed powerfully to the two strongest things in his nature: his really genuine love of money (of which his 'carefulness' was the obverse); and his passionate desire to be thought immensely virile and quite a devil of a fellow. Gambling, for some reason, he deemed a manly sport, as perhaps it is, when indulged in in a reckless and devil-may-care fashion. Basil, however, gambled in a pernicketty, pettifogging manner, always playing for safety, and suffering quite hideously when he lost. Valerie grew to dread the expression which, in these circumstances, settled upon his face: a sort of pathetically jaunty look

which concealed only very badly his furious resentment that he should have put his money upon the wrong horse. It was not, either, as if, when he backed the right one, he was pleased about it, and lavish with his windfall; for on these occasions he was merely chagrined that his stake had been no larger. While as for enjoying his occasional winnings, that was the last thing he ever thought of doing; he merely 're-invested' them, as he called it, with a view to increasing them; and went on doing so until he had lost them.

He made little Richard his excuse for these joyless exercises, saying that he indulged in them solely with a view to building up a fund out of which to pay for the child's education.

It was not very long before Valerie found that, as a result of these expenditures, her housekeeping money was being doled out with a more than usually sparing hand, and that every penny she spent on herself was subject to an even more vigorous check than heretofore. Her life now, economically, soon became a tissue of lies. If she bought for herself any small piece of finery (and because she was a woman she loved such things and fell for them, sometimes), then she was obliged to hide it, to produce it later on with some story that a relation had given it to her, or she had received it as a birthday present.

Basil, detecting her in one or two small falsehoods of this kind, immediately became intensely suspicious. He said he believed she was trying to ruin him, was running up bills; and now for ever, when he thought her safely out of the way, was in the habit of prying through her chest-of-drawers, her trunk, her handbag, to see what of incriminating evidence he could find against her.

It appeared to her—because, of course, she knew that he did this and had even caught him at it—that, as time went on, he was growing increasingly petty-minded. It was really incredible the trifles concerning which he would make the most tremendous uproar: a new lipstick, or a pair of lisle stockings. And, since the only thing which seemed to be of any avail in making him forego his inquiries was his love for sports and games, she encouraged him to become immersed in these; and

even herself, as a concession, learnt to play golf, so that he should have someone with whom thus to disport himself.

And so, pursuing the flying ball, studying with anxious and corrugated brows the columns of the racing and the football papers, and prying endlessly into Valerie's concerns so that he might restrain her from the vice of extravagance (poor modest thing who thought a yard of manufactured lace a great luxury!), Basil passed from the age of forty-three to that of forty-five, in the frantic years of 1940-42, when the foundations of the earth were, elsewhere, tottering.

5

At the beginning of 1943 the air-raids seemed to have passed their peak, and Basil plucked up courage. He was tired, he said, of the expense of living at the *Pack Horse*, where, besides, there were no proper facilities for him to wash his hair on Sunday mornings. The baby was almost three years old, and it was difficult bringing up a healthy vigorous little chap in furnished rooms; their house had been let furnished, but the people who had taken it were anxious to leave; he was sure they had already made the place in a dreadful mess, and quite ruined all the furniture; didn't Valerie think it would be a good idea for him to try to get his old job back, and return to Poole?

Valerie, who, if she had had her way, would never have left her home, was, for a wonder, in complete agreement with him; and, after some few weeks of devious negotiation, Basil managed to secure reinstatement in his old post, and they packed up and moved back home again. And, because Mrs. Singleton had sold her house when she left Bournemouth, and because Basil had by now become so used to her contribution to the housekeeping expenses that he was unable to regard it as other than a fixed portion of his own income, she too was urged, for the time being at any rate, to continue to make her home with them. To which proposal, being devoted to the child who was now quite as much as Valerie could cope with single-handed, Mrs. Singleton gladly agreed, even though the

prospect of living semi-permanently with her son-in-law was not one which afforded her any joy.

It was a strange relationship between these two. Basil, who felt that his mother-in-law supported and upheld his wife in her wicked and extravagant courses, thus rendering her less subservient than she should have been to his will, nevertheless shrank from an open conflict because he could not help being impressed by the fact that she had money to leave; while she, who really loathed him, also refrained from giving voice to her true feelings for the very curious reason that she was, fundamentally, frightened of him. This circumstance is so odd that it may, perhaps, be as well to enlarge a little upon it. There was in Basil an odd repressed form of malignancy which, while it would not have frightened any man because of his obvious physical inaptitude to give it expression, was yet sufficiently alarming to produce in a woman a species of terror. In less degree, it is true, than her mother, Valerie herself was capable of feeling this. When she and her mother were together, the mutual support which they gave one another was sufficient to mitigate this, and, as has already been described, the only effect which Basil's activities then had upon them was to cause them to laugh at him. But, taken separately, both had in their hearts a little seed of dread for him. True, he was a bully, but he was so singularly ineffective a one that it could hardly have been this alone. What perhaps is nearer to the truth is that both were frightened of his extraordinary pertinacity, of his ability for wearing them down by a constant harping upon a single theme, his apparently inexhaustible capacity for wearying, nagging discourse. Examples of this fixity of purpose in him had been the matter of his unrelenting persecution and pursuit of Valerie in the period before their engagement, and his unflagging persistency in the matter of her 'little operations' as he was now airily pleased to call them.

When they returned to *Sunnyside* a whole series of scenes was, of course, hardly to be avoided. One does not let a house furnished for a period of several years and expect to find it in exactly the same condition as it was when handed over. At least, we say 'one does not', and then we pause—for this was

just precisely what Basil did expect. The paint—the beautiful paint that had been laid on by his own hands—had been kicked, had been soiled; there were spots on the chair-covers, nail-marks in the walls; someone had stained a tea-cup ring on the piano-lid, and several knick-knacks were missing altogether.

Valerie viewed the scene ruefully enough, and yet she had realised that so it was bound to be, and was even relieved to find it was no worse. Not so Basil. He stormed and he raved and he said that he was going at once to consult a solicitor and have the law on his tenants; and then he turned on Valerie and said it was all her fault: she had interviewed the tenants and ought to have been able to see what manner of people they were! Moreover, it was her home, she was the housewife and it was her place to be upset about the mess the premises were in! She ought to *befar* more upset than he was. Yet, patently, he was more upset than she! Why was that? Was it because she cared less than he for their home? Obviously! And wasn't that a fine thing to have to say about one's wife. Eh! Wasn't it? "Oh God," cried Basil from the depths of his despair, "I wish to heaven I'd never married you!" And poor Valerie, scurrying about with a bucket of dirty soap-and-water and trying to do a dozen things at once, couldn't help calling to mind the even more awful occasion when, after the breaking of the Spodejug, her father had made a somewhat similar remark, had, in fact, gone even one stage further, in wishing that she had never been born.

"Oh dear," she thought, on the very verge of panic, "whatever is the matter with me? However hard I try, I'm always a failure, always doing the wrong thing!" and her tears dropped unseen into her bucket of dirty water, as she grovelled on the floor underneath the piano and did her best to clear up the mess the tenants had made of the polished parquet.

Still, the one saving grace of her existence was that Basil was an employed person, and couldn't be about all the time. The next day he went off to business as usual, and she and her mother set to, and soon had the place looking neat and comfortable again. All, that is, except for the paintwork. Though

they rubbed this, and scrubbed it, they could by no means bring it back again to Basil's somewhat exacting standard, so that, when that worthy returned home from work that evening, he stood for a while regarding it, grimly, in silence, before he made finally his pronouncement, in a martyred tone: "Well, I see I shall have to repaint the entire house from top to bottom!" Which he proceeded forthwith to do: an activity which, in conjunction with his now exacting commitments in the matter of his bets and his Pools, providentially left him but little time for several weeks in which to carry out his usual investigations into Valerie's financial and private affairs.

It was during this period of lull and lapsed vigilance that the apparently trivial circumstance of Philip Brent's visit took place. We say, advisedly, 'apparently trivial' for, though at a later date, when a widening ring of circumstance had spread from the dropping of this pebble in the stagnant pool of their lives, Basil had started already, with a rich but characteristic mixture of metaphors, to lament: "Ah, all this would never have happened if I hadn't had my eye off the ball when I was repainting the house!" he was only being wise after the event: a thing all too easy to do, and one that has never done anybody the least manner of good.

CHAPTER THREE

PHILIP

i

IT is necessary briefly to explain.

It may be remembered that the Brent family had been the Singleton's next-door neighbours in their early suburban days of more than thirty years before; and it may also be remembered that the widowed Mrs. Singleton and the widowed Mrs. Brent had continued to keep in touch, writing infrequently to one another at such seasons as Christmas; though they had not now met for many years. It was through one such letter as this

that Mrs. Singleton had derived the information, casually referred to earlier, that Philip Brent, who had once as a little boy walked solemnly at the side of the perambulator which contained the infant Valerie, had come into some money and was now in reasonably easy circumstances.

This one fact, and no more, represented the sum total of knowledge which the Singletons had of him; save that, by computation, they were able, at a pinch, to establish the fact that he must now be on the verge of forty; and it was upon this very same computation that they set their united minds to work when, one fine morning in the early spring of the year of their return to Poole, Mrs. Singleton found among her post a letter in an unfamiliar hand that was couched in the following terms:

DEAR MRS. SINGLETON,

I don't suppose you remember me, though I remember you very well.

I've been working all through the war as a civil engineer on Government work, and have recently been posted to a God-forsaken spot called Hamworthy. When I found this was near Poole, I remembered that you lived thereabouts, and wrote and asked Mother for your address.

It seems a shame to be so near and not see you, so perhaps we might arrange something? I'll leave it to you when and where, but I am free all week-ends, and shall be glad enough to see a familiar face.

Please give my best regards to Valerie, who I understand is now with you. I can hardly pretend to remember her, since she was, I think, about four, when I last saw her! And please also convey my best regards to her husband, since Mother tells me that she is now married, and that you are all living together which, I'm sure, must be very jolly for you.

I trust you keep pretty well.

Very sincerely yours,

PHILIP BRENT

P.S. I can still remember you giving me 'conkers' over the garden fence!

Mrs. Singleton, vaguely pleased, as one is always pleased when a figure out of the very distant past sends a signal that

you have not quite been forgotten, said: "I think I shall ask him to meet me for lunch in Bournemouth."

"Oh surely not, my dear," said her daughter. "Why not ask him here? You know how it is with these men who are away from home. They'd far rather go to someone's own house than have a meal in a public place. They spend most of their lives in public places anyhow, poor dears! I saw them so often at the *Pack Horse*, soldiers and all sorts, and I was so sorry for them."

"Do you think we should ask him here, dear?"

"Why not?"

"I only thought, dear, that Basil might be disagreeable."

"Mother dearest, I think you are sometimes rather unfair to Basil. He's an odd creature, but he's not inhospitable; and I don't think he'd go out of his way to be rude to a complete stranger. He thinks you should know a person really well before you're offensive to them!"

Mrs. Singleton laughed. "In that case he must know you very well, my dear."

"Well, he ought to by now!"

"All right then," said her mother. "What do you suggest? Shall I ask him to tea next Sunday?"

"I think so. Then he can meet Basil. It'll be company for him. He's always grumbling about being cooped up with us two women and never meeting any men. It'll do him good. For all we know Philip may be a golfer, and that'd be just Basil's cup of tea."

The upshot of all this was that Philip Brent was duly invited for the following Sunday, and wrote back by return saying that he would be glad to come. Both Mrs. Singleton and her daughter were mildly curious to see what he had turned out like; the mother, of course, remembered him very well as a child, the daughter not at all. When they broke the news to Basil, he was quite amiable about it, and said: "That's all right. Must do something to help the troops!"

"But I don't think he's troops, dear," said Valerie. "He said he was a civil engineer, and I suppose he means by that that he's a civilian."

"It's all one," said Basil. "I'm a civilian too, but my work is

of national importance; they said it was when they exempted me from the Home Guard. Troops or civilians, it's all the same nowadays. We must all help one another!"

They were both delighted to find him so genial about it, and so, in order to prejudice him further in favour of their visitor, told all they knew of him, not forgetting the piece about the private income, since they judged, not inaccurately, that this would appeal to, and impress, Basil.

As for Philip Brent, he was glad enough to receive their invitation. He was quartered in extremely comfortless lodgings, and had been living in a succession of such places for the past three and a half years. He was excessively bored, and rather lonely, and suffering from the effects of a prolonged period of overwork which had set in at about the time of Dunkirk, and had yet to reach its peak. He was not a civil engineer by profession, but he had chosen the job for his war-time employment because it had seemed to him the least disagreeable he could find. He was not unintelligent, and, after a little expert tuition at his first station, had come to the conclusion that there was nothing in the work that a normally bright person couldn't master in a few weeks. Consequently, he strode about each day upon mammoth military constructions, and peered through a dumpy-level, and made an infinite number of entries in a level-book, and 'reduced' his levels, and plotted contours, and generally found it all inexpressibly tedious; but he comforted himself with the reflection that someone had to do these things, and that it was all assisting the progress of the war and hastening the day when peace should break out once more and permit him to return to his own private pursuits and avocations. In the meantime, it was necessary to live as best one could, and to amuse oneself, too, with the very limited number of relaxations that were to hand. To take tea with a private family who lived in a house of their own was, for him, quite an event: Valerie had shewn her perceptiveness in thinking that this might be the case.

And so, on the Sunday afternoon following, at an hour unconventionally and inconveniently early, since Valerie had only just finished washing-up her dinner-things and had not

even had time to change into her afternoon frock, there came a ring at the bell of *Sunny side*, and, when she opened the door, there upon the step stood a tall slightly-built man in a shabby grey suit who was, presumably, their visitor. He wore no hat, and his hair was greying at the sides. His face was lined, and gave the effect of a youthfulness somewhat precariously maintained.

Valerie, her ruling passion to please operating as strongly as usual, gave a friendly, interrogative smile, her head slightly tilted to one side in a way that created the appearance, almost, of wishing to be ingratiating. With her, any slight shyness caused her to assume an almost excessive cordiality which, until you understood it, might easily have been mistaken for effusiveness.

Brent, for it was he, smiled back at her, and held out his hand. Then he said, with a certain air of embarrassment: "It's very absurd, you know, but I don't know whether you're the mother or the daughter!"

Valerie, forgetting that he had not seen her mother since such time as she was no older than she herself was now, burst out laughing. "My dear Philip," she said, "I'm Valerie, of course. I might just as well say I didn't know whether you were yourself or your father, since you're the very image of him."

"So I'm told," said Brent, coming into the house and taking a quick glance round the neat little hall that was everywhere encumbered with Basil's painting apparatus.

"I see you have the painters in," he added.

"Oh no. That's Basil."

"Basil?"

"Basil's my husband. You've not met him, of course?"

"No. That's a pleasure in store."

With which, with no more ado, Brent was then conveyed into the drawing-room and introduced to Basil, and to the little Richard, and to Mrs. Singleton as well, who really, though she had aged, was, he thought, still remarkably well preserved.

In the period before tea, Mrs. Singleton first held the floor,

indulging in many enquiries as to the health of Philip's mother and sisters, and in reminiscences of what she called 'the good old days'; and when, finally, she had said her say, the thread of discourse was taken up by Basil, who held forth with a good deal of graciousness on his grievances: on the war which he appeared to think had been inaugurated especially to inconvenience him; on his employment, for which he expressed the greatest distaste; and, finally, he passed on to his favourite subject of sports and pastimes: what were Philip's games?

Philip, who had small opportunity in his present circumstances to play games, and anyhow considered himself too old to do so, said as much; adding that, when he couldn't help himself, he played darts; and that he was not averse to a game of draughts.

Basil appeared shocked. "Oh," he said, "I meant *real* games, like tennis and hockey and golf. Still, I've got a dart-board in the other room, and we'll have a bash at it, if you like, when tea's over."

Valerie said nothing, but sat with a piece of needlework on her lap, listening to the conversation. From time to time, Philip took a sideways glance at her, and decided that she was a pretty thing. Pity she was so quiet! Her mother was charming, of course, but just a little tedious; and Basil was, clearly, quite a notable bore. For some reason, Brent seldom found tedious the conversation of younger women, and he kept hoping that she would soon break through her reserve and say something. She did not, however, but only sat there, engaged, as it seemed to him, in quietly sizing him up. He found himself hoping that her verdict was, on the whole, not unfavourable. She had, he thought, an intelligent and an observant eye; what spoilt her was a certain excess of reserve; it might even be timidity. Presently she vanished altogether, and a clattering in the adjacent kitchen indicated that she was preparing the tea.

Richard, too, seemed a quiet little boy; he sat on the floor busily engaged with a box of coloured building-bricks, and, except for politely shaking hands with his alleged Uncle Philip, and piping courteously: "Good afternoon, how do you do?" he had no contribution to make to the conversation,

Presently there was a bump and a scuffle against the outer side of the door, and Philip, who had a reasonably quick mind, recognised the nature of the sound. It was his hostess with a loaded tea-tray, trying to open the door without setting the tray down. Since Basil seemed quite oblivious to these signals of distress, Philip got up and opened the door for her, to be rewarded with a very amiable smile; and for the first time that afternoon his eyes and Valerie's really met. For the merest moment they held one another, and then the moment passed and she set the tray on the tea-table. Soon everyone was eating.

It was an excellent tea, and Philip enjoyed it very much. Entering the room on the heels of his mistress had come Tiger, the red setter, of whom Philip, who was fond of dogs, at once proceeded to make a great fuss. This display of approbation caused Tiger's generous heart to swell with reciprocal enthusiasm, and he forthwith reared himself upon his hind-legs and made vigorous attempts to lick Philip's face, nearly sending the tea-cups flying.

"Turn that dog out!" said Basil sourly. "He'll break something. You know perfectly well he's not allowed in here at meal-times."

Valerie, not saying a word, got up and opened the door and motioned Tiger out.

Philip precipitated himself into the breach. "So sorry!" he said. "I'm afraid it was all my fault. I shouldn't have encouraged him."

"Oh you weren't to know," said Basil, kindly. "Valerie had no business to let him in. She knows perfectly well that it's forbidden."

There was an awkward little silence, broken at last by Mrs. Singleton who said, in a babyish tone of reproach, "Now, now, Basil!" just as though he were a naughty child.

Basil glared at his mother-in-law, and Brent began to feel slightly uncomfortable. It seemed to him that it was a curious house he had gotten himself into, that it had a curious atmosphere. There was something dragging, dull, heavy in the very feel of the place. He concluded that it must be the general aroma that encompasses English matrimonial life.

After tea, Basil insisted that they should play darts in the dining-room, and, after he had beaten Brent to his satisfaction, said that he thought he would, if they'd excuse him, go out and get a round of golf while the light lasted. No one interfered with his proposal and he went off, saying to Brent: "Pity you don't care for a round, old chap! See you again before you go, I expect?"

"I expect so."

No sooner had Basil gone out of the door than the atmosphere lifted in the oddest fashion. Richard got up off the floor and went and sat by his mother on the sofa and started to chatter furiously; and Valerie chattered back; and Mrs. Singleton, taking out her needlework, commenced a long retrospective discourse, plentifully interlarded with not very respectful references to 'poor Basil'. It was impossible not to perceive that she did not care for Basil. The odd thing was that neither of the others seemed to, either.

Brent stayed until nearly eight o'clock, which gave plenty of time for Basil to return and furnish them with a full description, stroke by stroke, of the remarkable round that he had played; and then, though kindly pressed to remain for supper, he said he thought he really would have to be going, and made his departure.

"Come and see us again!" said Basil in his most lordly and condescending way.

"Yes, do, my dear boy," said Mrs. Singleton.

Valerie said nothing, but she smiled very pleasantly, and, in some way, Brent felt sure that she did not dislike him.

When he got back to his digs., he wrote a long letter to his mother, describing his visit, since he knew that it would interest her. "There is," he wrote, "a most curious atmosphere about the place; something heavy, airless, desolate, which I suppose is simply English Married Life as she is lived among our great middle classes! It is, of course, clear that Mrs. S. can't stick her son-in-law, and that the feeling is mutual. Personally I think myself that he is rather an oaf, but I don't really know the fellow, so it's hardly fair to say. The little boy is a nice little

chap, good-looking, seems a bit delicate, rather unnaturally quiet".

For some obscure reason, he made no allusion at all to Valerie.

2

During the weeks that followed, Brent received repeated invitations to *Sunnyside*: the Furnivals had, evidently, decided to regard him as their war-work, and he was glad enough to avail himself of their kindness. The visits were a pleasant change for him, even if there was nothing in them especially memorable, since they all more or less followed the uneventful pattern of the first, with one or two minor differences. The chief of these was that Basil, getting used to him, started to treat him as one of the family and so took to deluging him in his own particular brand of gloom; the other was that Valerie a little lost her shyness and spoke with him now more freely, though only, as a rule, when Basil was off the scene. She talked mostly to him of the books she had been reading, or wanted to read, for, though without much knowledge, she had a lively and a curious mind and knew that Philip was interested in such matters, and discovered quite soon that he enjoyed to talk of them. After a while he came to like her a good deal, and grew more and more at a loss to understand the reason for the abysmal gloom with which Basil drenched himself, his house, and all that was in it. After all, he had an agreeable home, a pleasant wife, a charming little boy; and he was not, apparently, overworked. Philip contrasted his own lot with that of the other, and felt that he had no doubt whose he would have preferred. At times he longed to ask Valerie point-blank what was the matter with her husband, why he appeared to have so deep-seated a grievance against life in general; but he felt he could hardly do so in her mother's presence, and had no opportunity of speaking to her out of it.

And then one day his chance came; in a rather singular manner, as it seemed to him at the time. He had for some while felt that he could hardly continue to accept indefinitely the

Furnival's hospitality without making some gesture of reciprocity, and, since he had no home in which to entertain them, had sent his hostess a note asking whether she and Basil wouldn't come over one evening, or one afternoon at the week-end, to meet him at his local inn and there have a meal and some drinks with him.

To this invitation he had had a reply, from Valerie, which said that they would love to make the trip; that Basil was, however, usually too tired after his day's work to care to go out in the evening, so might it be the week-end: the following Saturday afternoon?

Brent sent back a note inviting them both to lunch with him the next Saturday, and made due arrangements for their entertainment at the *Bull*.

When Saturday came, he left work at twelve-thirty and strolled down to the bus-stop to meet his guests, whom he knew would have to come by the bus, since their car had by now been laid up for more than a year. But when the bus drew in, one passenger alone descended. It was Valerie, looking very smart in her outdoor attire, in which, he reflected, he had never before seen her.

He hastened up to greet her. "Well," he said, rather puzzled, "where's Basil?"

"Oh, I do hope you'll forgive him! Right at the last minute he got a special invitation to play hockey for a team that sometimes gives him a game. He felt sure you would understand. I'm afraid you'll think it outrageous of me to come by myself, but I knew that you'd have made all your plans, and would have been left, if I hadn't come, wondering what had happened."

Now, of course, Brent, being merely human, was delighted that Valerie was alone, for he didn't like Basil and had only asked him because it is not customary to ask a man's wife to luncheon without asking the man as well. And so, concealing as best he could his pleasure at the turn events had taken, he said: "I think it's very thoughtful indeed of you to come and take pity on my solitude, and of course it is also very sensible of Basil not to miss his game, since he is so fond of it."

Valerie laughed. "You think him a bit childish about his games?"

"No. I should think I was if I went in for them myself, at my age, but that's a different thing.—Look here, you're not TT., are you? Let's go and have a quick one before lunch."

"I'd love to," said Valerie, with rather touching naivete, "I haven't had a drink out for I don't know how long. Basil doesn't approve very much."

"Well, I suppose I oughtn't to press you to do something your husband disapproves of."

"I'm sure you oughtn't, but I hope you will!"

They sat on high stools up against the bar and consumed several pink gins. It was easy to see that Valerie wasn't used to drinking much, since her self-confidence was so immediately fortified by the liquor.

At the end of her second drink she turned to Brent, and said: "Look here, Philip, I might as well get it over! No time like the present. I've been telling you a pack of lies, and I shan't feel better till I've owned up. Basil is playing hockey, but he knows nothing at all about your invitation to come over here, because I didn't mention it to him!"

"Dear me! I don't think I quite understand. That was very wicked of you, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't wicked at all, Philip. You know he bores you no end: it's as clear as crystal to everyone but himself. You know you only asked him because it was the right thing to do and because you wanted to return hospitality.—Well, if I had told him about it, he wouldn't have wanted to come himself, and he certainly wouldn't have let me come alone, and your nice impulse would have been slighted. So, because you're an old friend of the family, and knew me when I was two (so you say!), I've thrown my maiden modesty to the winds and come by myself; casting myself on your mercy not to give me away.—There, that's a long speech for me! Tell me you're not cross?"

"Cross! Why ever should I be? I think it's very delightful of you; and, since we're being frank, I may as well follow suit. Poor old Basil, as you surmise, does seem a bit of a pain in the neck to me, and you're quite right in thinking I only asked him

because I couldn't very well help myself.—Have another drink?"

"I oughtn't to!"

"No? Then that's all the more reason for having it!"

Valerie chuckled. She said suddenly: "You know, I haven't enjoyed anything as much as this for a long time."

"What? Sitting on a hard stool and drinking gin?"

"Well, that's putting it rather crudely; what I think I mean is the feeling that this is an adventure. Oh, I don't want you to feel that I'm disloyal to Basil, because I do try very hard not to be; but I expect you can see that the home-life isn't any too gay, and—well—when you're married you just can't go around the same as when you are single. That's the beauty of you, my dear Philip, the old friend of the family who knew me in my perambulator: you're in a category of one, all by yourself! I don't say that Basil would approve if he knew I was here, but he couldn't very well disapprove half so much of you as of anybody else!"

"Indeed! Don't you be too sure. For all you know I may have a quite dreadful reputation!"

"My dear, you have."

"What, me? How do you know anything about my reputation?"

"Your mother and mine are pretty close friends."

"Well, well, so my mamma blows the gaff, does she!"

"Oh very nicely, Philip, I assure you. She just says that you take after your dear father!"

"Does she now!"

They didn't know one another, of course; their conversation was mostly verbal fencing of this order, not very illuminating if set down. Still, Valerie lunched with him; and then, after lunch, at his suggestion, they took a short walk together, since she admitted that there was no possible chance of Basil being home before six o'clock, and Philip was at quite a loose end for the afternoon.

When they parted at the bus-stop—since she refused to let him see her home—the following facts had, at any rate, been established: that they enjoyed one another's conversation and

society; that willy-nilly a state of conspiracy had been established between them, since it would not have been possible for them to have met, then or thereafter, unless Valerie had made it quite clear to Philip that he must keep silent about their meeting; and, finally, that their afternoon had been sufficiently a success for them to wish to repeat it, and Valerie had, consequently, promised to send him a note directly another opportunity should arise.

So far they had only brushed the surface of acquaintance-ship, but even so it was clear enough that neither was loth to go deeper; there was a curious sympathy, a sense of fellowship, between them; neither, though they did not yet admit it, was happy, and, because they were both romantics whose illusions had gone astray, they derived a good deal of partly subconscious comfort from one another.

During their subsequent meetings, which Basil's fortunate passion for sports permitted them to enjoy on each succeeding Saturday afternoon for the next six weeks, they took a number of walks together. They had discovered that they were both fond of walking, and, as Valerie knew the surrounding countryside very well, she took it upon herself to introduce Philip to it, conducting him to such places as Studland and Corfe and Swanage, and to various other parts of the Isle of Purbeck. On these excursions they conversed endlessly, and it was not very long before, impelled by she knew not what uncontrollable impulse, Valerie had confided in him most of the history of her life, as has already been set down in these pages. She held back little; her sense of grievance against Basil was too strong, when she felt that she had, as in Philip, a sympathetic and impartial listener. Besides, it seemed to her that they could hardly be friends unless he knew the truth about her, since otherwise he could scarcely be expected to think well of her or condone what must otherwise seem her unjustifiable disloyalty to Basil. And so, as they walked the green and unfrequented hill-tracks, or the little paths that ran by the sea, out it all came, bit by bit; and the reason for that unhappy cloud which brooded over the so inaptly named *Sunnyside* grew clear to him. He asked her why, since she was so much the more aggrieved party, it should

be Basil that disseminated all of the gloom. What was *his* trouble? And to this the only answer she was able to give was that Basil, who, according to his own lights, was the perfect husband, was grieved and unhappy because she did not love him. "He, poor fellow," she said, "is, I suppose, just as much, in his own queer way, a romantic as I am."

3

Philip, it is to be regretted, was a good deal less frank. Not altogether by design, but because the factors which acted as irritants in his life were not actually on the spot. When Valerie asked him a direct question about his circumstances, he gave her a truthful answer, but he was not under the same compulsion as she to confess everything, and, oddly enough, she did not seem especially anxious to hear too much about his affairs. Her need was for sympathy, and, while she was perfectly ready to give him reciprocal sympathy, this was only if he should require it, not otherwise. He did not extort it, and so she was only in a very general sort of way aware that his life, though not quite so hopelessly muddled as hers, was in a sufficient tangle.

He had been married, was divorced, was now contracted to another girl, to whom, once the war was over, it appeared to be his duty to return. This, though at times it seemed to him a dubious proposition, did not appear an intolerable one; he had made his bed and he was prepared to lie on it, with rectitude, tempered by some slight measure of apprehension. Besides, like so very many others during the war years, Philip had—and about this he was quite frank to Valerie—seasoned the disagreeableness of his situation with a touch of levity, here and there; had had affairs when they had come his way, had taken his fun where he found it, and hadn't found it the immensest fun.

There was now in his relationship with Valerie an adult quality which both of them found very unusual and stimulating. They respected one another, and found it possible to be straightforward, to cut out much of the unreality and the pretence which so often renders stupid and fruitless a friendship

between two people of opposite sex. Witness, for example, the following conversation which took place one afternoon as they were walking down the hill from the ridge above Gorfe.

"You would," he had said, "be a perfect fool if you didn't realise well enough that I find you excessively attractive. If it wasn't that I liked you so much, and didn't want unnecessarily to complicate your life, you may be quite sure I should do my best to lead you astray!"

She had not been offended. She'd only laughed, and replied: "It takes two to play a game like that, my lad!"

"I know. And because I like you such a lot as a person, and because I know I shan't be stationed here very much longer, and don't want you when I've gone away to think badly of me, I behave myself. It would spoil it all if I were to try any funny business."

She had ignored the last part of his sentence, and had only said: "You won't be here much longer?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm due to move off about the beginning of May."

"I shall miss you, Philip."

"And I you. But I hope we shall stay friends. Don't ever get the idea into your head, though, that I haven't made a pass at you because I haven't wanted to! I owe it to you to say that. It's just that I couldn't bear to spoil things for later on."

"You're rather sweet, my dear. Perhaps you're rather silly, too."

"I daresay. You know it'd be quite different if we weren't both so utterly tied up."

She walked on for a long time without reply, then said: "You know, I rather loved to hear you say that."

"Well, you know it's true."

"I thought so. I hoped so. But I wasn't sure."

But for all this, for all their exemplary behaviour, quite another destiny was in store for them. And the odd thing was that it was Basil who, exclusively, precipitated it.

One Saturday when he was engaged in playing an away match of some description or other, Philip took Valerie to a concert in Bournemouth. Little by little, he had learnt that

Basil never took her out now to a meal or an entertainment of any kind; and when he found that she had never in her life been to a concert of classical music, he had suggested that it was quite time she started. The concert had gone on a little longer than they had anticipated, and Valerie lost the train she had intended to catch. She returned home by the next one, but when she got in Basil was already there, clamouring for his food and in a white-hot passion to know where she had been.

It is impossible to trace all the motives behind human actions. It may be that the concert, which had been a Beethoven one, had emotionally unsettled Valerie; it may be that it had exerted on her a civilising influence which had made her feel unwilling all of a sudden to fall back into her life-long task of humouring, of lying to, Basil. But whatever the motive, there is no doubt as to what she did: for once she told her husband the truth, saying: "I'm sorry, dear. I've been to a concert in Bournemouth with Philip Brent."

"You've been to a concert with another man! You, a married woman with a young child!"

"Yes. What is there so terrible in that? It was a really excellent concert."

Basil, already incensed, grew positively berserk at her unaccustomed nonchalance. He strode up to her and seized her by the shoulders.

"You dirty little liar," he said, "you thought I was safely out of the way, didn't you? I've had my suspicions of you for a long time—ever since Brent stopped visiting the house. And you aren't too damned smart, either! I've just been asking Richard a few questions."

"You've been questioning baby? Basil, how could you?"

"He's not such a baby. He knows well enough when his mummy's out on the tiles, and his granny has to look after him! What I want to know now is how long this has been going on?"

She struck at his hands. "Let go of me!" Her alliance with Brent had given her back something of her courage and her self-respect. She was no longer willing to cringe to Basil as she would once have done.

He stared at her in astonishment. "You brazen little bitch, you," he said, "I believe the fellow's your lover!"

"What if he is? Weren't you?"

"So you admit it, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"You did!"

"Basil, don't be a fool. I said 'What if he is?' "

"That's quite enough for me. I know you and the sort of trash you are. Easy! Weak! I'll deal with Master Philip later. Now get me my supper!"

"Basil, you're making the greatest mistake of your life."

Basil retorted with a coarse monosyllable.

Valerie went out into the kitchen where, with slow tears running down her cheeks, she got his supper ready. It had all been so lovely with Philip, and it was, in any event, bound to last only such a short while. Now it was all spoilt, all spoilt: and it was she that had spoiled it!

4

That same evening Basil wrote, and at once posted, a very bellicose note to Philip, saying that he intended to come over and see him the following Monday evening, and would be obliged if he would have the goodness to stay in and await his arrival. He added in a postscript which, for its ingenuity, pleased him very much: "You may be interested to know that my wife has confessed everything."

Philip, when he received this unpleasant document on the Monday morning, was much put out. He loathed scenes, and he had grown to value his friendship with Valerie. Now it was all quite spoilt, and, with Basil intervening, all doubtless would soon grow merely squalid.

That same evening Basil duly arrived, and it soon became obvious that he held within himself a profound desire to shout and to rail. Since Philip did not care publicly to be shouted at in his lodgings, the walls of which were quite preternaturally thin, he suggested that they might compose their differences just as well on a short walk.

Basil graciously agreed to this proposal, and the pair of them set out. It was a beautiful evening in late April, and the sky was faint, high and luminous; the fields were very green, and the birds were singing uproariously. It seemed a great pity that Basil alone should so utterly be out of harmony with the general peace of the scene. For there could be no shadow of doubt but that the poor fellow was indeed exceedingly upset. If only he had been willing to be a little reasonable about it, Philip would even have felt sorry for him. It was merely that he was so certain, to put it quite bluntly, that he had been cuckolded, that it was difficult to keep patience with him.

Basil was very elegantly dressed in a pair of highly-creased brand-new flannel trousers, a new fawn raincoat, and a handsome trilby hat; and Philip, who was wearing his rough blue serge engineer's jacket, no doubt cut a very poor figure beside him. The point has been made earlier that Basil had a prurient cast of mind: the things which he now felt himself impelled to say about his wife revealed that, in this respect, marriage had not effected any alteration in his mental processes. He kept calling Valerie all manner of unpleasant names; alluded to her as 'easy meat'; and generally made Philip feel dreadfully repentant for the trouble in which he had obviously landed her with this so maniacal a husband.

From the time they left the cottage Basil did not once stop talking, and his monologue—a queer, inconsecutive and very foul-mouthed farrago—gave Philip no opportunity at all to get in a word of explanation. Basil was one of those talkers that intoxicate themselves with their own rhetoric: he waved his arms about; called Philip all manner of objectionable things; and then, with a sublime bathos of which he was quite unaware, started to abuse him because he didn't play games. "It isn't manly," he shrieked (luckily the road was quite deserted). "If you played games you'd leave other people's women alone. I've a damned good mind to throw you over the hedge!"

"Yes?" said Philip.

"Yes, indeed. You and that filthy little bitch, my wife, too. I know you've had her, and it's not a pen'north of good your

denying it. She's Weak. I should know. Easy Meat!" And so on, and so on, entirely *ad nauseam*.

Now Philip was a fairly even-tempered person, and he had been ready at the beginning of their parley to admit that he was to some extent to blame, partly because he really thought he was, and partly because he thought it would be better for Valerie if he were to say so. But unfortunately, the longer Basil continued to rant, the more violent grew his language and his threats, the less accommodating did his listener find himself becoming. Besides, he was fortified by the knowledge that he and Valerie were being falsely accused; not that he minded this so much from his own point of view, because it might so easily have been otherwise: without being guilty in fact, he was, no doubt, guilty in intention. But in her case it was utterly different. And so, at length, after some hour or so of Basil's interminable harangue, Philip also began to lose his temper, and said loudly: "How dare you speak of your own wife in that filthy way! She's a hundred times too good for you."

"That's right," sneered Basil, "you stick up for your fancy woman. That's only as it should be, isn't it! I wonder you don't offer to take her right off my hands."

"It's what you deserve," said Philip.

"You dirty little so-and-so, I really *shall* have to throw you over the hedge!"

This was the fifth occasion that evening that Basil had referred to this feat of derring-do, and quite suddenly Philip, who, in theory, was an entirely pacific person, completely lost his temper at the continued silly threat, and, before he knew what he was about, found that he had grasped Basil by the shoulder of his raincoat and the leg of his beautiful new trousers, and had dropped him plump into a deepish ditch full of dirty water that, at this point, ran beside the road.

As soon as he found he had done this, he regretted it. It was completely against his principles to do such things; and he realised that it would only make matters ten times worse for Valerie. Moreover, it would no doubt, to Basil, be almost tantamount to an admission of guilt. And so the next thing he did was to extend a courteous hand to his victim, who was still

floundering about in the muddy water and quite unable to extricate himself, and to haul him with a great effort up the sheer side of the bank.

Then Basil, regarding his ruined trousers, began to exhibit that quality in him that was indeed nonpareil. "Look at them," he cried, quite forgetting all their previous matter of discussion. "Look at my new trousers! They're spoilt, and I only put them on for the first time yesterday. Look here, Brent, you've got a cheque-book in your pocket, haven't you? Write me out instantly a cheque for another pair!"

Philip couldn't believe his ears. "Don't be a bloody fool, Furnival," he said. "And you'd better look lively, or you'll be losing your last bus home."

Dripping and scowling, but mercifully silent at last, Basil followed in his rear. A few moments passed, and then Philip providentially looked round to find that his antagonist was in the very act of creeping upon him with a huge stone in his hand that he had picked off the coping of a wall. His arm was already raised; another moment and the stone would have crashed upon Philip's bare head, and Basil might well have found himself in the dock. There was no time to discuss the matter amicably. Philip hit straight out before Basil could bring his weapon into play, and, though not at all practised in such feats, had the good fortune to land the other a terrific crack right on the nose, which knocked him off his feet.

Basil dropped his stone, and began to moan. There was only ten minutes to go before his last bus left, and Philip picked him up and shook him, saying: "Look here, I'm awfully sorry, but you really shouldn't try to hit people with rocks. It's asking for trouble, you know."

Basil, his nose pouring blood, stood now as meek as a lamb. Philip looked along the road. Very fortunately, no one was in sight. "Where's your handkerchief?" he said.

"Don't know!" Basil was now giving a remarkably able representation of a tearful small boy.

Philip took out his own handkerchief and rubbed him down; the blood was all over the beautiful clean raincoat. "Look here," he asked him, "you're all right, aren't you?"

Basil said: "My coat's ruined, too. You really must write me out that cheque. You really must!"

"Don't be grotesque. Look here, there's a lavatory on our way back to the bus-stop. There'll be time to take you in there and swill you down, if you hurry."

Basil trotted meekly behind him. Once in the lavatory, also providentially deserted, Philip wrung out his already ensanguined handkerchief and thoroughly sponged Basil down. Luckily his nose had stopped bleeding. "There now," he said, giving a final touch to the other's beautiful wavy hair that had fallen all round his face. "You're all right now, aren't you?"

Basil, who was only meek so long as he was being ministered to, now affected a sad reversion to bellicosity. "I don't know," he said, "I absolutely refuse to commit myself! I shall bring an action against you for this, don't you know." He said this in such a sad remote little voice that Philip couldn't help roaring with laughter.

"Nonsense," he said. "You've no witnesses."

"What of that?"

"Come on! You've really got to canter. Don't argue or you'll lose your bus, and you won't fancy the walk back in your present state."

He hustled him on to the bus in the nick of time, and saw him safely carried away. As the bus turned the corner, it seemed to him that Basil, inside it, was shaking his fist.

Feeling very sad, and very much ashamed of himself, Brent slowly walked back to his lodgings. Violence was a stupid thing, and settled nothing. It was now only much worse for each of them than it had been before. All the same, Basil really should not talk of his wife in the filthy way he had done; no one could possibly be bad enough to deserve that! He was insanely jealous, of course; but it was not a jealousy that was based upon his love for her; only upon his possession of her. It was his property rights which, in his opinion, had been violated. . . . And equally, of course, one should not attack one's adversaries with large rocks! His last blow had been entirely in self-defence; and indeed it had been what is known in some circles as a fourpenny one! He could still feel in his

knuckles the sensation he had experienced as they had contacted Basil's proud and imperial nose. Really, one could hardly help laughing; and then he found he felt more like crying than laughing. For certainly it was deplorable that poor little Valerie should be chained up to this imbecile; chained without a hope of release. Did he wish it otherwise? Did he love her; want her for himself; wish to set her free? Oh, he would have given much then to set her free, but in itself that was not enough; and he knew it was not.

He finished the evening smoking a pipe and reading Montaigne; and came to the conclusion that Montaigne himself—after he'd done laughing—would have taken a decidedly dim view of his isolated incursion into the role of Man of Action.

5

Meanwhile, at *Sunnyside*, two highly apprehensive women awaited the return of Basil. He had departed, after thoroughly priming himself with whisky, vowing that he would not return before he had done something dire—though unspecified—to Philip; and both Valerie and her mother, for entirely different reasons, were exceedingly perturbed and quite unable to settle to any employment.

First one of them and then the other kept darting to the window, till at last, just as twilight was falling, Mrs. Singleton spotted him approaching, and, calling to her daughter, said: "Oh darling, just look! He's walking so strangely, and it looks like blood on his coat."

"Oh God, Mother!—we can't be in for such trouble as that!" And Valerie's hand went up to her mouth and her face assumed an expression of utter despair as she visualised Philip's battered corpse lying unattended in a wood.

It soon became evident, however, that the blood was all Basil's own. He entered, a ghastly, a quite Shakespearean figure, and, dropping into an armchair without even troubling to take off his coat or hat, proclaimed: "I am very seriously injured. I have been set upon by your fancy man. Who attacked me when I was not prepared. I believe my nose is broken. Will someone kindly help me to bed?"

And up to bed he went, vowing that he would have the law on Philip. Valerie and her mother gravely ministered to him, and then, when they could endure no longer, retreated to the bathroom, locked themselves in, and laughed—silently—till they could hardly stand. It was very callous of them, no doubt, but they really couldn't help it, for Basil, who was quite plainly not seriously hurt at all, did look so very droll; and did persist also in talking in so very droll a manner.

He remained in bed for four days, and refused to see the doctor because he knew very well that the latter would say that there was nothing greatly amiss with him. His intention in taking to his bed was to terrorise the women, in which, though he did not realise it, he signally failed to succeed.

At the end of the fourth day he went to see his solicitor, and gave him, though he was a friend of the family and knew Valerie very well indeed, a highly garbled version of the affair in which, inevitably, she cut an extremely poor figure.

"Well," said the solicitor when he had quite done, "what do you want: a divorce?"

"A divorce! Certainly not. Why?"

"I only thought you must do from the way in which you were speaking of your wife."

"Oh her! She's a bitch, but I must put up with that, I suppose. No; what I want is to summons the boy-friend for assault."

Here the solicitor made the same observation as Philip had done, saying: "Where are your witnesses?"

"Well I'm damned! That's just what he said."

"Precisely! You'd have the greatest difficulty to prove anything."

"Oh dear! What a damned nuisance! No hope of getting anything for my trousers?"

"Not an earthly! My advice to you, Furnival, is to forget it; or to hit first yourself, next time."

"Oh I see. Not much help, are you!"

When he had gone, the solicitor called his wife and said: "Poor little Valerie: that girl certainly has something to put up with. Why not have her round to tea, some day?"

"Why certainly, my dear, if you wish it."

Basil, foiled in his efforts to get the Law to do his business for him, did the best he could off his own bat, and sent Philip a highly abusive letter calling him many names, forbidding him ever to speak to his wife again, saying that he thought his nose was broken, and that, so soon as it was recovered, he was coming over again to administer 'condign punishment' to him. He therefore advised Philip to 'make himself scarce' before this happened. He ended with a plaintive postscript: "If you were a real gentleman and as well off as you're reputed to be, you would most certainly despatch me a cheque for £10 (Ten Pounds) to replace the garments which you have ruined. I say nothing of the cost of medical attendance."

The day after he had received this portentous missive, which he deemed it best to ignore, Philip, coming home to his mid-day meal, found Valerie waiting for him in the sitting-room at his digs. She had bicycled over.

"Hullo," he said, when his landlady had left them together, "didn't you know I'm forbidden to see you!"

"And I you, too, my dear. But I simply had to. You don't mind?"

"Of course I don't.—I say, how's the patient? I was awfully sorry about that. It might have been all right if he hadn't kept on calling you such filthy names."

She nodded. "I know," she said, "I get plenty of it. I think he's quite mad where anything to do with sex is concerned; and has been for years."

"One would think it was some form of repression—"

"Well it's not the ordinary sort. I should know."

"Of course."

"It's his mind. It's nasty through and through. He hates the very idea of sex, and yet he can't keep off the subject. He hates me because I represent it, for him. I suppose it's his early training that's at fault: his mother and her damn psalm-singing ways."

"And that, I suppose, is why he thought that we——"

"Yes! Because he just can't believe that there's anything else to bring a man and a woman together. He hates women, as

women; he hates me as a person, and hates me still more because, as a woman, he wants me."

"I think I begin to see. It's all pretty beastly."

Valerie started to cry. "It's all horrible," she said. "You don't hate me too, do you, Philip, for involving you in all this nastiness?"

"Of course I don't. I like you very much. You know that perfectly well. I feel that it's I who should do the apologising."

"Why you? It was I that begun it."

"No; it was both of us. Only I couldn't before you gave me a sign. It was hard for you to do so, but it would have been impossible for me. That's why I'm so endlessly grateful to you."

"Darling, then you don't think I've been a shameless little bitch?"

"I certainly don't."

"I love you for that," she said.

"You love me?" he said, raising his eyebrows and looking sceptical.

"Darling, I love you like hell, and I can say it now because you are so soon going away, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so. In May. Fancy you remembering!"

"I remember most things you say, my dear. Oh I know I seem foolish some times, but I'm not really such a fool.—Look here, I daren't stay long. I just felt I had to see you because I knew what Basil had written. He insisted on reading it to me—with the greatest pride!"

"You've been having the most bloody awful time?"

"It hasn't been too good, but he's back again at work now.—But don't take me off my point. What I want to ask you is this: you're not going to take any notice of his letter, are you?"

"No, I shouldn't think so. How do you mean?"

"Oh, this vulgar business about 'clearing out', 'making yourself scarce', or something."

"That! Oh that was just a threat. Of course I shall stay here till my job's finished."

"And you will still see me?"

"Of course I will, if you can manage it, and it doesn't get you into the most frightful hot water."

"That's my funeral."

"Is it? I'm not so sure. Anyhow, I don't want to get you into worse trouble than you're in already."

"That's all right, my love. I shall be very prudent. But with you leaving here so soon, I just couldn't bear the thought of losing what little time there is that we can still be together. It's hell for me to say this; it makes me sound such a slut; but after years of Basil I don't really think I've much shame left. I know now that if I want a thing badly I've got to humble myself to get it; and I don't mind doing that with you, so long as it doesn't put you off me."

"Dearest Valerie, I do understand that."

"So long as you do really? God knows, I hate to be like this. I want to be very nice and distant and capricious with you; it's what pays best in the long run. Unfortunately, beggars can't be choosers. With me, it's this way or nothing. I'd never forgive myself after you'd gone if I'd been standoffish and diffident; and you hadn't understood."

What a strange woman she was! He took her hand and held it tightly, saying: "We've both of us hit something we neither of us quite expected, Valerie."

"I think so. And the fact that it's all wrong, and that Basil has a great many dirty words for it, doesn't seem to make it all wrong for me."

At which point Philip's landlady, who had been greatly intrigued at the arrival of the strange and somewhat agitated lady on the bicycle, unable any longer to restrain her curiosity, brought in his lunch; and Valerie, bestowing on her one of her sweetest, most ingratiating of smiles, said: "Well, I mustn't disturb your meal. Besides, I've half the housework to do when I get back."

"There's no hurry. Why not stop and have lunch with me!"

"Philip, don't be a lunatic! Look here, about our next meeting. Is Saturday all right for you?"

"Perfectly."

"Well then, Basil's definitely fixed up, if it is fine. You remember that lane at the side of the bay, where you were holding forth about Time and the Fourth Dimension?"

"I do; but I'm surprised you do."

"Well, I shall be cycling along there just after two. We can go off somewhere quiet and talk, and I can tell you all the news, such as it is."

"All right. I'll be there, wet or fine, just in case. I expect I could borrow a bicycle too."

"That'd be splendid; then we could have a real outing."

"Yes. All the same, I hate the feeling that you may get into trouble over it."

"Oh damn the trouble! If I'm not in trouble that way, then it's some other way. I don't suppose it has occurred to you, Philip dear, that you've already given me more happiness in these past weeks than I've had in the last ten years. I'm a perfect fool to say that to you, but it's true, and I say it because our time is so short."

"My dear Valerie, don't be ridiculous: I'm barely polite to you!"

"Darling," she said, "if only you knew how pleasant that is, when you aren't used to it. But it's rather more than that, I think, and you know it is.—And now I must really fly."

He got up and went with her to the door of the cottage. "I shall look forward to Saturday," he said, "I think it is wonderful of you to risk such uproars for so little."

"You know it isn't so little!" she said; and jumping on her cycle was off and away.

He turned back after she had disappeared, and finished eating his dinner. "I suppose I must face it," he thought; "she either loves me, or thinks that she does." As if there were any difference! What a stupid distinction: if one thinks one loves, then one loves. And he, did he love her? He was greatly attached to her; very fond of her; very sorry for her; he would have given a great deal to have been able to rescue her from her lamentable situation. The truth, however, had to be faced: that, if he loved her at all, he did not love her enough, not enough to upset their many handicaps. It seemed to him that, when they met on the following Saturday, he would be hard put to it to explain to her the exact distinctions which he had in his mind. There would, he felt, have to be explanations

at that meeting. The pleasant part of their relationship was over; the unreflecting part in which both simply knew, without undue investigation, that it was very pleasant to be together. Something else had now brought them closer, had brought them to the stage at which nothing can remain tacit and unspoken; and that something was Basil and his insane suspicions.

Insane? But was he so insane? Philip knew very well that he would now give a great deal—a very great deal—to fulfil the role which Basil had bestowed upon him. Her lover! Ah, if he could believe for one moment that she also desired it! It was to be presumed that Basil's intuition had sensed this in him, before he himself knew that it was there. What if he had sensed in her the same longing? In her, in Valerie! Philip, because he wanted to believe this, found that he simply couldn't believe it: yet, all the same, he awaited Saturday in a fever of impatience, and could hardly sleep at all for thinking of her. Basil's poison was working strongly in him. After all, he reflected, what did he know of Valerie, or, for that matter, of any woman?

6

They met, as had been arranged, in the little lane that commanded a wide view of the shining waters of the bay. It was gloriously fine, which meant, among other things, that there was no danger at all of Basil's match being postponed or cancelled. Valerie seemed shy and very silent; and Philip, who had endured a series of really very bad nights on her account, was strung up and jumpy. Besides, he had managed to borrow a bicycle for the occasion, and had found, after he had ridden a couple of miles on it, that it possessed the grave defect of shedding its pedals now and again without the slightest warning, involving frequent rapid descents, frantic searchings, and an ignominious and oily screwing of the thing on again.

He started by enquiring after the victim of his aggression.

"Oh, he's perfectly all right again now," said Valerie. "All except his wounded pride, you know. But don't let's talk about

him. Our time is so short. I want to talk about us. Do you know yet when you have got to go away?"

"I'm afraid I shall be through in about three weeks," he said. "I daren't last the job out longer than that, as they're screaming for me already on a big contract in Devonshire that's going ahead full blast and is desperately short of engineers. I shall have to get along there as soon as I possibly can."

"How far will that be from here?"

"Eighty or ninety miles, I'm afraid."

"Oh Philip, it'll be hell! I've grown so to rely on you, to feel that nothing else matters while you're near. I don't know how I'll cope."

"No? It is so much worse for you. I shall be so damn busy that I won't have much time to think."

"It's always worse for the woman, my sweet."

"Always?"

"I think so. Still, don't let's waste what time we have. I may be able to manage an evening or so, as Basil has a spell of overtime coming on. Oh, I know how repugnant it is for you to be 'fitted in' like this, like some sort of thief or criminal, but I can't really help it; and it is worse for me because there's always, at the back of my mind, the fear that something'll go wrong, the house'll catch fire or something, while I'm away. So please bear your share of it!"

"I do. I will. That's what they call the way of transgressors being hard!"

"We're not transgressors, my love."

"No, I must say I don't feel like one."

"Nor I. But look: next Saturday's impossible. I've got to go and pay a visit to my mother-in-law."

"What's she like? Does she resemble her dear boy?"

"She's not a bad old stick, nearly eighty, but far more of a sport than he is."

"I expect I shall just about last out here till the Saturday after that."

"Thank goodness! That means then that with good luck we've these two Saturday afternoons, and perhaps two or three

evenings—and then nothing at all. Perhaps nothing ever any more."

"Oh come! Don't be so gloomy. The war can't last for ever."

"No, I know. But you'll go away and forget all about me."

"I don't think so."

"I hope you won't. Oh, if only there could be some way to make sure you didn't!"

"Darling, perhaps there could."

She looked at him very gravely, her whole being concentrated in her eyes. "Yes," she said. "You mean we've been blamed for it and we might as well? Oh, I've so much wanted to hear you say that, and have been so dreadfully afraid that you'd despise me for wanting to."

"My sweet," he said, "you talk the greatest rubbish."

"I'm sure I do. But you see, darling, I don't want you to think I'm all the things Basil says I am. I'm not, really. Really I'm not! Only it is different with you. I want you to feel that I'm part of you for ever, and I don't know any other way to do it."

He took her hand: "Don't let's talk any more. I suppose it was bound to end like this."

She raised her face to his. Her eyes were shining. As he kissed her lips, his whole spirit seemed to stream from him into her bright, her proud, her tender eyes.

"Beloved," she said, "you'll be careful?"

"Of course."

They lay down on the grass under the shelter of the young green hedge, and for a long while there was nothing in the world for them but one another.

Afterwards he said: "You're so wise, Valerie. That's what they call the wisdom of the serpent, I suppose! You know I can never forget you now."

She laughed. "I don't much like being called a serpent, darling! All the same, I'm happy. I know we can neither of us forget now. It's best this way, so long as all goes well. All was well for you, my sweetheart?"

He kissed her. "It was all perfect, Valerie. And it has never

been perfect before. Not the same way. That sounds like a speech, but it isn't."

"I know, because it was just the same for me."

They lay a long time on the warm grass; talking; relaxed; at ease. They were so happy, there seemed so infinitely much to say to one another.

Presently, though, she grew a little tearful: "Darling, you will despise me now; think I'm all the things Basil says I am?"

He did his best to reassure her, saying rather inadequately: "Of course, I shan't."

"Please try not to. I'm not really a loose creature. You're only the third man I've ever had anything to do with. Does that sound so very dreadful? I loved the first, and I thought he loved me and was going to marry me. If he had done, I don't think I would ever have looked at another man. Then when he went away I was dreadfully unhappy, and I suppose I'd got used to being loved. When I first met Basil I thought it was the real thing all over again. I've tried so hard to make it so. It's taken him fourteen years to beat every shred of affection out of me. I'd given up any hope of ever feeling it again, and was resolved to settle down and just be a good mother to Richard. I had come to the conclusion that I'd been mistaken about life; that there was no such thing as real tenderness, real gentleness, between men and women. Then you came along, and it was all different. And now I'm terrified in case you think, in your heart of hearts, that I'm nothing but another 'conquest', and the little wanton my husband has made me out to be."

His heart was overflowing with tenderness for her. He lay with her in his arms, stroking her hair, trying to soothe her. He said nothing for he didn't know what to say. It was his chance to say so much and he missed it. She was crying now as though her heart was broken, and great tears were running all down her face.

"If only——" he said at last; and stopped.

"Yes," she said, "if only——But we can't, I suppose. I don't know how I can bear it. I'm tied and you're tied, and there's no way out."

Brent became a little unduly ponderous; reasonable. The

fact was that her passionate weeping had rather alarmed him. He said: "Valerie, we've much to be thankful for. After all, we might never have met, never found one another. We can still meet, can't we? from time to time."

"Yes," she said, "secretly, clandestinely, furtively. I suppose that's better than nothing.—But oh, my darling, it isn't a bit what I want!"

He made no reply. He couldn't say that it was a state of affairs that suited him tolerably well. Yet the fact was that, if he had said so, he would have been speaking the truth. For, though he had then the deepest tenderness for her, and found her an adorable mistress, he did not love her—did not love her enough to urge her to throw everything over and cast in her lot with his. This, partly, was because of cowardice, because he dreaded to face the consequences of so definite an action; and partly it was caution because he had so often in the past experienced the illusion of love only to learn later that it was merely an illusion. Brent, to tell the truth, in those days of the war, had become tarnished, coarsened by the casual contacts he had made. What Valerie had for him was a jewel of the purest ray; and he was not certain that it was genuine. He had lost the art of distinguishing the true from the false. While she, in her submissive rather frightened way, loved him wholeheartedly and expected him to do no more than to throw to her such scraps of his affection as he had to spare. She had grown accustomed to small solaces, to the petty actions of little men; she didn't even expect him to make a larger gesture. She had hoped, of course; but she hadn't expected. Because of her humility she accepted without remonstrance that he should permit their relationship to be conducted in a low, a minor key; and, because of this acceptance in her, he fancied that he was doing the right thing. She loved him with all her tender, timid heart, and he let her go, taking her love for him as the basis for one more war-time love-affair. Oh yes, he was very much attached to her, but he wasn't prepared to inconvenience himself in the slightest for her sake.

They met just four times more; kissed; made love; clung together in an ecstasy of mutual tenderness: and then it was time for Brent to go away.

He said good-bye to her, as he thought, one evening; and then next morning, as he was fixing his gear on to the motor-cycle on which he travelled from job to job, he saw her furiously pedalling along the road towards the cottage.

She jumped off her cycle, out of breath. "Darling," she said as soon as she could speak, "I just felt I couldn't let you go without coming to see you off."

"That was very sweet of you." He was really touched. He looked at her and saw that she had been crying. Perhaps it was his opportunity. If it was, he missed it. He was fussed, bothered at the prospect of the new job, of going once more through all the old business of finding new digs., of making new contacts, of mastering a whole set of new circumstances. She thought him cold and perfunctory; wished she hadn't come. It never occurred to her to blame him for his lack of response. She knew that he was angry and embarrassed because she had been crying. She made a valiant effort to appear bright and ordinary. They chatted for a few minutes, casually and irrelevantly. Perhaps, if he had had the wit to see it, Valerie had never in her life put up a braver show. Perhaps he did see it, but was too selfish, too self-engrossed, to shew that he did.

Soon he got on his motor-cycle, kicked the starter, and, in the ensuing uproar, all chance of rational conversation was at an end.

"You'll write," she shouted above the roar of the engine.

"Of course. And you?"

"Yes." She gave him an address to write to, so that Basil wouldn't intercept her letters. Carefully and gravely he made a note of it.

She could no longer hold back her tears; didn't even try to do so. Brent felt ashamed of himself. He knew he oughtn't to leave her like this; knew it so well that, without more ado, he pushed his machine into the road, mounted it, and said: "Well,

I must be off"; and rode away, leaving her staring after him, waving.

When he had quite vanished round a bend in the road, Valerie picked up her cycle out of the hedge, and, with a heart as heavy as lead, pedalled back home to resume her interrupted housework. She couldn't believe that he had gone, wondered whether she would ever see him again. She knew that he didn't love her as she loved him. She was now, she told herself, an adulteress; and what had it brought her? The possibility of a few clandestine meetings, an *affaire* of the sort she loathed. As for Basil, she realised suddenly that she couldn't bear him; that it humiliated her unendurably even to be touched by him; that she would, nevertheless, have to be touched by him. She had thrown her heart away, and had got little for it but the loss of such peace of mind as she had once had. Yet, for all that, she could not have done otherwise. It was in her nature to love, and Brent had really been very sweet to her, up to a point. It was not his fault that he was inadequate. She found she was making excuses for him. He was her lover, and she couldn't permit herself to think badly of him. Perhaps, she thought, even as it is, it is better to have this than to have nothing. When there had been no one except Basil, there had been nothing, save, of course, her love for her little boy. She still had him to love. She told herself that it was for his sake she hadn't thrown everything aside and followed her lover to the end of the earth. She deceived herself: she had not followed him because, in his crass egotism, he had never asked her to do so.

BOOK FOUR

POPPIES, NOT ROSES

*Let be these poppies that we strew,
Your roses are too red:
Let be these poppies, not for you
Cut down and spread.*

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI : *The Prince's Progress.*

CHAPTER ONE

PHILIP'S FROLICS

I

— To THIS period of intensified feeling there followed for Valerie long months and years of muted, twilight living in which her existence took on a strangely dreamlike quality. Brent was as good as his word; he did write to her, rather scrappy, unilluminating notes, from which she deduced that he was working very hard, drinking a good deal, and, from time to time, amusing himself with other women. Though this last intelligence distressed her, she was, in a curious way, glad that she still had his confidence. For she felt that it would have been far worse if he had been secretive and made a poor pretence of having remained faithful to her. Besides, why should he be so while she was still obliged, as he must know, to endure Basil's legal embraces? His letters, too, were always affectionate, and she felt he had not lost his fondness for her. This, since she had a deep craving for tenderness, made her very willing to forgive him his shortcomings; which in any case she was eager to forgive because she loved him. Outwardly she still lived precisely the same life as she had done before she met him: she ran her house, she tended Basil and her little boy, who was now fast growing up and becoming a real companion for her; and she still had her pleasant and confidential relationship with her mother. Basil, as the years went by, grew more and more difficult. To his previous peculiarities was now added a quite fanatical jealousy of Brent. She lived under a constant cloud of suspicion; he pried into her most intimate possessions to see what evidence he could find to incriminate her, he harped continually upon her alleged infidelity, her looseness, her debased moral character. Though she was too careful to allow him to obtain any concrete evidence that her relations with Brent

continued, even in a greatly diminished form, his feminine spitefulness was matched by an almost feminine intuitiveness, and he was quite certain that there was, in the phrase he was for ever using, 'something wrong'. He never ceased to make allusions to him whom he chose to call her 'fancy man'; to her low and warped moral standards; to her bad blood and evil heredity. Because he suspected that her mother knew more of her secrets than he did, he hated Mrs. Singleton more than ever, and was often as offensive to her as he dared be.

During these years Valerie often asked herself whether she was happier or less happy than she had been before meeting Brent. It was a question to which there seemed no very satisfactory answer. There was no doubt that before his coming she had enjoyed a greater measure of tranquillity; but at the same time she recognised that her love for him had given her something that was even more precious to her than tranquillity. It had given her reassurance. It was a need of her nature to love; she had done her level best to love Basil, and he had rendered it impossible. The fact that she was still able to centre her affections upon Brent had an amazing effect upon her poise. It made her certain that the failure which was her life was not utterly her own fault. She lost her timid and ingratiating ways, and, though she wasn't a happy woman, she felt whole and integrated. She had acquired, though in the oddest of ways, perhaps, a respect for herself; and when Basil perceived her no longer cowed and subservient, he could think of no better word to describe her than 'brazen'. When he called her this, as he did very often, she only laughed. He had no power now to hurt her, though he was still often able to make her life uncomfortable and squalid. When she faced its squalidness she would think of Brent, and it is proof of the selfless quality of her affections that the thought of her far from perfect relationship with this far from perfect person should have been sufficient to restore her equanimity and her proper pride. Oh yes! Valerie was of that race of women who need only the barest modicum of decent treatment to feel that they are fulfilling their destiny. Even the truncated and incomplete assurance which she derived from her lover was sufficient for her. And he, all unaware

of the change he had wrought in her, went on his amiable, unreflecting, self-centred way.

From time to time, at very rare intervals when occasion permitted, they met—briefly, for a few hours, for, at most, a stolen night. Valerie treasured these clandestine meetings, though she was always in dread while they were taking place lest some unhappy turn of chance should lead to her being caught out by Basil. They never were, though she sailed remarkably near the wind several times. Because of this anxiety, she enjoyed her meetings with Philip more in prospect and retrospect than when they were actually occurring. Particularly in retrospect: then, indeed, those brief hours were infinitely precious to her.

And he, he took all she had to give, and, in some strange way, though he realised that each occasion made him fonder of her, took it all for granted. He liked being with her; he greatly enjoyed making love to her; and, when it was time for them to part, he was genuinely sorry for a short while. He took it all in his stride, however, and, if anyone had told him that these meetings, which to him were pleasant diversions, were Valerie's whole life—so that she lived between them in a state of virtually suspended animation—why, he would have laughed at them!

This state of affairs endured through the remainder of 1943 and for the year that followed. Then, just before the war in Europe ended in 1945, Brent, who had finished his work in Devonshire, was moved further away, into Cornwall—a distance which rendered impossible, or at least very difficult, even such brief meetings as they had before enjoyed.

Valerie, since she had no alternative, saw herself deprived even of these scanty approximations to happiness, and she contented herself, willy-nilly, with writing to him as fondly and as frequently as before. While he, though with less regularity, answered her letters. But it soon became apparent that a change had come over the spirit of their relationship. It had been some eight months since they had seen one another, and Philip's letters, for the first time since he had begun to write, were becoming perfunctory. She concluded that he had at length grown weary of her, and began to prepare herself for the shock of losing him. Her distress at the prospect was so great

that she even went so far—being as she was all too human—as to make tentative approaches to Basil to see whether there was not a possibility of some sort of improved relationship being patched up between them. But Basil, who resented beyond all words that she should have escaped from his power, was irreconcilable. He noticed she was becoming more compliant, and took the opportunity of asking her what fresh deception she was trying to cover up by soft-soaping him; or was it perhaps that she wanted to get money out of him?

Brent, who, during this period, was really very unhappy indeed, for reasons that shall shortly be apparent, had, throughout the time he had known Valerie, become more dependent on her than he realised, and did not, when the fatal thing happened, submit her to the final humiliation of keeping his troubles to himself. At last, when he was quite sure what was amiss, he sent her a quite enormous and incoherent letter telling her all his woes, and asking her—of all people!—for her advice. What had happened was this. For years, as we have already said, Brent had been contracted to another woman whom, for a variety of reasons, he wasn't able to marry. All through the war with the prospect of sudden death just around the corner, this obligation had not perturbed him very much; but now with the war plainly drawing to a close, his freedom—and with it the obligations inseparable from that freedom—was in sight, and it was at just this very moment that he should elect to fall into a desperate infatuation for a plump and pretty young woman, by name Miss Tovey, some fifteen years his junior, whom he had met in Cornwall. Miss Tovey was a virgin, a nice girl and a respectable girl; she was not vastly interested in Brent and that served merely to enhance his infatuation for her. Between this unsuitable and somewhat abortive relationship, and the prospect of his other obligation so shortly due to mature, the wretched Philip was in a state of the greatest perplexity, and, incredible as it may sound, regarding Valerie as an old friend and a faithful friend, he wrote and told her all about it, and asked her to advise him what he had better do'

Valerie, who knew she had lost him, and that she had also

lost all that made life worth while to her, sent him, nevertheless, a very sensible and temperate reply, in which she made no allusion to the state of her own emotions, since she felt that, if he did not know what they were, it wasn't her business to advise him of them. She contented herself with generalisations, since she could hardly do otherwise, knowing nothing of Miss Tovey nor, indeed, of the other lady—Elsa. She said that, speaking generally, she did not think marriage with a girl fifteen years one's junior was a state of affairs likely to turn out well; it sometimes did but more often did not. She said that, as she knew nothing of Elsa, she could not presume to judge whether he was right to disclaim his obligation to her or not; but that, again speaking generally, it was usually better to implement a promise than otherwise. She had known of Elsa ever since their earliest meetings, and, although she was naturally not pleased that she existed, she had, to some extent become reconciled to her as a permanent figure in the scene. For, after all, Philip had become involved with her before he had even known of Valerie's existence; just as she herself had become involved with Basil. Miss Tovey, on the other hand, was something new. Philip, having enjoyed her embraces, had, of his own free will, decided that those of Miss Tovey would be sweeter; and Valerie, being human, could hardly be expected to be pleased at the prospect. Only one touch slightly acid crept into her long letter of advice, and that was where, humorously as she had thought, she had parodied Basil and said: "You ought to take up cricket or some good manly sport, instead of confining all your energies to love-making!"

This would-be witticism had released upon her the full flood of Philip's indignation. Men in love are completely humourless, and the wretched Philip was really deeply concerned with his passion for Miss Tovey. For the first time in his life he hit out at Valerie, and, quite omitting to see that her reference to his taking up cricket was a joke, he read her, by return of post, a long and portentous lecture in the course of which he explained to her, in full, that she obviously comprehended nothing of the passion of love.

Valerie replied, meekly enough, that probably he was quite

right; she said she hoped that whatever he decided to do he would be happy, and added that, for her part, she would always be grateful for his sweetness to her. It was clear to her that everything between them was now over; but if he still wanted a friend she was always ready to be his friend. She cried a good deal as she wrote this letter; then she took Richard, now aged five, for a long walk in the country, upon which she reflected that she was, at any rate, fortunate in still having a son upon whom she could lavish her affections.

Philip, who was thoroughly ashamed of himself, even though it seemed to him that he couldn't help his odd behaviour, was very touched by the gentleness and affection of her reply, and wrote back to say that he should always value her as a friend, and as far more than a friend; and at once proceeded in the most maniacal of fashions to plunge himself even deeper into his embroilment. He there and then proposed marriage to Miss Tovey who, because she wasn't at the moment feeling disposed to marry anyone, life in the single state being pleasant enough for her, said No. On the rebound from this, Philip flung himself straightway into Elsa's arms, and, seeing with the end of the war the end also in sight of his war-work, promptly installed her in a house which he owned in a Surrey village. No sooner had he done so than he was seized with compunction, and, rushing back to Miss Tovey, besought her to alter her mind. This lady, knowing nothing of his machinations with Elsa, having in the meanwhile been reflecting on her own prospects, said that perhaps she might; and Philip was once again plunged into the depths of irresolution. All this time, of course, he had no single thought for Valerie, save when, on rare occasions, her faithful and friendly letters reached him and he would bestir himself to reply to them, usually in a comic vein since he was old enough and possessed of sufficient detachment to be aware that there was a side to his tortuous gyrations that was not entirely devoid of humour. Indeed, throughout this whole period which we have so rightly described as maniacal, it was largely the knowledge that, though they did not seem so to him, his actions must, to others, appear peculiarly ludicrous, which prevented him from becoming completely demented.

This story, however, is the story of Valerie, and it is therefore sufficient here to trace Brent's fantastic evolutions only so far as they affected her, and caused her to suffer. The war, then, ended; Philip's job ended; Miss Tovey suddenly blew cold again, and Philip, developing a fancy for home-life, departed from her to his house in Surrey and to the consolations provided by Elsa. There he remained for precisely two months, and then, in the spring of 1946, Miss Tovey, who had, in the interim, been jilted by an officer of marines in whom she had been interested, held out again a sudden tentative olive-branch, and wrote saying that she was staying with her aunt in Bournemouth: did he perhaps ever find himself in Bournemouth?

It is difficult, indeed it is impossible, to justify Brent's antics at this period: it is impossible to justify the antics of any man who happens to be overcome with a passion for a woman many years his junior. It at once became imperative, for all that he had burnt his boats with Elsa, for him to rush incontinently to Bournemouth and to ascertain the exact meaning of Miss Tovey's coy and non-committal signalings. He thought at once of Valerie, his friend, and wrote and asked her if she couldn't find him accommodation in Bournemouth. He added that his life with Elsa was difficult, as well it might be since he spent his days and nights dreaming of Miss Tovey; and Valerie, poor sweet silly innocent, thinking that he was coming to Bournemouth for the express purpose of seeing her again, gladly did as he bade her.

When he arrived he bluntly and brutally told her the real reason of his desire to visit Bournemouth, and spent several hours chanting to her the unique virtues of Miss Tovey. Valerie, who had long since grown reconciled to his infatuation, bore it very well, though she could not help finding herself reflecting sadly that it was now more than a year since they had met, and that he, though outwardly most affable, seemed to have forgotten altogether that she was a human being, who had once loved him. Who, incredible as it may seem, still loved him, though she took great pains not to shew him this.

Miss Tovey, as soon as he had answered to her call, blew

rather cold again, it being always her nature to depreciate what she had, and to regret what she had not; and in the spring weeks which ensued she led Brent quite a considerable dance. One day he thought himself as good as married to her; the next, after she had had occasion to take exception, say, to his table-manners (for Miss Tovey was nothing if not a lady), he found himself again cast away in the outer darkness. To add to the complexities of his existence was now the fact that Elsa had, very reasonably, decided to taken umbrage at his sudden and unexplained departure; so that he now no longer found it advisable, on such occasions as Miss Tovey's frowns indicated the desirability of such a course, to go home. Everything he had was in his house in Surrey, and by the time he had contributed to its upkeep and to that of Elsa, and had paid for his lodgings in Bournemouth, and had made such disbursements as were necessary to the wooing of Miss Tovey, he found with dismay that his income, much diminished by the war, simply wouldn't stand the strain. It became obvious that some sort of retrenchment was necessary; his wooing of Miss Tovey was a lengthier and a more costly process than he had budgeted for; and it was, of course, the faithful Valerie, who cost him nothing beyond the price of an occasional bun and cup of tea on those of their rare meetings upon which he poured his sorrows into her sympathetic though now slightly cynical ear, that was roped in to aid him in the matter.

She, being always eager to be helpful, soon found for him a tiny furnished cottage in Dorset at a very small rental, that was sufficiently near to Bournemouth to be suited to the continued assault upon Miss Tovey. She then took it upon herself, with the greatest of pains, to make the place habitable for him. She scrubbed, she dusted, she even fumigated the rooms, since the last tenant was reputed to have succumbed to tuberculosis; then she notified him that all was in readiness for his entry.

Brent, full of facile gratitude, took possession of her handiwork at the beginning of April, and at once, his financial resources thus augmented, proceeded to an even more vigorous onslaught upon the citadel, that was Miss Tovey. She, however, inscrutable woman, had again grown diffident;

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she had exhibited her power to detach him from whatever sort of life he had been leading in Surrey, and she now seemed suddenly to lose all interest in him. Brent, for all his insensate passion for her, was yet old enough, and enough of a philosopher, to accept his marching-orders, once they were definitely conferred on him, and he said so; whereupon Miss Tovey once more grew fond. Thus from April until August, while he resided at the cottage, the tension upon him was perpetually being screwed up, to be as rapidly unscrewed again. This, naturally, had a disturbing effect on his temper; and Valerie, who came to visit him twice each week, to bring him small luxuries and do him little services, found him singularly variable in his mood. She, for her part, refrained from making any observations on Miss Tovey, aware that there was only one person who could cure him of his obsession, and that was himself. Besides, though she had been deeply mortified when she had found that he had come to her part of the world not on her account but on that of another woman, she now realised that she derived so much comfort from his proximity that she was quite willing to forgive him; and almost willing to forgive Miss Tovey, into the bargain, since she was perfectly aware that to her devious manoeuvres there could be but one outcome, and that, if she could only wait patiently, Philip would see at last that he was pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp.

Her triumph came one day in August. It was a pouring wet afternoon, and she found Philip much dejected. For three weeks he had had no word from Miss Tovey, for it was one of that lady's peculiarities to be a very poor correspondent; and then, that very morning, he had received from her a brief line to say that she had come to the conclusion that it was all a great mistake, and that he had better abandon all pretensions to her person and return forthwith to his house in Surrey, where she was sure he would be a great deal more comfortable than he was in his wretched cottage. For Miss Tovey had visited his cottage, and had expressed her deep astonishment that any gentleman could contrive to live in so frightful a place.

Valerie was highly perceptive; she realised that he was naturally discomposd; she did not add to his disappointment

by saying that it had all been obvious to her for a long time. She just made him some tea, and sat and talked with him in her usual way, which was a way that always, though he never consciously realised it, gave him a sense of comfort and security, well-being and ease.

Brent, however, as may have been gathered from the preceding pages, was a peculiar creature. He did not seem especially unhappy. He had, in fact, in some strange way of his own, realised already for a long time that thus and not otherwise must inevitably end the business of Miss Tovey. And while he was much too obstinate to end it himself, he was almost relieved at the knowledge that she herself at last had ended it, and had set him free.

Valerie, perceiving with pleasure that he was taking the matter in a very calm and philosophic spirit, said: "Well, darling, and what do you do next? I suppose you go back home? I shall miss you."

He looked at her very hard, and said: "And I shall miss you too, my dear. You know, whatever sort of a bad lot you may think I am, you do me less than justice if you imagine that, however stupidly I may act, I can't see what's in front of my nose. I know I've behaved atrociously to you, and that you've been a perfect saint to me. Can you forgive me?"

"Darling," she said, "as long as you don't despise me; don't think I'm a door-mat that'll put up with anything! I wouldn't like you to think I haven't as much pride as the next woman. But because I do really love you, and understand you too, I think, more than a bit, I can stand a lot from you, even when I think you're being very foolish. I know it's your nature, you see, and that you can't help yourself. Besides, what have I got to offer you; what sort of a success have I made of my own life that I should criticise your attempts to make a success of yours? Beggars can't be choosers; but they can still be friends."

"Dear Valerie," he said, "you're more than a friend. I treat you abominably, and I know that I treat you abominably; and each time I do it my tenderness for you increases. Do you know that, except for that silly little squabble of ours when you suggested that I'd do better to play cricket than be for ever

chasing after women, we've never had a single cross word in three years?"

"They're three years in which we've mostly been apart, my dear," she said. "All the same, I don't think we'd quarrel much, any time."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. While Miss Tovey had reigned in the ascendant he had not done this, and Valerie had done nothing to indicate whether or not she wished him to; but now that of his own volition he had done so, her head at once fell back, her eyes closed, and she started to cry.

"Oh my love," he said, "I've been so bloody to you."

"No, dearest, you would not have been as you were if I'd been free to be with you always."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it." Her face for a moment assumed an expression almost arrogant. "I can forgive you anything, my sweet," she said, "because I *know* you're mine, but for the mess our lives are in."

Her confidence astonished Brent. After so many months of diffidence, of playing second fiddle, this was a new—the old—Valerie. "You know that?" he said.

"Yes; and you will know it too one day, sweetheart."

He covered her face, her closed eyelids, her neck, with kisses; and she shivered and lay limply, utterly acquiescent, in his arms.

2

The longer Brent reflected on the way in which Valerie had conducted herself while he had been pursuing his amours with Miss Tovey, the more ashamed he felt of himself, the more astonished at her extraordinary forbearance. It would have been so easy to explain it as due to a lack of spirit in her, a capacity for being, as she had called it, 'a door-mat'; it would have been so easy had it not been patent that this simply was not the case. Very gradually it was becoming borne in upon him that Valerie had tolerated his impossible conduct, not because she was weak and easy-going, but rather because she

was strong and patient—and certain. She was certain that she loved him, though God only knew what it was that she saw in him. It was this rooted certitude that was her strength. 'Charity suffereth long and is kind, vaunteth not itself, thinketh no evil'—something like that. It appeared, as he reflected on it, stranger and stranger that what was, in effect and with the best will in the world, only to be described as an illicit, as an adulterous connection, should be the one of all his relationships that, in the end, should teach him most of the true nature of human love. It was strange, and yet it was not strange, since love is a rare plant that does not always grow best in the appropriate spot where the ground has been tilled and made ready for it, with full benefit of clergy and all the solemn panoply of established institutions.

He had plenty of time now for such meditations as these, for the cottage was a squalid and inconvenient place, in which, since the evanishment of Miss Tovey, he had ample leisure, indeed, too much. Valerie, as has been said, stole two afternoons a week to visit him; she couldn't manage more; and for the rest of the while he was left to his own devices: that is to say when he wasn't doing his housework, drawing water from the well, cooking on his infamous Primus, making his bed, raking out the ashes of the sitting-room fire.

For the past seven years Brent had lived in a constant turmoil of work and change and argument; one great military project after another had grown under him overnight, as he had scurried about on it with his level and his drawings; he had had little time for consecutive thought, with the result that his mental processes had become very much confused. But now, in the blessed silence of the Dorset countryside, he had at last ample opportunity to meditate on his life, and the sum total of the meditations in which he now engaged rather astonished him.

In the first place, he discovered himself to be a completely worthless person. He had for some while suspected this, but had not previously had the leisure to confirm his suspicions. This being so—and it was a view which he knew Miss Tovey shared, to say nothing of Elsa—he found himself wondering

why Valerie should thus have set her face against reason and the general verdict of the world, and should still believe in him and think well of him; should, though he almost feared to use the word, love him.

One day he asked her point-blank. Her answer was a simple one: "Because I can't help myself," she had said. "You're kind to me, you need me, I'm happy with you, and I don't care if you're the devil himself. You think you are worthless and selfish, and I daresay you are to anyone who isn't fond of you. I am fond of you, and so I haven't found you either the one or the other."

Brent brooded over her reply, and on her next visit he asked her outright whether she thought she could face the scandal of leaving her husband and coming to live with him. "Nothere," he added, ruefully waving at his disordered hovel.

"No, darling," she said, "I could face it, or anything else, if it were only you and I that were involved. But unfortunately there are others. We're all in a mess; there's Basil, and Elsa, and more than all there's my little Richard. We've no right to build our happiness on the unhappiness of other people. And besides," she added, illogically enough, "you don't really love me. You're sore now about Miss Tovey, and grateful to me; but there may well be another Miss Tovey to come later on, who'll be more pliable. I'm not a very alluring morsel for you. I'm a married woman, tied up with a little boy. I shall be forty next year. I mayn't quite look my age yet, but there's no telling when I shall. We're the best and the dearest of friends, and that's as good as we can have, with things as they are."

Brent protested. "I hate all this secrecy, this cheating."

"I know. So do I. But how can we have anything without it? Half a loaf, you know——"

In a way he wasn't, perhaps, unduly perturbed by her decision. He still felt that a successor to Miss Tovey was not beyond the bounds of all probability; masculine vanity dies very hard.

"Well then," he said, "what had I better do? I can't spend the rest of my life in this damned hovel. It'll be impossible in the winter."

"I know' I've thought all about that. What do you think would happen if you went back to Elsa? After all, it's your house, isn't it?"

"God knows! I expect I should get the reception I deserve."

"You could try it."

"You want me to?"

"That's not the point at all. It might be the best thing for you to do."

"Well, at any rate I needn't do it yet. We've a good two months to run before the winter sets in. I've mostly been so rotten to you: I'll do my best in that time to make up for it."

"Darling," she said, "you don't have to keep on apologising! I'm perfectly satisfied with you as you are."

"Valerie, *why?* It's so absurd. You've no reason to be, God knows."

"You old silly, *the heart has its reasons*—Rochefoucauld says something about it."

"When the devil were you reading Rochefoucauld?"

"I wasn't. You made that remark yourself when you were in hot pursuit of Miss Tovey. You see, my love, I remember what you say!"

How sweet she was to him! How much he owed her that he couldn't possibly repay! It was now more than three years since he had first met her, and, except for a few paltry gifts, what had he given her to merit the sublime faith and confidence she had in him?

"Well," he said, "the next two months, anyhow, are all yours. I've never given you my free and undivided attention before. Isn't that a damnable confession to have to make! For what it's worth, I'm all yours for that time."

"You're all mine all the time," she said. "Don't talk rot!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLES REVERSED

I

IT is hardly necessary to trace in much detail the course of those two months that Philip remained at the cottage. At long last he had come to realise something of the nature of the gift that Valerie had bestowed upon him, and he did his best to repay her—with what? With little treats, little excursions. Her mother's motor-car was now on the road again, and she, straining at every chance to be with him, took him in it for simple little trips to all the agreeable places they could reach in the limited time at their disposal.

Their quiet assured fellowship was a thing totally different from Philip's fervent and often so uncomfortable pursuit of Miss Tovey. Valerie was a naturally quiet woman and a good listener, and Philip, on these excursions, held forth on anything and everything that occurred to him; on the scenery, the wild life, the architecture that they saw, on the books he had been reading, on anything that came into his head. He was perfectly happy, and she also appeared to be so. It was so curious to him that, after his hectic search for what he had deemed to be the rare exotic of love, this quiet easy companionship with this shy, wistful, rather inarticulate woman should now seem to him the supreme experience of his life. Supreme, alas, only in retrospect, since, while he had it, he—as everyone did with Valerie—took it, as we have said, very nearly all for granted.

They were lovers again, and this was very pleasant, though it would have come as a surprise to the censorious to know how little this relationship bulked in the sum total of their attachment. It gave them merely a great easiness with one another, set up a sort of constant flux of grateful kindness between them. Sex is only a thing to loom large in the life of a man or a woman when it is not deeply fulfilled. When the relationship is

a perfect one, it is hardly noticed; until one awakens to the bleak knowledge that it is there no longer.

Before their two months was over, Philip again asked her whether she didn't think they had better risk everything and go away together. And this time he spoke with a deeper conviction. He knew now that she suffered when she was separated from him, for he too was beginning to suffer when he was away from her.

But she remained firm. "No, darling," she said. "I lost my little Colin because I left him, and nothing in the world will make me leave Richard. He's the only thing in the world that I put before you, but you understand I must do that, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But why leave him? We could have him with us."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You don't understand, I think, just quite how vindictive dear Basil is! He'd do his utmost to get the child from me; and he might succeed. You see, it is we who are the sinners; and, though I hate to have to say it, you've an awfully shaky sort of reputation: first a divorce, and then Elsa. Anyhow, I daren't risk it."

"Darling, I don't know how I'm going to manage without you. It all seems such a waste."

"I know. None better. But just remember how you felt not so long ago about Miss Tovey. You got over her soon enough, and I expect you'll get over me. You have a mercurial disposition, my sweet!"

"Don't bait me, Valerie!"

"All right. But anyhow, you will have Elsa, if you go back to her. Tell me, Philip, what she is really like? You can hardly blame me for being a little curious."

"Elsa? Oh, she's an awfully good sort. That's the tragedy. If only she were a creature like your unhappy Basil, I shouldn't have the least compunction."

"So you have compunction! I knew you had."

"In her case I suppose I have. After all, I asked her to live with me, knowing nothing of you."

"Yes. That's all right. You don't have to apologise. That's

where the irony of it comes in. And I pursued Basil, tooth and nail, knowing nothing of you. It's rather incredible when you come to think of it."

"Don't think of it."

"No, I agree. It's better not."

But there were occasions when it was impossible not to think of Basil or, for that matter, of Elsa either, who, from time to time, despatched to Philip proud and acid little notes relating solely to matters of business. These were bad enough, but Basil's incursions into their fool's paradise were worse. By tacit agreement they never spoke of him, but there were times when Philip, who had learnt to read Valerie's moods with some acuity, could not help being aware that Basil had been being especially objectionable to her.

One day she arrived looking particularly dejected. When he asked her the reason, she said: "Oh, just Basil."

"What's he been up to now?"

"Oh, the old story! He wants to shoot you. Sat up half the night haranguing me about it."

"Well, I suppose it's natural enough, though I thought he imagined we'd parted long ago."

"Oh yes, he does, but he's never really forgotten that business in '43. It's always an excellent stick to beat me with. About once a week it comes up, sometimes in an aggravated form, sometimes mildly. It's always bad when I've been doing something wrong."

"Such as?"

"Well yesterday I switched off the electric thing that heats his bath, when I'd intended to switch it on."

"But, my dear Valerie, he couldn't possibly create a scene about that!"

"Couldn't he! At least, that is what started it. And then he said I was going mad because I was always thinking of you instead of attending to my duties, and he got hold of a lot of letters I had ready for the post, and steamed them all open when my back was turned, to see whether he couldn't find any incriminating evidence about you in them."

"Nice man! Did he?"

"No. One gets so cunning, so wary. One gets so sick of it. It's degrading. Then he called me—let me see—a dirty little whore, and started on about his intention to slaughter you."

"Well that's all right. He can try."

"Yes, I know, my love; but it's dreadful when one is tired and wants to go to sleep."

"Valerie, why not let's put an end to it all?"

"Don't tempt me, dear: we mustn't, we can't."

"Oh very well. All the same, it makes me so furious to think of you having all this to contend with; and all because of me."

"Well, darling, we are adulterers. It wouldn't do if things were made too easy for us, I suppose."

"Yes. An alarming word, an alarming thing! It seems odd that it should apply to us."

"That, darling, is what all adulterers say, I expect."

"Yes," said Philip reflectively, "I expect it is. God, what a damned lot of humbug it all is! You, me, Basil, Elsa, Miss Tovey, Christian Marriage: what does it all add up to in the long run? What will it all have mattered when we're dead?"

"I know, dear, but you must be patient. After all, we've got something that very few people ever have. At least, I've got it, and I believe you are beginning to get it at last. When you really do get it you'll understand that no one can do anything to you, fundamentally, any more; that whatever you do, or wherever you go, so long as you don't break faith with the thing you have, you can't be touched. And when I say 'break faith' I don't mean a little silly thing like sleeping with some other woman, because you feel you must, I don't even mean a rather comic set-up like your pathetic pursuit of Miss Tovey—darling, if you'd only known how my heart bled for you sometimes, then, though I was sad for myself too!—; I mean that so long as we never forget the way things have been with us, and never pretend it isn't the very best that life has to offer, we can't really, in any important way, be touched. 'He who has once been happy is for aye out of destruction's reach'."

He looked at her with an enhanced respect. "You've got it all very neatly taped, Valerie."

"I've got this taped, at all events. I know when things are as

they ought to be, and I salute them. There are very very few people who can say here and now that this is the perfect thing and they're happy. I can say it. I believe you'll soon be able to say the same."

"I can now."

"Not now, dearest, but soon."

2

It was strange, her insistence that she understood better than he the true nature of love. Philip, as a man, naturally felt it highly unsuitable that she, a woman, should have pretensions to a wisdom higher than any that he possessed. At a later date he took up the theme again, and asked her her reasons for her certitude.

She thought a moment, and said: "Because I've suffered for you, sweetheart. Oh I don't say that it hasn't been abundantly worth it, but it has been real suffering. You haven't had it yet, but I daresay you will. I suppose, in a way, I hope you will, though I'd do anything in the world to save you pain. But this is a sort of pain I can't save you, and I expect that, in the long run, it's a sort that it is best for you to have."

The mention of her having suffered filled him with an extreme shame. "Valerie, I've been such a cad to you. I'm so desperately sorry!"

"That's all right, darling. You couldn't help it. It's the way you're made. You may do it again. I hope you won't. You may not. It'll make no difference to me now."

Deep upon deep upon deep! She continued to astonish him. He thought of Basil in full possession of this surely most rare woman, and he grew furiously jealous; and said as much.

"You don't have to be jealous. He can't touch me. No one but you can touch me any longer. 'I am yours and you are mine, thou descendant from the prophet's uncle!' I hope you remember your Arabian Nights?"

He took her hand. It was grubby and worn with housework, and the nails were discoloured. He kissed it and said: "I don't know what I've done to deserve you."

"Don't be a fool, Philip. I'm a very ordinary woman, and a very simple one. And you are really a dear thing. It's a tragedy that out of all the damned people there are in the world an inconspicuous couple like us shouldn't have had the good luck to meet a little earlier. You know, I can see exactly how it would have been."

"Tell me! Let's pretend it's still possible."

"Well then, we'd have had a nice house, in the country, of course. I think it'd be old: red brick, sash windows, and a magnolia over the front. I can see it all rather clearly. There's a lot of stables and things, that we don't use of course because we're rather poor, but we've some nice old bits of furniture and pictures, and some bits and pieces of good silver. And upstairs there's a nursery, and in it—and I'm afraid this is going to be rather a shock for you—there'll be the family, all five of them, Hilary and Lynn and Caroline and young Valerie and Philip, our eldest son."

"Five, darling? I thought we were poor! You'd really like to have such a brood?"

"Yes. Oh, I expect you think me quite a monster; but after all I should by rights have had five children by now. I'm an immensely fecund person. I was meant to have a huge family. Sometimes now I look at poor little Richard and he seems to me like some sort of survivor that I've just managed to drag off a sinking ship. It's all wrong his being an only child. I know because I was one. They're spoilt and they're nervy. I spoil Richard. I can't help myself. I can see it in him sometimes; and I can see his father in him, too. He was another only child, with a mother-fixation thrown in. I sometimes lie awake at night and imagine how it'll be if Richard turns out just such another as he. He might—so very easily."

Philip looked curiously at her. She spoke so very seldom of her son; because she feared lest he should grow jealous of him. He realised her devotion to the boy, hadn't realised before that she was full of disquiet because of him. "It's a pity," he said, "that he has no brothers and sisters. You've never thought about it?"

"Oh yes, it's a thing I find most embarrassing to discuss with

you, but I expect you'll understand. Basil says we can't afford it; and between you and me I don't think I could bear the humiliation of another of his celebrated operations."

"That's what he'd do?"

"That's what he'd try to do."

"Suppose you wouldn't have it. After all, he can't force you."

"No, I suppose not. Yet it is difficult for us, talking together so sensibly here, to visualise just quite what it's like when Basil really gets cracking. He has the most extraordinary pertinacity. I think he'd wear anyone in the world down.—But we don't want to talk about that. Let's go back to our dream-house."

"If it gives you any pleasure!"

"Darling, you said that so savagely. Don't you like me making up my stories?"

"Not much. It makes me unhappy."

"My sweet!" She took his hand and grasped it tightly. "It's lovely to hear you say that. You'd like it just as I've imagined it, would you?"

"You know perfectly well I should."

Suddenly she was in his arms, in floods of tears. "Oh darling," she said, "I was such a fool even to think about it, even as a joke. We mustn't, we mustn't ever do it again."

"There, there! Come along, Valerie. Cheer up." He wiped her eyes, kissed her, but her sobbing continued. "It was the magnolia that did it," she stammered, between her tears. "Can you see it?"

"Yes, of course I can."

"Oh darling, what fools we are!"

"Well, it's not too late."

"Yes, darling, it's ages too late, and you know it. I'm forty next year, in ten years time I shall be fifty. These things weren't meant to happen, and the only thing we can do is to stop being foolish and thinking about them."

September passed, a lovely tranquil melancholy month; and October came, and with it gales and great storms of rain. The cottage grew very desolate and comfortless. It had a small slip of a kitchen at the back, the floor and walls of which were now constantly running with water. Valerie began to fret about Philip's health, said she was sure he would be ill if he stayed there much longer. And then, if he were ill, what could she do for him? She urged him to write to Elsa without more ado, and suggest he should come home.

"All right. But leave it till November. These two months are yours, and I want to make the most of them; to leave us both something we can remember."

All the same, he wrote to Elsa, who replied politely, if stiffly, that the house, of course, was his, and that he was at any time entitled to resume occupation of it.

He told Valerie of her letter, and said: "She doesn't sound very enthusiastic, does she?"

"Silly fellow, why should she be? You've treated her exceedingly badly."

"I know."

"Darling," she said, "why don't you try to make it up with her, to make some sort of life for yourself? After all, it's the life you've got to live, it seems. I'd like to feel that you at least were happy."

"Even if it meant giving up seeing you?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I lived before I knew you, and I could live afterwards. Would you like it to be that way?"

"No," he said, "I couldn't do that. You've given me everything that matters. I couldn't do that now."

"Darling, I love to hear you say that. So long as you know that I would stand aside if I thought it was the best thing for you."

"You would do that?"

"Of course I would."

"Well, it's more than I can do now."

"Until you forget me."

"I shan't forget you."

"That remains to be seen."

"You don't really think I will, Valerie?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wish you would. Sometimes__
no, often—I wish I could. I can't, though, and that's the end
of it."

"Yes," he said, "that's the end of it for us both."

4

There were a few more golden days together, a few more embraces; and then, at length, the last afternoon of all was upon them. Though they had both been dreading this day for weeks, it still seemed to come unexpectedly, found them unprepared. Philip, with a horrible solemnity, had prepared a special tea for the occasion, then found that neither he nor Valerie could eat any of it. They had parted before, he told her, and they had met again. They could still meet as they had done in the years before he had come to the cottage.

"Yes," she said. "A few stolen hours. They're very precious, but this was something more. Though I wasn't with you, I knew where you were, and I could think of you. I was with you here always, Philip, in your solitary evenings. When you got up in the morning I was thinking of you. I could see you shaving, getting your breakfast. Now it's as though you were going where I can't follow you."

There was a little garden-plot in front of the cottage, in which, even in the height of the Miss Tovey romance, Valerie had helped him to bed out a few flowers. The plants were withering now, and beaten down by the autumn rains, but there were still a few blooms—an odd marigold, a blue salvia. Valeria stooped and picked a little bunch of the flowers.

"Oh don't," he said. "It is like a wreath, like a funeral. If only time could stand still, and nothing need be past!"

She took no notice of him but stood looking for a long time at the cottage; then she said: "Darling, don't ever forget this. It wasn't much of a place for you, but it was everything for me. We shall never be so near together again."

"Pm not so sure."

"No. It is useless to deceive ourselves.—I must go now, sweet, I've Basil's supper to get. Come in and kiss me once more, and then we shall have to be sensible."

They went into the cottage for the last time. The sense of strain was almost unbearable. He took her in his arms and said: "What a fool I am to let you go!"

"What fools we both are, perhaps."

"You mean that?"

"No. Not really. Richard must come first."

"Richard will grow up some day."

"When that happens I shall be an old woman and you won't want me."

His hold on her relaxed. "People," he said bitterly, "are inclined to regard adultery with some facetiousness. There's nothing very funny about it that I can see."

"There's nothing funny at all about love, dear Philip," she said. "I must go now. Good-bye!"

After she had gone it seemed to him incredible that it should all be over. He wandered moodily around the cottage, every least corner of which was full of memories of her, of little things she had brought him, of incidents, of words she had spoken. He seemed to see her everywhere. He passed one of the most disagreeable evenings he had ever spent, packing up; and when the time came for him to go to bed, he couldn't sleep.

A dozen miles away, at the same time, Valerie was lying sleepless beside her snoring husband, caring no longer to restrain the tears she had successfully held back for so long.

Her sobbing shook the bed and wakened him. He turned on his side, and, rolling over, put his arm sleepily round her.

"Don't fidget," he said drowsily, and almost automatically his hold tightened on her body. Valerie lay perfectly still and willed herself not to scream. There was no limit, then, to the humiliations which life had to offer.

The next morning Philip returned to Surrey, to resume such threads as remained of his old life.

It was now the late autumn. Zealously each week Valerie wrote to Philip at an address which he had given her—odd jerky little letters which revealed so much more than she thought; and as zealously he wrote to her. They sent to each other their love, spoke bravely of when they should next meet. Both seemed as though their lives were frozen. Christmas came with its usual parade of merriments, and after Christmas the snow and the severe weather. Richard fell ill, and Valerie's letters became more scrappy and hurried than ever. Basil, she said guardedly, was being rather trying.

In some respects life was easier for her than it was for Philip. In the first place, she was so occupied with the running of her house that she seldom had much time for thinking; in the second, she had Richard on whom to lavish her affections, and he needed a great deal of these since he was growing fast into a nervous and rather difficult boy. There was her mother, too, now really ageing at last, and becoming with increasing years increasingly self-centred. She was selfish, Basil was selfish, Richard, though he was often very sweet to her, was selfish with the ferocious egotism of the only child. Valerie was the prop and support of the whole household, and the only one of them who was never supposed to feel ill or tired or heart-sick.

Each morning she got up at seven o'clock and went downstairs to light the boiler. Sometimes the cat had been sick in the little kitchen, and Tiger, who was elderly now, seemed to be always ill. There was the breakfast to be got, and Basil's luncheon-package to prepare, and then Basil had to be got off by the 8.15 train, and after that Richard had to be despatched to school. When both of these were gone, and her mother's breakfast had been taken up to her in bed, Valerie had the washing-up to do, the beds to make, the house to tidy, the dog to exercise, the shops to visit, the garden to see to, and lunch to get ready; for Richard came back at mid-day and her mother descended in the middle of the morning with a healthy appetite. And so, continually, she went on: washing, mangling, scrubbing, scraping potatoes, until just after six o'clock Basil

returned for his evening meal, very sorry for himself and full of undischarged venom. By the time she had cleared the dinner-things and washed them up, Richard was ready to be put to bed, and Richard was now being very difficult about going to bed, and declared that he couldn't get to sleep at all unless she read to him first. When she had read to him, she came down again to find Basil clamouring for a cup of tea. By this time he would have involved himself in a discussion with her mother, generally upon some matter concerning money, and when they had finished wrangling, Valerie would sit down at last, take a glance at the morning paper, and find it was time to go to bed.

Each day was much the same as the last, except for Sundays, when Basil was at home all day and would spend the morning washing his hair. In the afternoons he slept in his armchair, except on such occasions as he went off to play golf. Basil, though he would never have admitted it, was ageing considerably, and was finding his perennially youthful appearance more and more difficult to keep up. He was still deeply engaged with his betting and his football-pools, though he had now struck a bad patch and was plunging heavily to try and recoup his losses.

One day in the summer of the year following, he told Valerie that he had lost so much that he thought the best thing they could do to ensure that both ends met was to get a lodger for the spare bedroom. She, weary of her constant struggle with the inadequate housekeeping money, agreed to this, so long as it was understood that a proportion of the lodger's money should come to her to help eke out her housekeeping; and soon there was an extra mouth to fill, an extra plate and cup-and-saucer to wash up.

In the autumn, Mrs. Furnival, who had long been expected to crack up, fell ill with pneumonia, and, when she was a little better, was invited by her son to come and stay with them while she convalesced. This strained the little house to bursting point, and Valerie was obliged to make up a bed for Richard in her own room. Mrs. Furnival, however, instead of getting better steadily got worse, and it soon became apparent that she was on Valerie's hands for the rest of her days. She was not a

good patient and had grown excessively dictatorial with age. Basil had by now confided in her something of his wife's sins, and she consequently persisted in regarding her as a brand plucked, and only just plucked, from the burning. She grumbled incessantly, and was now only happy when she was engaged in playing cards with her son, for which exercise Valerie and her mother were naturally roped in to make up the four.

Basil, now reinforced by one of his own kind, became more himself than ever, and soon the house took upon itself a typical Furnival squalidness. This was more than Mrs. Singleton could abide. She had never liked her co-mother-in-law, and so, after a series of most unpleasant and unedifying squabbles, she decided to leave *Sunnyside* and take such of her furniture as remained to a bungalow close by that had miraculously become vacant. This deprived Valerie of her one remaining ally (since Richard was too young to count) and, at the same time, provided Basil with a perpetual and running source of grievance. He had grown so used to the really handsome contribution Mrs. Singleton had made for her board that he had ended by regarding it as part of his income, and now that it had become so suddenly removed he really felt as though he had been swindled out of it, and spent hours and hours lecturing Valerie and suggesting to her all sorts of fantastic ways in which she could prevail upon her mother to continue the payment. There was also another very sore point in his mind, which concerned a few logs that Mrs. Singleton, having paid for them, had not unnaturally taken with her when she moved. He regarded this action on her part as petty, as even dishonest; and he continually harped upon the matter: "It is not the logs *themselves* that concern me," he said, repeatedly. "It is the principle of the thing!"

With all this it was not surprising that Valerie wrote scappily to her lover, that she grew thin and scatter-brained, disappointed him by being able to meet him only at very infrequent intervals.

They did meet, for odd snatches of hours, hours that passed for both of them with the swiftness and the unreality of a

dream. Valerie did not seem well, and this distressed him. And he, she thought, seemed saddened and older. Both had lost their capacity for high spirits; neither was happy. They had chosen the virtuous path of self-sacrifice and should have been flourishing in self-righteousness. That they were not doing so was due to the fact that neither of them knew whether it was virtue, or mere cowardice, that impelled them.

6

As for Philip, he found the very oddest things were happening to him. He had very largely, during his scatter-brained war-years, lost the knack of thinking clearly; and now that he had once more the leisure to do so it seemed to him that he had lost the art. He lived in his admirably appointed house which was so adequately attended to by Elsa, and it seemed to him that he was able to see nothing clearly. Life, all of a sudden, had lost its savour for him. He wasn't, precisely, ill; he wasn't even particularly unhappy; he was simply not interested. Nothing of all the things which had once seemed to him to be important now seemed to him important any longer: politics, the arts, possessions, pastimes. It was as if he was living constantly in a kind of grey indeterminate haze, in which nothing was clearly defined and in which he wanted nothing. The queer thing was that he still automatically went through all the old motions of his existence: read books; attended auctions, picking up bargains which, as soon as he had acquired them, appeared to him quite valueless; tended his garden, taking endless pains to rear flowers and vegetables which, once again, when they were ready seemed to him not worth the trouble he had taken over them. It is needless to expand this state of affairs: life for him had suddenly lost its savour, and he didn't know why. Elsa, perceiving this, suggested that what he needed was 'a change'; and urged him to go for a holiday. He went away, but almost at once found things away from home even more insipid than they had been at home; so he returned again, puzzled and even a little frightened. It may be that his age had something to do with it: he was close on forty-five which is a dangerous time

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for any man, since his youth is over and he has not yet achieved the serenity of old age. For quite a considerable while it did not appear to him that there was any specific reason for his malaise, and he began to assume that it was constitutional, and that nothing could be done about it; until one day it occurred to him that almost every night he was having the most peculiar dreams, in which everything was altered and his life seemed real and possible again. In these dreams, it suddenly struck him, he was always with Valerie.

For many weeks then he struggled against the idea that relentlessly rose nearer and nearer to the surface of his consciousness, that it was his separation from her that was affecting his whole life. He had, he told himself, had enough trouble with his love-affairs already; he was no longer a young man, and, though he was deeply attached to her, they had made their choice and it was useless to think of trying to alter it. To augment this line of argument he thought of everything he could that was in her disfavour, that might serve to lay her ghost. She was no longer young, her looks were fading, her hair going grey, her eyes too small, her chin too sharp, her skin not very good, her hands rough and work-worn. Besides, she was a simple woman, not perhaps the best of company; she was foolishly fond of her son, and spoilt him; she was allied to the odious Basil; worse, she was the property, the bedfellow of this same Basil, and could never in his mind be entirely disassociated from him. It was all without avail. No sooner had he formed these no doubt entirely just intellectual concepts than there rose before him a memory of the tender curve of her nostril, the curl of her hair on her neck, the little moments of gaiety they had shared, her abounding kindness and gentleness to him: in a word, of her sweetness. He shot off on another tack and decided that he was in the grip of a sexual illusion; that leading now a chaste life he attributed to her who had been his mistress perfections which she did not possess; and decided deliberately to put an end to his unnatural celibacy. It was again useless; he found that no other woman any longer attracted him. It seemed to him then that he was in the grip of an obsession, and he grew seriously alarmed. Then he remem-

bered that, for Valerie, all this had happened already in the old days, when he had still been free to pursue Miss Tovey and similar fantasies, while she had been tied to him because she'd not been able to help herself. She had suffered then, and now he knew how much: for he was suffering for her. Well, she had said he would; when he loved her. . . .

He knew now that he loved her to the exclusion of everything, and that, moreover, it was not a merely romantic passion born of unsatisfied desire. She had been his, and would be his again; and all that made no difference. What he needed from her now was something quite other: her constant presence, the continuous sensation of well-being and assurance which she and no one else could give him. He wanted to be able to laugh with her, to share little intimate trifles with her, to be relieved for ever of the quest of the ideal by the possession of the all-satisfying actual. Why it should be she that gave him all this, he did not know. She was a very ordinary woman, just as he was a very ordinary man. It was merely, perhaps, that they had between them built up, quite fortuitously and not by design, something which happened, for them, to be indestructible. It was, perhaps, nothing more than a certain happy blending of their auras, of their personalities; they supplemented, complemented one another.

All these conceptions did not come to him at the same time, but gradually and by degrees; and as they came he fought a savage rearguard action against them. He had learnt to distrust his emotions, his senses; besides, he did not want all the turmoil and commotion of yet another break up of his affairs. He was comfortable enough as he was; he was deeply indebted to Elsa; he wanted nothing but to get on with his work and his life; at times, of course, no doubt, meeting Valerie and keeping bright the flame of tenderness that spanned their lives. And to him, so rational and so sensible, this other hungry and unreasonable thing had come; he didn't welcome it, but at last he learnt to accept it. He grew to understand that his life apart from her was meaningless; that he loved her; and that he could never recover his peace of mind or attain to his own self-respect so long as she remained the uncomplaining martyr of Basil's

egotism. He had, he knew well enough, had her answer once and for all, but at long last he could bear no more, and, against all his prudence and better judgment, wrote her a long letter, that was very different from their usual brave interchange of badinage and small talk, to say that he was in the depths; that he loved her more than ever before; that he didn't see how he could live without her; and that he knew now what she had suffered because of him and that his one hope was that she would let him spend the rest of his life trying to atone for the unhappiness he had caused her. Further, he proposed definitely that she should leave her husband and bring Richard with her, and that they must hope that legal custody of the boy would be granted them: it seemed probable that Basil's well-known parsimony would lead him not to oppose this. For the rest, he would give Elsa his house and all that was in it, together with an allowance, so that he would have very little money to offer Valerie. He thought it would be just enough to make do.

He ended by saying that neither of them was young any longer, and that life was an uncertain quantity; he thought they had no right to reject such possibility of happiness as lay before them. Then he sealed and posted his letter before he should have had time to regret it; and awaited, in a fever of impatience, her reply.

CHAPTER THREE

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

i

VÄLERIE RECEIVED his letter on a Monday morning, which was also her washing-day. Even though the sky should fall the washing had to be done, or her whole week would become utterly disorganised. As she laboured over the sink, scrubbing, rinsing, wringing, she pondered as carefully as she could all Philip's arguments. There was a note of urgency and spon-

taneity in his letter that deeply disturbed her. Much as she was attached to him, she had always been aware of a certain faineant quality, a certain weakness and infirmity of purpose in him, and she marvelled to find that this seemed at last to have entirely gone; and perhaps was a little disconcerted thereby.

When the clothes were all safely out on the line, she went over to her mother's bungalow, and, putting the letter before her, said: "Mother, what *am I* to do?"

Her mother put on her spectacles, read the letter carefully, shook her head, and said: "Poor Philip! What do you want to do?"

"What's best for everyone, I suppose."

Her mother looked at her, rather slyly: "I know what I should do."

"Oh, Mother, if only he had written this four years ago, when we first met, when Richard was younger, I would have known what to do. I did know then. Now it has taken him four years to find out what I knew after four meetings, and I'm not so sure of myself."

"Yet you would have gone to him then?"

"Yes. I couldn't have helped myself."

"But now?"

"Well, I suppose I've trained myself to get used to things as they are. I've got used to going without. I think that something happened to me when Philip was fooling around after Miss Tovey. I told myself then I could never have him. I accepted it. It went very deep."

"Yes, dear, I quite understand. All the same, he is a nice fellow, and I should think it over very carefully. There is no need to hurry. After all, Basil has not been a very good husband to you."

"I haven't been a very good wife to him."

"No, but you could have been."

Mrs. Singleton's dislike of Basil was such that the idea of her daughter's leaving him, of the astonishment that such a gesture would arouse in him, strongly appealed to her. She looked sharply at Valerie, and said: "Well, if you can't make your mind up now, you can temporise. Why not write him an aw-

fully nice letter and say that as you've waited so long there can be no harm in waiting a little longer; that you'll give him his answer later on, when you've had time to think more about it?"

"After Christmas? It'd be better to get Christmas over for Richard."

"Very well, my dear, if you think so. It'll certainly be one way of starting the New Year!"

"You think I'll go to him, Mother?"

"I think you'll be a perfect fool if you don't," said her lamentable parent.

"I don't know that I shall, all the same," said Valerie. "I don't think there is any need to now."

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Singleton, rather acidly.

"Mother dear, I don't understand myself."

And Valerie returned home and wrote Philip a note to say that she was very deeply touched and honoured by his letter, and that she would give him a definite answer by or before Christmas—that is, within the next couple of months.

2

Sometimes it seemed to her that her answer would be Yes. During the two final months of that autumn, the Furnivals appeared quite fiendishly to extend their demands upon her. Old Mrs. FurnivaPs bronchial troubles augmented with the severer weather, and the more her health deteriorated the more exacting she became, and the more uncertain in temper. She treated Valerie as though she were a servant-girl. And Basil also, Basil surely had never been so pernicketty and difficult, so fussy about his paintwork or the condition of the drawing-room carpet, so rigorous about the household bills, so inquisitive and prone to pry into her private concerns. One day she found him rifling her handbag for evidences of infidelity and/or possible unpaid bills, and, strong in the knowledge that even if she was hateful to him she was not hateful to Philip, she turned and faced him.

"How dare you!" she cried. "How can you expect any woman to tolerate you?"

Basil assumed a silly grin: "Just keeping a quiet eye on fancy man!" he said. "He's got a bit sick of you lately, I imagine. Not quite so bumptious, are you! Fading charms and all that, eh what?—Ugh, you scrawny, flat-bosomed, thin-necked hag, you!"

It was all true. She had grown very thin; her neck-bones protruded, her bosom was almost non-existent. What if Philip one day, awakened from his dream, his illusion, should hurl similar taunts at her! What man in all the world can you trust when his passions are sated?

Basil, seeing his shaft had struck home, was delighted. He grabbed hold of Valerie and patronisingly slapped her behind. "Never mind, old girl," he said uxoriously. "There's one here, at any rate, who won't desert you. Never been unfaithful yet in word or deed, and that's a whole lot more than you can say, my sweet! Here"—and he tilted up her chin with a clumsy gesture—"give your legal lord a kiss."

For nearly twenty years now, Valerie had endured Basil in every mood, spiteful, censorious, uxorious; she knew every one of his little meannesses, his arrogance, his cold delight in humiliating her. Surely she had borne enough! Yet, even so, was she free to choose? that was the question which tormented her. There was Richard, there was Elsa, there was Basil; more than all there was Philip and herself. And suddenly she saw that it was this last that was holding her back; that she was temporising, refraining from burning her boats, because she was no longer sure—of what? Of Philip's love; of her own? No, it was of neither of these that she doubted; it was of something worse, deeper by far. It was a dread lest, if she were to go to him, they might lose something without which she would not be able to live. And all of a sudden, and very clearly, she saw what was holding her back: she was afraid that by living with Philip both of them might lose the illusion of love that was all they had in the world. Put to that test she couldn't face it; couldn't run the risk, for the sake of a possible gain, of losing what she so certainly had.

Oh, now she saw very clearly to how great an extent the long years of Basil's tyranny, coming on top of her father's tempest-

uousness, had sapped, had broken her nerve. She would never escape now; would never escape because she could not bear to run the risk of losing her illusions. That was all very well, but how was she to put that to Philip without, in any case, sacrificing his regard?

She decided still to wait, to temporise, postponing, putting off, hoping for a miracle to fall out of the skies and set her free. After all, he did not now expect her definite answer before Christmas.

3

In the very week before the Christmas holiday, Basil was suddenly and quite unexpectedly taken ill. He had been unusually peevish for some time, and then one morning he had collapsed at his office and been brought home in an ambulance.

The doctor had been summoned at once, and he, after a long examination of the patient, had emerged from the sick-room smiling and rubbing his hands.

Valerie was lying in wait for him on the landing. "What is it?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh nothing very much, my dear," said the doctor, who really hadn't the faintest idea what was amiss. "I should say it was some sort of a nervous collapse. You want to keep him rigorously in bed and give him plenty of light nourishing food—These are trying times—trying times for us all! He'll pick up, I don't doubt, in the New Year."

The Christmas celebrations at *Sunnyside* that year were a mockery. Mrs. Furnival was distracted by her son's illness, and, abandoning her usual precautions, caught a bad cold which, coming on top of her habitual bronchitis, forced her also to take to her bed. Valerie, entirely beside herself, had now two patients on her hands.

She wrote and told Philip what had occurred, and begged him to wait a little longer for her answer.

But now it was Philip that started to become difficult, and despatched to her forthwith an immensely long, closely written letter in which he expressed the opinion that she was 'playing

with him'. Valerie, remembering what she had endured from him during his pursuit of Miss Tovey, ran her eye over the sheets of his familiar hand-writing; she had really no time to read the letter properly since Basil was awaiting her attentions. Her eye caught the familiar phrases—'must see you again'—'not much fun for me'—'Really, Valerie, I do think you ought'—'you know I am devoted to you'—'Surely, dearest, a nurse, could do all you do'—'I don't want to seem unreasonable'—'I don't know how much longer I can go on like this'—'I can't sleep'. Yes: I, I, I!

Really, perhaps, when it came to rock-bottom, there was no difference in men! All were the crassest egotists. If only he could have had the tiniest little bit of imagination, could have seen how hopelessly bedevilled she was with so much sickness in the house, could have had the generosity, the trust in her, that should have caused him to forget himself for a little while.

She lifted her eye from the page. Basil was now a stickler for time, he had nothing to do in bed but watch the clock. She had just four minutes before she need go up to him.

Well, in that time she certainly couldn't compose her reply to Philip. She would have to write later, begging, cajoling him to be patient. All at once she revolted from the prospect. Her whole life had been spent cajoling one damned man after another; with Philip it was all to have been different. Would *all have to be* different if it was in any way the different, the real right thing they had believed it to be.

4

DARLING PHILIP (she wrote at last)

I know you are angry and impatient with me. I could say that I am sorry for this, and it would be true; but I am not going to say that I am sorry in the sense of apologising for myself, because I have come to the conclusion that I have been apologising for myself all my life, and that it has not got me very far. If things between us are as different as we believe them to be, then such an apology will be unnecessary. You must know that I am not to blame for there being two sick persons on my hands

who, until they are better, make it quite impossible for me to find the time to come to the decision that I know you are expecting.

You remember when you were in full career after Miss Tovey: I accepted this as a part of your nature, and when you told me you were sorry for having hurt me in this way, I told you that you had no need to apologise; that I understood. In the same way, I don't now apologise to you because I think that you, if you really loved me unselfishly, would understand.

Do please write and say that you do.

When she had finished this letter, Valerie paused and carefully read it over. How strange it all was! Though she had not said so, she knew now that she did not intend to go to him. She did not intend to do so because she believed that only by staying with Basil could she be quite certain of keeping whole and untarnished her love for Philip; because she deemed that she could only keep it untarnished by not permitting either of them to compare too closely their dream of what it was to the actuality of what it might become. It was sad that it should end so: that she who, years before at their first meeting, would have gone to him so gladly, if he had as much as lifted a finger to her, should now be the one of the partnership to be cool and temperate and cautious. All her instincts then had been directed towards him, and he, using his reason, had repelled her. Now he was impelled towards her by his instinct, and she was controlled by her reason. Her motives? Who could say: there had been Miss Tovey, there had been the gathering though sub-conscious wound dealt to her by his tardiness to reciprocate to the full her passion; finally, perhaps, there was her age. At thirty-six there had been a good hope of a new life for her, but now in a couple of months time she would be forty-one, and how could she hope at that age to hold him for long enough to build a certain life together? No; they were too late; and it was not her fault.

All the same, he was her life, and if she were to lose him now her life would be over. Perhaps she was weak and cowardly. Perhaps she was nothing but weak and cowardly, and all her fine parade of reason was nothing but a shield behind which she

had installed her weakness, her cowardice, her fear of convention ! Well, if that were so, doubtless he would not fail to tell her.

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He did not fail. Philip replied by return of post, saying that he quite appreciated that having a pair of invalids on her hands must naturally render it impossible for her to take any immediate steps in the matter of coming away with him, but that, at the same time, he failed to see how such a contingency prevented her from coming to a decision as to what she should do later on. It was a distinctly unpleasant letter; and he concluded it by saying that, since her irresolution could only mean one thing, he preferred to save both her and himself the embarrassment of hearing her say No; and that he consequently withdrew his proposal.

When she received this letter, though greatly distressed by its harshness of tone, Valerie perceived that his final sentence afforded her great relief. She wrote to him at once to say that she loved him, and would always love him, but agreed with him in feeling that her duty lay elsewhere, particularly with Richard.

So concluded that game of make-believe.

Basil, in the meantime, mended slowly, and did not grow any sweeter by reason of his enforced idleness. Poor fellow, he missed his games and sports, and nothing now was left to him but his pools and his horse-races. Every day Valerie had the extra duty of sallying forth in search of a racing-paper for him, which he then spent long hours in carefully studying. But despite the unlimited time at his disposal, he did not seem to grow markedly more successful in his forecasts, and this rendered him Very cross and low-spirited. Occasionally kind people tried lending him books, but Basil had never been much of a reader, and couldn't bring himself to start one of them. The result was that he merely lay in his bed and grumbled, his one remaining pleasure, after his daily 'investment' was made, being to get Valerie into the room and there nag at her, saying

that now he was laid by the heels she was doubtless misconducting herself with every Tom, Dick and Harry that called at the back-door.

Valerie had been busy enough before, but now she was too busy to think of what was happening to her; and this, in its way, was a relief. Old Mrs. Furnival in her own noisy fashion was now in the process of dying. She was already eighty-four, but it seemed probable that she might still take several years to attain to her ultimate extinction. Mrs. Singleton, who might have helped with the patients, had now grown old enough to be wary; and confined her assistance to occasionally looking after Richard. And he, growing up fast, was unruly and thoughtless; he did not appreciate the seriousness of having two invalids in the house and had frequently to be reproved for making unseemly noises. Since it was now only his mother who administered such reproofs, and he hadn't the slightest fear of her, he was merely rude, and redoubled his clamour. As for the lodger, they had been obliged to keep him on for financial reasons, though he was really the last straw. Valerie was too tired when she had finished her day's work to think of anything but bed. From time to time, Basil, from the lordly altitudes of his couch, would reproach her for having lost her self-respect and for turning into a slut: "Why," he would say, "do you never try to look nice nowadays?"

In all this welter there was only one bright spot for her, which was that Philip's letters—for he still wrote often to her—could now come direct to the house, since Basil was no longer able to pry into her concerns or to grab her letters up from the mat and rush with them into the kitchen to steam them open. It was, of course, quite out of the question for her to get away to see Philip during this period, but his letters did still a little compensate her for this. He wrote affectionately to her, but somehow it wasn't the same; it would have been strange if after so great a disappointment it had been. She felt that he still blamed her for her decision not to come to him; and then again she could not be sure. 'Now,' he had said in one of his recent letters, 'we shall never know what we might have been to one another', and she couldn't help feeling that there was in his

tone the very slightest hint that perhaps he also had realised that, whatever they had lost, they had at least gained the priceless privilege of retaining their mutual illusions. He had lost Helen, but he had saved his ships! But perhaps he hadn't meant it that way. Who could tell?

6

On her forty-first birthday she received a letter from him. It was a perfectly lovely early spring day, an absurd day to have come so soon in the year, with the sun shining, the birds singing, a feeling everywhere that the earth was stirring and life being in all things born anew.

It had already been a day in which, for Valerie, things had started to go wrong; and she usually found that days which started thus badly had a habit of continuing so. The boiler fire had been very awkward; she had upset the porridge all over the floor; Richard had flatly refused to eat his breakfast, and had gone off to school chanting a sort of rune which ran, 'Bad Mummy! Mad Mummy! I hate you! Oh yes I do!' While Basil and Mrs. Furnival—well, for the unreason and the petulance of invalids there is doubtless every ground for excuse, even if it is sometimes difficult for the most fair-minded person to make it.

But now, what with the weather, what with a letter from Philip, it seemed just possible that it wasn't going to be so bad a kind of a day after all; and so Valerie, as she sat at the table in her small tiled kitchen, drinking the belated cup of tea that was her breakfast, propped open the back-door so that she should be better able to see the bright morning outside, and, with eager fingers, tore open the letter from Philip. It was a rather fatter one than usual, and it seemed to her probable that he—dear good ridiculous childish creature that he was—had stuffed out his letter with a formal birthday card. She hoped so; but when she took the letter out of its envelope she found that this was not the case, and that it was only fat because it was longer than usual. She glanced up at the clock. It was already a quarter to nine. Soon Basil would be clamouring to

be attended to; and as for his mother—oh! unmentionable horrors on her behalf. She couldn't really properly read the letter now, but because it was her birthday and he was sure to say something especially nice she would just run through it, picking out the plums, keeping the main mass of it hidden away till later on in the table drawer which Basil couldn't now, thank God, investigate.

But as her eye ran hastily over the closely-written pages it soon became apparent to her that it was not, in fact, an especially nice letter. On the contrary, it seemed that Philip had experienced a bad relapse to his old mood of feeling sorry for himself; so bad a relapse that he had even forgotten that it was her birthday. At least she could not, in her hasty scrutiny, catch any reference to it. No, the general gist of the letter consisted of what she couldn't help calling to herself, since she had experienced it so often before from him, 'Philip suffering'. He loved her: didn't know how it would all end. And so on; and so on.

Yes: no doubt it was all very true. He did love her; doubtless he didn't know how it would all end. But did she? It seemed to her then, as she sat there that fine spring morning on the threshold of the forty-second year of her age, that the whole of her life had been crushed, utterly lost, beneath the burden, fifty Atlantics deep, of the conflicting egotisms of everyone that she had ever known! Dear Philip, of course he was attached to her, as she was to him; but for all his attachment it never seemed to occur to him sometimes to be patient and self-effacing and ungrasping. If only he—if only *someone*—could just for a change write to her, or say to her, 'My dear, I trust you and believe in you. I know you're doing your best. I rely implicitly on your judgement, and am always with you when you want me, on your terms and not on mine'—ah! what a relief that would be! Only, unfortunately, people weren't a bit like that; perhaps even she herself wasn't like that, and only wanted other people to be. She found herself thinking of all the men she had known: of her father and his alarming tempestuous ways; of the rough greedy boy who had first kissed her as she had come home from school—Fred, Ted, was it? she

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didn't remember; of poor Toby with his gentleness and his gentle nagging reproachful jealousy; of her Australian, Richard, and his natural, selfish absorption in himself; of Basil—ah! Basil; even of Philip and his inability to accept misfortune and to give her credit for doing the best she could. Now she was forty-one and very faded. There would be no more men, and perhaps that was a good thing. Reeled out like that, the list, she thought, seemed a long one; or didn't it? Was it really longer than that which most women of her age could produce? Only three of them had mattered in the very least, Richard and Basil and Philip. Perhaps three men wasn't an undue allowance in one woman's whole life? Ah! but she had had a baby; an illegitimate baby; and she had been both a fornicator and an adulteress. It sounded strange and dreadful enough when you put it that way, and yet how very few people, perhaps, could really lay their hands on their hearts, and, if they were sincere, swear that they were not equally eligible for such titles of dishonour. It was only that she, being perhaps a little less hypocritical than the majority, preferred to face things and call them by their right names. Not that, really, she regretted it all; it was useless to regret. She was only glad that she hadn't it to live all over again. The past was the past, and what the future held was as sure as anything is sure in this world: a petulant and gradually becoming more exacting Basil; a disappointed and gradually becoming more exacting Philip. Dear Philip! of course it was all perfectly explicable. It was wretched for him. What astonished her was that he should not see that it was equally wretched for her. Equally? No, worse! If he had a little more generosity he would surely be able to see that. So; she was criticising him already: all because he had forgotten her birthday. That was the way love died. That mustn't happen. Philip was her last link with the old life as she had known it, the old life of men and women and their passions. Soon, she would be nothing but Richard's mother. If her love for Philip were to die, then she would be dead indeed: void, hollow, empty of feeling. That couldn't—mustn't be allowed to—happen.

And yet, the basis of these things was reciprocity. If his love

for her were to die, of impatience, of chagrin, of mere inanition because she was not able to feed it, then what would become of hers? She thought it would go on, wanted it to, willed it desperately, of necessity, to do so. But she wasn't sure.

She got up and carefully inspected her face in the little cracked mirror that was stuck up behind the water-pipes over the sink. Remembering her face as it had been, she saw it now a comparative ruin—crow's feet at the eyes, greying temples, a pretty face sharpened and grown old. If it was only that which held him to her, then in the end she would lose him too.

But in her heart she knew that, for all his egotism, for all his harangues and argumentative preachments because he wanted her with him, there was for Philip something more than this. The very reason that he fussed her and lectured her was because he loved her, and it was not her person only (which, God knows, would have been a weak anchor to hold him now) but her own self, her very self, the thing which she too meant when she thought of herself as 'me.'

Was it? *Was it?* Or did she still delude herself?

She believed that it was so; believed it because she had no alternative. "Besides," she said to herself proudly, confirmed in the dubious doctrine which has comforted so many generations of poor women, "so long as I love him as I do, he can't help but love me in return."

She loved him with all her heart. She had to, for it seemed to her that without him she was nothing. And yet he had forgotten her birthday. How could he, loving her, have done so? She picked up his letter again, and this time her eye caught a postscript which she had previously missed:

P.S. Since this is such a grumbling letter, darling, because I am unhappy about all your troubles and because I can't do anything to help you, I'm not spoiling your birthday letter with all this, but am sending you another—and a specially nice one, I hope, which should be along with the parcel post.

Her heart gave a leap. It was all right! It was really. It had got to be; and perhaps, she thought, years and years ahead, when he was very old, and she was very old too, and both of

them had done all things they must do for decency's sake, then they might be allowed a few last years together. Even adulterers, she concluded, perhaps deserve a break at the end of their careers of crime; and perhaps at the very end of life such dreadful words as these don't mean quite so much as they had seemed to mean earlier. To Basil, she was a lost soul, but then Basil was religious, and she had been brought up with no religion. That, as he was very fond of telling her, was why she was unable to distinguish right from wrong. Well, maybe she couldn't; and maybe very few other people could either, if they really told the truth. It was easy enough to condemn a thing in other people which, when you do it yourself, seems sufficiently innocent. That, no doubt, was why no one is ever really convinced that he is wicked—unless he is a religious maniac or something of that sort, of course.

"Darling Philip," she said, putting his letter into the bosom of her dress, "I'm an ignorant little beast and I don't know anything and I haven't been properly brought up or instructed in the Creed, but I wouldn't be all that surprised, if we stick things out and keep faith with one another, if we don't some day find ourselves together for longer than we can now possibly imagine." And, being an ardent sentimentalist at heart, a vision came to her of a popular picture, entitled, we believe, 'Reunited', in which a handsomely winged he-angel, in a very blue sky, clasps to his bosom a female of the same species, in gauze and golden hair. "Nobody knows to the contrary, anyway!" she asserted, pouting defiantly.

The clock had moved on, and upstairs Basil, who had been watching his own clock with the eager eye of the totally unemployed, gave loud thumps for attention on the floor with his walking-stick.

"Come along, Valerie!" he bawled. "Late again! Reading love-letters, I suppose. Any damned man can get you now, you bitch, while I'm laid up; and I can't do a thing about it."

"Coming, Basil," she called, pouring his hot water from the kettle into the can.

Basil grumbled away to himself, almost genially. "You just wait till I'm up and about again, that's all."

"What did you say, Basil?" asked Valerie, as she ran up the stairs.

"I said just you wait till I'm up again."

"Well, dear," she said, "that won't be so long now. The doctor says he hopes you can come downstairs next week. Come along now and be a good boy and let me help you wash! That's it. Ups-a-daisy!"

She washed him, clutching to herself her secret **dream**: the dream which she had made safe for **Philip**; for herself.

