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IT MAY NEVER HAPPEN

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By the same Author

★

DEAD MAN LEADING
NOTHING LIKE LEATHER
YOU MAKE YOUR OWN LIFE
IN MY GOOD BOOKS

It May Never Happen

& OTHER STORIES

by

V. S. PRITCHETT

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TO
~~FOR~~
MY WIFE.

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THE SAILOR

He was lifting his knees high and putting his hand up, when I first saw him, as if, crossing the road through that stringing rain, he were breaking through the bead curtain of a Pernambuco bar. I knew he was going to stop me. This part of the Euston Road is a beat of the men who want a cup of tea or their fare to a job in Luton or some outlying town.

"Beg pardon, chum," he said in an anxious hot-potato voice. "Is that Whitechapel?"

He pointed to the traffic clogged in the rain farther down where the electric signs were printing off the advertisements and daubing them on the wet road. Coatless, with a smudged trilby hat on the back of his head so that a curl of boot polish black hair glistened with raindrops over his forehead, he stood there squeezing the water in his boots and looking at me, from his bilious eyes, like a man drowning and screaming for help in two feet of water and wondering why the crowd is laughing.

"That's St. Pancras," I said.

"Oh, Gawd," he said, putting his hand to his jaw like a man with toothache. "I'm all messed up." And he moved on at once, gaping at the lights ahead.

"Here, wait," I said. "Which part of Whitechapel do you want? Where have you come from?"

"Surrey Docks," he said. "They said it was near Surrey Docks, see, but they put me wrong. I bin on the road since ten this morning."

"Acton," he read a bus sign aloud, recalling the bottom of the day's misery. "I bin there," and fascinated, watched the bus out of sight.

The man's worried mouth dropped open. He was sodden. His clothes were black with damp. The smell of it came off him. The rain stained from the shoulders of his suit past the armpits over the ribs to the waist. It spread from dark blobs

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over his knees to his thighs. He was a greasy looking man, once fat and the fat had gone down unevenly like a deflating bladder. He was calming as I spoke to him.

A sailor, of course, and lost. Hopelessly, blindly lost. I calculated that he must have wandered twenty miles that day exhausting a genius for misdirection.

"Here," I said. "You're soaked. Come and have a drink."

There was a public-house nearby. He looked away at once.

"I never touch it," he said. "It's temptation."

I think it was that word which convinced me the sailor was my kind of man. I am, on the whole, glad to say that I am a puritan and the word temptation went home, painfully, pleasantly, excitingly and intimately familiar. A most stimulating and austere gregarious word, it indicates either the irresistible hypocrite or the fellow-struggler with sin. I couldn't let him go after that.

Presently we were in a café drinking acrid Indian tea.

"Off a ship?" I said.

He looked at me as if I were a magician who could read his soul.

"Thank Gawd I stopped you," he said. "I kep' stopping people all day and they messed me up, but you been straight."

He gave me his papers, his discharge paper, his pension form, official letters, as he said this, like a child handing himself over. Albert Edward Thompson, they said, cook, born '96, invalided out of the service two years before. So he was not just off a ship.

"They're clean," he said suspiciously when I asked him about this. "I got ulcers, riddled with ulcers for fourteen years."

He had no job and that worried him, because it was the winter. He had ganged on the road, worked in a circus, had been a waiter in an Italian restaurant. But what worried him much more was getting to Whitechapel. He made it sound to me as though for two years he had been threshing about the

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country, dished by one job and another, in a less and less successful attempt to get there.

"What job are you going to do?" I said.

"I don't know," he said.

"It's a bad time," I said.

"I fall on my feet," he said, "like I done with you."

We sat opposite to each other at the table. He stared at the people in the café with his appalled eyeballs. He was scared of them and they looked scared too. He looked as though he was going to give a yell and spring at them; in fact, he was likelier to have gone down on his knees to them and to have started sobbing. They couldn't know this. And then he and I looked at each other and the look discovered that we were the only two decent, trustworthy men in a seedy and grabbing world. Within the next two hours I had given him a job. I was chum no longer, but "Sir". "Chum" was anarchy and the name of any twisty bleeder you knocked up against, but "sir" (for Thompson, out of the naval nursery) was hierarchy, order, pay-day and peace.

I was living alone in the country in those days. I had no one to look after me. I gave Albert Thompson some money, I took him to Whitechapel and wrote down the directions for his journey to my house.

The bungalow where I lived was small and stood just under the brow of a hill. The country was high and stony there. The roads broke up into lanes, the lanes sank into woods and cottages were few. The oak woods were naked and as green as canker. They stood like old men, and below them were sweet plantations of larch where the clockwork pheasants went off like toys in the rainy afternoons. At night you heard a farm dog bark like a pistol and the oceanic sound of the trees and sometimes, over an hour and half's walk away, the whistle of a train. But that was all. The few people looked as though they had grown out of the land, sticks and stones in cloth; they were old people chiefly. In the one or two bigger houses they were childless. It was derelict country; frost with its teeth fast

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in the ground, the wind running finer than sand through a changeless sky or the solitary dribble of water in the butts and the rain legging it over the grass—that was all one heard or saw there.

“Gawd!” said Thompson when he got there. “~~I~~^I thought I’d never strike the place.” Pale, coatless again in the wet, his hat tipped back from a face puddingy and martyred, he came up the hill with the dancing step of a man treading on nails. He had been lost again. He had travelled by the wrong train, even by the wrong line, he had assumed that, as in towns, it was safest to follow the crowd. But country crowds soon scatter. He had been following people—it sounded to me—to half the cottages for miles around.

“Then I come to the Common,” he said. “I didn’t like the look of that. I kept round it.”

At last some girl had shown him the way.

I calmed him down. We got to my house and I took him to his room. He sat down on the bed and told me the story again. He took off his boots and socks and looked at his blistered feet, murmuring to them as if they were a pair of orphans. There was a woman in the train with a kid, he said, and to amuse the kid he had taken out his jack-knife. The woman called the Guard.

After we had eaten and I had settled in I went for a walk that afternoon. The pleasure of life in the country for me is in its monotony. One understands how much of living is habit, a long war to which people, plants and animals have settled down. In the country one expects nothing of people; they are themselves, not bringers of gifts. In towns one asks too little or too much of them.

The drizzle had stopped when I went out, the afternoon was warmer and inert and the dull stench of cattle hung over the grass. On my way down the hill I passed the bungalow which was my nearest neighbour. I could see the roof as pink as a slice of salt ham, from the top of my garden. The bungalow

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was ten years old. A chicken man had built it. Now the woodwork was splitting and shrinking, the garden was rank, two or three larches, which the rabbits had been at, showed above the dead grass and there was a rose-bush. The bush had one frozen and worm-eaten flower which would stick there half the winter. The history of the bungalow was written in the tin bath by the side door. The bath was full of gin, beer and whisky bottles, discarded after the week-end parties of many tenants. People took the place for ever and then, after a month or two, it changed hands. A business man, sentimental about the country, an invalid social worker, a couple with a motor bicycle, an inseparable pair of school-teachers with big legs and jumping jumpers; and now there was a woman I hardly saw, a Colonel's daughter, but the place was said to belong to a man in the Northampton boot trade.

A gramophone was playing when I walked by. Whenever I passed, the Colonel's daughter was either playing the gramophone or digging in the garden. She was a small girl in her late twenties, with a big knowledgeable-looking head under tobacco-brown curls, and the garden fork was nearly as big as herself. Her gardening never lasted long. It consisted usually of digging up a piece of the matted lawn in order to bury tins; but she went at it intensely, drawing back the fork until her hair fell over her face and the sweat stood on her brow. She always had a cigarette in her mouth, and every now and then the carnation skin of her face, with its warm, dark blue eyes, would be distorted and turned crimson by violent bronchial coughing. When this stopped she would straighten up, the delicacy came back to her skin and she would say, "Oh, Christ. Oh, bloody hell" and you noticed at the end of every speech the fine right eyebrow would rise a little and the lid of the eye below it would quiver. This wink, the limpid wink of the Colonel's daughter, you noticed at once. You wondered what it meant and planned to find out. It was as startling and enticing as a fish rising, and you discovered when you went after it that the Colonel's

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daughter was the hardest drinking and most blasphemous piece of apparent childish innocence you had ever seen. Old men in pubs gripped their sticks, went scarlet and said someone ought to take her drawers down and give her a tanning. I got a sort of fame from being a neighbour of the Colonel's daughter. "Who's that piece we saw down the road?" people asked.

"Her father's in the Army."

"Not," two or three of them said, for this kind of wit spreads like measles, "the Salvation Army." They said I was a dirty dog. But I hardly knew the Colonel's daughter. Across a field she would wave, utter her obscenity, perform her wink and edge off on her slight legs. Her legs were not very good. But if we met face to face on the road she became embarrassed and nervous; this was one of her dodges. "Still alone?" she said,

"Yes. And you?"

"Yes. What do you do about sex?"

"I haven't got any."

"Oh, God, I wish I'd met you before."

When I had friends she would come to the house. She daren't come there when I was alone, she said. Every night, she said, she locked and bolted up at six. Then the wink—if it was a wink. The men laughed. She did not want to be raped, she said. Their wives froze and some curled up as if they had got the blight and put their hands hard on their husbands' arms. But the few times she came to the house when I was alone, the Colonel's daughter stood by the door, the full length of the room away, with a guilty look on her face.

When I came back from my walk the gramophone had stopped. The Colonel's daughter was standing at the door of her bungalow with her sleeves rolled up, a pail of water beside her and a scrubbing brush in her hand.

"Hullo," she said awkwardly.

"Hullo," I said.

"I see you've got the Navy down here. I didn't know you were that way."

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"I thought you would have guessed that straight away," I said.

"I found him on the common crying this morning. You've broken his heart." Suddenly she was taken by a fit of coughing.

"Well," she said. "Every day brings forth something."

When I got to the gate of my bungalow I saw that at any rate if Thompson could do nothing else he could bring forth smoke. It was travelling in thick brown funnel puffs from the short chimney of the kitchen. The smoke came out with such dense streaming energy that the house looked like a destroyer racing full steam ahead into the wave of hills. I went down the path to the kitchen and looked inside. There was Thompson, not only with his sleeves rolled up but his trousers also, and he was shovelling coal into the kitchener with the garden spade, the face of the fire was roaring yellow, the water was throbbing and sighing in the boiler, the pipes were singing through the house.

"Bunkering," Thompson said.

I went into the sitting-room. I thought I had come into the wrong house. The paint had been scrubbed, the floors polished like decks, the reflections of the firelight danced in them, the windows gleamed and the room was glittering with polished metal. Door-knobs, keyholes, fire-irons, window-catches, were polished; metal which I had no idea existed flashed with life.

"What time is supper piped—er ordered," said Thompson, appearing in his stockinged feet. His big round eyes started out of their dyspeptic shadows and became enthusiastic when I told him the hour.

A change came over my life after this. Before Thompson everything had been disorganized and wearying. He drove my papers and clothes back to their proper places. He brought the zest and routine of the Royal Navy into my life. He kept to his stockinged feet out of tenderness for those orphans, a kind of repentance for what he had done to them; he was collarless and

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he served food with a splash as if he allowed for the house to give a pitch or a roll which didn't come off. His thumbs left their marks on the plates. But he was punctual. He lived for "Orders". "All ready, sir," he said, planking down the dish and looking up at the clock at the same moment. Burned, perhaps, spilling over the side, invisible beneath Bisto—but on time!

The secret of happiness is to find a congenial monotony. My own housekeeping had suffered from the imagination. Thompson put an end to this tiring chase of the ideal. "What's orders for lunch, sir?"

"Do you a nice fried chop and chips?" he said. That was settled. He went away but soon he came back.

"What pudding's ordered, sir?" That stumped both of us, or it stumped me. Thompson watched me to time his own suggestion.

"Do you a nice spotted dick?" So it was. We had this on the second day and the third, we changed on the fourth, but on the fifth we came back to it. Then Thompson's mind gave a leap.

"Do you grilled chop, chips, spotted dick *and custard*?" he said. That became almost our fixed menu. There were bouts of blanc-mange, but spotted dick came back.

Thompson had been sinking towards semi-starvation, I to the insidious Oblomovism of the country. Now we were reformed and happy.

"I always fall on my feet," he said, "like I done with you." It was his refrain.

The winter dripped like a tap, the fog hardly left our hill. Winter in England has the colourless, steaming look of a fried-fish shop-window. But we were stoking huge fires, we bunkered, the garden spade went through coal by the hundred-weight. We began to talk a more tangy dialect. Things were not put away; they were "stowed". 'String appeared in strange knots to make things "fast", plants were "lashed" in the dying

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garden, washing was "hoist" on the lines, floors were "swabbed". The kitchen became the "galley". The postman came "along-side", all meals were "piped" and at bedtime we "piped down". At night, hearing the wind bump in the chimneys and slop like ocean surf in the woods, looking out at the leather darkness, I had the sensation that we were creeping down the Mersey in a fog or lumping about in the Atlantic swell off Ushant.

I was happy. But was Thompson happy? He seemed to be. In the mornings we were both working, but in the afternoons there was little more to do. He sat on a low chair with his knees close to the bars of the range or on the edge of his bed, darning his clothes. (He lived in a peculiar muddle of his own and he was dirty in his own quarters.) In the evenings he did the same and sometimes we talked. He told me about his life. There was nothing in it at all. It was buried under a mumble of obscurity. His memories were mainly of people who hadn't "behaved right", a dejecting moral wilderness with Thompson mooching about in it, disappointed with human nature. He didn't stay to talk with me much. He preferred the kitchen where, the oil-lamp smoking, the range smoking and himself smoking, he sat chewing it all over, gazing into the fire.

"You can go out, you know," I said, "whenever you want. Do what you like."

"I'm O.K.," he said.

"See some of the people," I said. Thompson said he'd just as lief stand by.

Everyone knows his own business best. But I was interested one night when I heard the sound of voices in the kitchen. Someone had come in. The voices went on on other nights. Who was it? The milker from the farm probably or the cowman who cleaned out cess pits by lantern light at night and talked with nostalgia about burying bodies during the war. "If there hadn't been a war," this man used to say, "I wouldn't have seen nothing. It was an education."

I listened. Slow in question, slow in answer, the monotonous

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voices came. The woodcutter, the postman? I went into the kitchen to see who the profound and interminable crony was.

There was no one. There was only Thompson in the kitchen. Sitting close to the fire with all windows closed, a sallow, stupefied, oil-haired head in his own fug, Thompson was spelling out a story from a *Wild West Magazine*. It was old and dirty and his coal-blackened finger was moving from word to word.

So far Thompson had refused to go out of the house except as far as the coal-shed, but I was determined after this discovery that he should go out. I waited until pay-day.

"Here's your money," I said. "Take the afternoon off."

Thompson stepped back from the money.

"You keep it," he said, in a panic. "You keep it for me."

"You may need it," I said. "For a glass of beer or cigarettes or something."

"If I have it I'll lose it," he said. "They'll pinch it."

"Who?" I said.

"People," Thompson said. I could not persuade him.

"All right, I'll keep it for you," I said.

"Yes," he said eagerly. "If I want a bob I'll ask you. Money's temptation," he said.

"Well, anyway," I said "take the afternoon off. It's the first sunny afternoon we've had. I'll tell you where to go. Turn to the right in the lane . . ."

"I don't like them lanes," said Thompson, looking suspiciously out of the window. "I'll stay by you."

"Well, take a couple of hours," I said. "We all need fresh air."

He looked at me as if I had suggested he should poison himself; indeed as if I were going to do the poisoning.

"What if I do an hour?" he began to bargain.

"No, the afternoon," I said.

"Do you half an hour?" he pleaded.

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"All right, I don't want to force you," I said. "This is a free country. Go for an hour."

It was like an auction.

"Tell you what," he said, looking shifty. "I'll do you twenty minutes." He thought he had tricked me, but I went back into the kitchen and drove him to it. I had given him an overcoat and shoes, and it was this appeal to his vanity which got him. Out he went for his twenty minutes. He was going straight down the lane to where it met the main road and then straight back; it would take a smart walker about twelve minutes on a winter's day.

When an hour passed I was pleased with myself. But when four hours had gone by and darkness came I began to wonder. I went out to the gate. The land and the night had become one thing. I had just gone in again when I heard loud voices and saw the swing of a lamp. There came Thompson with a labourer. The labourer, a little bandy man known as Fleas, stood like a bent bush with a sodden sack on his shoulders, snuffling in the darkness, and he grinned at me with the malevolence of the land.

"He got astray," he said, handing Thompson over.

"Gawd," exclaimed Thompson, exhausted. His face was the familiar pale suety agony. He was full of explanations. He was sweating like a scared horse and nearly hysterical. He'd been on the wrong course. He didn't know where to steer. One thing looked like another. Roads and lanes, woods and fields, mixed themselves together.

"Woods I seen," he said in horror. "And that common! It played me up proper."

"But you weren't anywhere near the common," I said.

"Then what was it?" he said.

That night he sat by the fire with his head in his hands.

"I got a mood," he said.

The next morning cigarette smoke blew past my window and I heard coughing. The Colonel's daughter was at the

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kitchen door talking to Thompson. "Cheero," I heard her say and then she came to my door and pushed it open. She stood there gravely and her eye winked. She was wearing a yellow jersey and looked as neat as a bird.

"You're a swine," she said.

"What have I done?"

"Raping women on the commons," she said. "Deserting your old friends, aren't you?"

"It's been too wet on the common," I said.

"Not for me," she said. "I'm always hopeful. I came across last night. There was the Minister's wife screaming in the middle of it. I sat on her head and calmed her down and she said a man had been chasing her. 'Stop screaming,' I said. 'You flatter yourself, dear.' It was getting dark and I carried her shopping-bag and umbrella for her and took her to her house. I often go and see her in the evenings. I've got to do something, haven't I? I can't stick alone in that bungalow all day and all night. We sit and talk about her son in China. When you're old you'll be lonely too."

"What happened on the common?"

"I think I'm drunk," said the Colonel's daughter, "but I believe I've been drunk since breakfast. Well, where was I? I'm losing my memory too. Well, we hadn't gone five minutes before I heard someone panting like a dog behind us and jumping over bushes. Old Mrs. Stour started screaming again. 'Stand still,' I said, and I looked and then a man came out of a tree about ten yards away. 'What the hell do you want?' I said. A noise came back like a sheep. 'Ma'am, ma'am, ma'am, ma'am,' it said."

"So that's where Thompson was," I said.

"I thought it was you," the Colonel's daughter said. "There's a woman set about me with a stick on the common," he said. "I didn't touch her, I was only following her," he said. "I reckoned if I followed her I'd get home".

"When they got to the wood Thompson wouldn't go into it

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and she had to take his hand; that was a mistake. He took his hand away and moved off. So she grabbed his coat. He struggled after this, she chased him into the thicket and told him not to be a fool, but he got away and disappeared, running on to the common.

"You're a damn swine," the Colonel's daughter said to me. "How would you like to be put down in the middle of the sea?"

She walked away. I watched her go up the path and lean on the gate opposite to stroke the nose of a horse. She climbed into the field and the horses, like hairy yokels, went off. I heard her calling them but they did not come.

When she was out of sight, the door opened behind me and Thompson came in.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "That young lady, sir. She's been round my kitchen door."

"Yes," I said.

He gaped at me and then burst out:

"I didn't touch her, straight I didn't. I didn't lay a finger on her."

"She didn't say you did. She was trying to help you."

He calmed down. "Yes, sir," he said.

When he came back into the room to lay the table I could see he was trying to catch my eye.

"Sir," he said at last, standing at attention. "Beg pardon, sir, the young lady . . ."

His mouth was opening and shutting, trying to shape a sentence.

"The young lady—she'd had a couple, sir," he said in a rush.

"Oh," I said, "don't worry about that. She often has."

"It's ruination, sir," said Thompson evangelically.

She did not come to the house again for many days, but when she came I heard him lock both kitchen doors.

Orders at the one extreme, temptation at the other, were the good and evil of Thompson's life. I no longer suggested that he went out. I invented errands and ordered him to go. I

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wanted, in that unfortunate way one has, to do good to Thompson. I wanted him to be free and happy. At first he saw that I was not used to giving orders and he tried to dodge. His ulcers were bad, he said. Once or twice he went about barefoot, saying the sole was off one of his boots. But when he saw I meant what I said, he went. I used to watch him go, tilted forward on his toes in his half-running walk, like someone throwing himself blindly upon the mercy of the world. When he came back he was excited. He had the look of someone stupefied by incomprehensible success. It is the feeling a landsman has when he steps off a boat after a voyage. You feel giddy, canny, surprised at your survival after crossing that bridge of deep, loose water. You boast. So did Thompson—morally.

"There was a couple of tramps on the road," Thompson said. "I steered clear. I never talked to them," he said.

"Someone asked me who I was working for." He described the man. "I never told him," he said shrewdly. "I just said 'A gentleman'. Meaning you," he said.

There was a man in an allotment who had asked him for a light and wanted to know his business.

"I told him I didn't smoke," said Thompson. "You see my meaning—you don't know what it's leading up to. There warn't no harm, but that's how temptation starts."

What was temptation? Almost everything was temptation to Thompson. Pubs, cinemas, allotments, chicken-runs, tobacco-shops—in these, everywhere, the tempter might be. Temptation, like Othello's jealousy, was the air itself.

"I expect you'd like to go to church," I said. He seemed that kind.

"I got nothing *against* religion," Thompson said. "But best keep clear. They see you in church and the next thing they're after you."

"Who?" I asked.

"People," he said. "It's not like a ship."

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I was like him, he said, I kept myself to myself. I kept out of temptation's way. He was glad I was like that, he said.

It was a shock to me that while I observed Thompson, Thompson observed me. At the same time one prides oneself, the moment one's character is defined by someone else, on defeating the definition. I kept myself to myself? I avoided temptation? That was all Thompson knew! There was the Colonel's daughter. I might not see her very often; she might be loud, likeable, dreary or alarming by turns, but she was Temptation itself. How did he know I wasn't tempted? Thompson's remark made me thrill. I began to see rather more of the Colonel's daughter. ✓

And so I discovered how misleading he had been about his habits and how, where temptation was concerned, he made a difference between profession and practice. So strong was Thompson's feeling about temptation that he was drawn at once to every tempter he saw. He stopped them on the road and was soon talking about it. The postman was told. The shopkeepers heard all his business and mine. He hurried after tramps, he detained cyclists, he sat down on the banks with road-makers and ditchers, telling them the dangers of drink, the caution to be kept before strangers. And after he had done this he always ended by telling them he kept himself to himself, avoided drink, ignored women and, patting his breast pocket, said that was where he kept his money and his papers. He behaved to them exactly as he had behaved with me two months before in the Euston Road. The Colonel's daughter told me. She picked up all the news in that district.

"He's a decent, friendly soul," muttered the Colonel's daughter thickly. "You're a prig. Keep your hair on. You can't help it. I expect you're decent, too, but you're like all my bloody so-called friends."

"Oh," I said hopefully, "are prigs your special line?"

I found out, too, why Thompson was always late when he came home from his errands. I had always accepted that he was

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lost. And so he was in a way, but he was lost through wandering about with people, following them to their doorsteps, drifting to their allotments, backyards and, all the time, telling them, as he clung to their company, about the dangers of human intercourse. "I never speak to nobody"—it was untrue, but it was not a lie. It was simply a delusion.

"He lives in two worlds at once," I said to the Colonel's daughter one morning. I had sent Thompson to the town to buy the usual chops, and I was sitting in her bungalow. This was the first time I had ever been in it. The walls were of varnished match-boarding like the inside of a gospel hall and the room was heated by a paraffin stove which smelled like armpits. There were two rexine covered chairs, a rug and a table in the room. She was sorting out gramophone records as I talked and the records she did not like she dropped to the floor and broke. She was listening very little to what I said but walked to the gramophone, put on a record, stopped it after a few turns and then switching it off, threw the record away.

"Oh, you know a hell of a lot, don't you?" she said. "I don't say you're not an interesting man, but you don't get on with it, do you?"

"How old are you? Twenty-five?" I said.

Her sulking, ironical expression went. She was astonished.

"Good God!" she exclaimed with a smile of sincerity. "Don't be a damn fool." Then she frowned. "Or are you being professionally clever?"

"Here," she said. "I was damn pretty when I was twenty-five. I'm thirty-nine. I've still got a good figure."

"I would have put you at twenty-seven at the most," I said truthfully.

She walked towards me. I was sitting on the arm-chair and she stood very close. She had never been as close to me before. I had thought her eyes were dark-blue but now I saw they were green and grey, with a moist lascivious haze in them and yet dead and clock-like, like a cat's on a sunless day. And the

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skin, which had seemed fresh to me, I saw in its truth for the first time. It was clouded and flushed, clouded with that thickened pimpled ruddiness which the skin of heavy drinkers has and which in middle-age becomes bloated and mottled. I felt: this is why she has always stood the length of the room away before.

She saw what was in my mind and she sat down on the chair opposite to me. The eye winked.

"Keep control of yourself," she said. "I came down here for a rest and now you've started coming round."

"Only in the mornings," I said.

She laughed. She went to a bookshelf and took down a bottle of whisky and poured out half a tumblerful.

"This is what you've done coming in here, early bird," she said. "Exciting me on an empty stomach. I haven't touched it for ten days. I had a letter this morning. From my old man."

"Your father?"

I had always tried to imagine the Colonel. She gave a shout of cheerful laughter and it ended in coughing till tears came to her eyes.

"That's rich. God, that's rich. Keen observer of women! No, from my husband, darling. He's not my husband, damn him, of course, but when you've lived with someone for ten years and he pays the rent and keeps you, he is your husband, isn't he? Or ought to be. Ten years is a long time and his family thought he ought to be married. He thought so too. So he picked up a rich American girl and pushed me down here to take it easy in the country. I'm on the dole like your sailor boy. Well, I said, if he felt that way, he'd better have his head. In six months he'll tire of the new bitch. So I left him alone. I didn't want to spoil his fun. Well, now, he writes me, he wants to bring his *fiancée* down because she's heard so much about me and adores the country. . . ."

I was going to say something indignant.

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"He's nice too," she said casually. "He sells gas-heaters. You'd like him all the same. But blast that bloody woman," she said raising her cool voice. "She's turned him into a snob. I'm just his whore now."

"Don't look so embarrassed," she said. "I'm not going to cry."

"For ten years," she said, "I read books, I learned French, educated myself, learned to say 'How d'you do', instead of 'Pleased to meet you', and look down my nose at everything in his sort of way. And I let him go about saying my father was in the Army too, but they were such bloody fools they thought he must be a Colonel. They'd never heard of sergeant-majors having children. Even my old man, bless his heart," she smiled affectionately, "thought or let himself think they did. I was a damn silly little snob."

"I don't know him," I said. "But he doesn't sound much good to me."

"That's where you're wrong," she said sharply. "Just weak, poor kid, that's all. You don't know what it is to be ashamed your mother's a housemaid. I got over it—but he didn't, that's all."

She paused and the wink gave its signal.

"This is more embarrassing than I thought," she said.

"I am very sorry," I said. "Actually I am in favour of snobbery, it is a sign of character. It's a bad thing to have, but it's a bad thing not to have had. You can't help having the diseases of your time."

"There you go," she said.

The suffering of others is incredible. When it is obscure it seems like a lie; when it is garish and raw, it is like boasting. It is a challenge to oneself. I got up from my chair and went towards her. I was going to kiss her.

"You are the sentimental type," she said.

So I didn't kiss her.

Then we heard someone passing the bungalow and she went

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to the window. Thompson was going by. The lock of black hair was curling over his sweating forehead and he gave a hesitant staggering look at the bungalow. There was a lump of fear on his face.

“He’d better not know where you’ve been,” she said. She moved her lips to be kissed, but I walked out.

I was glad of the steady sense of the fresh grey air when I got outside. I was angry and depressed. I stood at the window of my house. Thompson came in and was very talkative. He’d been lost, of course. He’d seen people. He’d seen fields. He’d heard trees. He’d seen roads. I hardly listened. I was used to the jerky wobbling voice. I caught the words “legion” and “temptation”, and thought he was quoting from the Bible. Presently I realized he was talking about the British Legion. The postman had asked him to go to a meeting of the British Legion that night. How simple other people’s problems are! Yet “No” Thompson was saying. He was not going to the British Legion. It was temptation.

I ought to have made love to her and kissed her I was thinking. She was right, I was a prig.

“You go,” I said to Thompson, “if you want to. You’d enjoy it.”

But how disgusting, obvious, stupid, to have made love to her then, I thought.

“Do as you like,” I said.

“I’m best alongside you,” said Thompson.

“You can’t always be by me,” I said. “In a month, perhaps less, as you know, I’ll be leaving here and you’ll have to go.”

“Yes,” he said. “You tol’ me. You been straight. I’ll be straight with you. I won’t go to the Legion.”

We ate our meal and I read.

“In every branch of our spiritual and material civilization we seem to have reached a turning point,” I read. “This spirit shows itself not only in the actual state of public affairs . . .”

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Well, I thought, I can ask her over to-night. I needn't be a fool twice. I went out for an hour. When I returned Thompson was fighting Temptation hard. If he went to the Legion how would he get back? No, best not. He took the Legion on in its strength. (She is a type, I thought.) At four he was still at it. At five he asked me for his money. (Well, we are all types, I was thinking.) Very shortly he brought the money back and asked me to keep his pension papers. At half-past six I realized this meant that Thompson was losing and the Legion and all its devils winning. (What is a prig, anyway?) He was looking out at the night. Yet, just when I thought he had lost, he had won. There was the familiar sound of the Wild West monologue in the kitchen. It was half-past eight. The Legion was defeated.

I was disappointed in Thompson. Really, not to have had more guts than that! Restlessly I looked out of the window. There was a full moon spinning on the tail of a dying wind. Under the moonlight the fields were like wideawake faces, the woods like womanish heads of hair upon them. I put on my hat and coat and went out. I was astonished by the circle of stars. They were as distinct as figures on a clock. I took out my watch and compared the small time in my hand with the wide time above. Then I walked on. There was a sour smell at the end of the wood, where, no doubt a dead rabbit or pigeon was rotting.

I came out of the wood on to the metalled road. Suddenly my heart began to beat quickly as I hurried down the road, but it was a long way round now. I cut across fields. There was a cottage and a family were listening to a dance-band on the wireless. A man was going the rounds of his chickens. There was a wheelbarrow and there were spades and steel bars where a water mill was being built.

Then I crossed the last fields and saw the bungalow. My heart throbbed heavily and I felt all my blood slow down and my limbs grow heavy. It was only when I got to the road

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that I saw there were no lights in the bungalow. The Colonel's daughter, the Sergeant's daughter, had gone to bed early like a child. While I stood I heard men's voices singing across the fields. It must have gone ten o'clock and people were coming out of the public-house. In all the villages of England, at this hour, loud-voiced groups were breaking up and dispersing into the lanes.

I got to my house and lit a candle. The fire was low. I was exhausted and happy to be in my house among my own things, as if I had got into my own skin again. There was no light in the kitchen. Thompson had gone to bed. I grinned at the thought of the struggles of poor Thompson. I picked up a book and read. I could hear still the sound of that shouting and singing. The beer was sour and flat in this part of the country but it made people sing.

The singing voices came nearer. I put down the book. An argument was going on in the lane. I listened. The argument was nearing the cottage. The words got louder. They were going on at my gate. I heard the gate go and the argument was on my path. Suddenly—there could be no doubt—people were coming to the door. I stood up, I could recognize no voice. Loud singing, stumbling feet, then bang! The door broke open and crashed against the wall. Tottering, drunk, with their arms round each other, Thompson and the Colonel's daughter nearly fell into the room.

Thompson stared at me with terror.

"Stand up, sailor," said the Colonel's daughter, clinging to him.

"He was lonely," she said unsteadily to me. "We've been playing gramophone records. Sing," she said.

Thompson was still staring.

"Don't look at him. Sing," she said. Then she gave a low laugh and they fell, bolt upright on the sofa like prim, dishevelled dolls.

A look of wild love of all the world came into Thompson's

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eyes and he smiled as I had never seen him smile before. He suddenly opened his twitching mouth and bawled:

“You’ve robbed every tailor,
And you’ve skinned every sailor,
But you won’t go walking Paradise Street no more.”

“Go on. That’s not all,” the Colonel’s daughter cried and sang, “Go on—something—something, deep and rugged shore.”

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him. He gaped at her with panic and looked at her skirt. It was undone.

He pointed at her leg in consternation. The sight sobered him. He pulled away his arms and rushed out of the room. He did not come back. She looked at me and giggled. Her eyes were warm and shining. She picked leaves off her skirt.

“Where’s he gone? Where’s he gone?” she kept asking.

“He’s gone to bed,” I said.

She started a fit of coughing. It strained her throat. Her eyes were dilated like an animal’s, caught in a trap and she held her hand to her chest.

“I wish,” she cried hysterically, pointing at me in the middle of her coughing, “I wish you could see your bloody face.”

She got up and called out.

“Thompson! Thompson!” And when he did not answer she sang out, “Down by the deep and rugged shore—
—ore-ore-ore.”

“What’s the idea?” I said.

“I want Thompson,” she said. “He’s the only man up here.”

Then she began to cry. She marched out to his room, but it was locked. She was wandering through the other rooms calling him and then she went out, away up the path. She went calling him all the way down to her bungalow.

In the morning Thompson appeared as usual. He brought the breakfast. He came in for “orders”. Grilled chop, did

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I think? And what about spotted dick? He seemed no worse. He behaved as though nothing had happened. There was no guilty look in his eyes and no apprehension. He made no apology. Lunch passed, tea-time and the day. I finished my work and went into the kitchen.

"Tell me," I said, "about last night."

Thompson was peeling potatoes. He used to do this into a bucket on the floor, as if he were peeling for a whole crew. He put down the clasp-knife and stood up. He looked worried.

"That was a terrible thing," Thompson said, as if it was something he had read about in the papers.

"Terrible, sir. A young lady like that, sir. To come over here for me, an educated lady like that. Someone oughter teach her a lesson. Coming over and saying she wanted to play some music. I was took clean off my guard.

"It wasn't right," said Thompson. "Whichever way you look at it, it wasn't right. I told her she'd messed me up."

"I'm not blaming you. I want to know."

"And she waited till you was out," Thompson said. "That's not straight. She may class herself as an educated young lady, but do you know what I reckon she is? I reckon she's a jane."

I went down to the bungalow. I was beginning to laugh now. She was in the garden digging. Her sleeves were rolled up and she was sweating over the fork. The beds were thick with leaves and dead plants. I stood there watching her. She looked at me nervously for a moment. "I'm making the garden tidy," she said. "For Monday. When the bitch comes down."

She was shy and awkward. I walked on and, looking back, saw her go into the house. It was the last I ever saw of her. When I came back the fork she had been using was stuck in the flower bed where she had left it. She went to London that night and did not return.

"Thank Gawd," Thompson said.

There was a change in Thompson after this and there

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was a change in me. Perhaps the change came because the dirty February days were going, the air softer and the year moving. I was leaving soon. Thompson mentioned temptation no more. Now he went out every day. The postman was his friend. They used to go to the pub. He asked for his money. In the public-house the labourers sat around muttering in a language Thompson didn't understand. He stood them drinks. At his first pint he would start singing. They encouraged him. He stood them more drinks. The postman ordered them for him and then tapped him on the pocket book. They emptied his pockets every night. They despised him and even brought complaints to me about him after they had emptied his pockets.

Thompson came back across the common alone, wild, enthusiastic and moaning with suspicion by turns. The next day he would have a mood. All the countryside for ten miles around knew the sailor. He became famous.

Our last week came. He quietened down.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'll stay by you."

"You can't," I said. "I'll be going abroad."

"You needn't pay me," he said. "I'll stay by you." It was hard to make him understand he could not stay with me. He was depressed.

"Get me out of here safe," he pleaded at last. "Come with me to the station." He could not go on his own because all the people he knew would be after him. He had told them he was going. He had told them I was saving his pension and his last fortnight's pay. They would come creeping out of cottage doors and ditches for him. So I packed his things and got a taxi to call for us. How slowly we had lived and moved in these fields and lanes. Now we broke through it all with a rush as the car dropped down the hill and the air blew in at the window. As we passed the bungalow with the sun on its empty windows I saw the fork standing in the neglected

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bed. Then we swept on. Thompson sat back in the car so that no one should see him, but I leaned forward to see everything for the last time and forget it.

We got to the town. As the taxi slowed down in the streets people looked out of shops, doors, a potman nodded from the pub.

"Whatcha, Jack," the voices called.

The police, the fishmonger, boys going to school, dozens of people waved to him. I might have been riding with royalty. At the station a large woman sweeping down the steps of the bank, straightened up and gave a shout.

"Hi, Jacko!" she called, bending double, went into shrieks of laughter and called across to a friend at a first-floor window. It was a triumph. But Thompson ignored them all. He sat back out of sight.

"Thank Gawd I've got you," he said. "They skin you of everything."

We sat in the train. It was a two-hour journey.

"Once I strike Whitechapel," he said in the voice of one naming Singapore, "I'll be O.K." He said this several times, averting his face from the passing horror of the green fields.

"Don't you worry," he said. "Don't fret yourself for me. Don't you worry." His optimism increased as mine dwindled as we got nearer London. By the time we reached London he was almost shouting. "I'll fall on my feet, don't you worry. I'll send you my address."

We stood on the kerb and I watched him walk off into the yellow rain and the clogged, grunting and mewling traffic. He stepped right into it without looking. Taxis braked to avoid him. He was going to walk to Whitechapel. He reckoned it was safer.

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"OH, there you are, that's it, dear," said the mother, timidly clawing her son out of the darkness of the doorway and kissing him. "You got here all right. I couldn't look out for you; they've boarded up the window. We've had a land-mine. All the glass went last week. Have you had your tea? Have a cup of tea?"

"Well, let's see the boy," said the father. "Come in here to the light."

"I've had tea, thanks," Teddy said.

"Have another cup. It won't take a tick. I'll pop the kettle on. . . ."

"Leave the boy alone, old dear," the father said. "He's had his tea. Your mother's just the same, Teddy."

"I only thought he'd like a cup of tea. He must be tired," said the mother.

"Sit down, do, there's a good girl," said the father.

"Now—can Father speak? Thank you. Would you like to wash your hands, old chap?" the father said. "We've got the hot water back, you know."

"Yes, go on," said the mother, "wash your hands. They did the water yesterday."

"There she goes again," the father said. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

"No, I don't want to wash," said Teddy.

"He doesn't want to wash his hands," said the father, "so leave him alone."

"It's hot if he wants to."

"We know it's hot," said the father. "Well, my boy, sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"Take this chair. Don't have that one. It's a horrible old thing. Here, take this one," the mother said.

"He's all right. He's got a chair," the father said.

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"Let him sit where he likes," the mother said. "You do like that chair, Teddy, don't you?"

"Well," said Teddy, "you're looking well, Mother." This was not true; the mother looked ill. Her shoulders were hunched, her knees were bent and her legs bowed stiffly as she walked. When she smiled, tears ran to the corners of her eyes as if age were splitting them; and dirty shadows like finger-marks gave them the misplaced stare of anxiety. Her fingers, too, were twisting and untwisting the corners of her cardigan.

"Of course she's looking well. Nothing wrong with her, is there? What I keep saying," the father said.

He was a bit of a joker. He resembled a doll-like colonel from a magazine cover, but too easy in manner for that.

"I'm well now," said the mother. "It's just these old raids. They upset me, but I get over it."

"We worry about you," Teddy said.

"You shouldn't worry," said the father. "There's nothing to worry about, really. We're here, that's the chief point. We just don't worry at all."

"It doesn't do any good, Teddy dear," said the mother. She was sitting by the fire and she leaned over to him and gripped his knee hard. "We've had our life. I'm seventy, don't forget."

"Seventy," laughed his father. "She can't forget she's seventy. She doesn't look it."

"But I am," said his mother fiercely.

"Age is what you make it," the father said. "That's how I feel."

"There's a lot in that," said the son.

"I go to bed . . . and I lie there listening," the mother said. "I just wait for it to go. Your father, of course, he goes to sleep at once. He's tired. He has a heavy day. But I listen and listen," the mother said, "and when it goes I give him a shake and say 'It's gone'."

"I don't want to sound immodest," the father laughed,

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"but she nearly has my—my confounded pyjamas off me, sometimes."

"He just lies there. He'd sleep through it, guns and all," the mother went on. "But I couldn't do that. I sit on the edge of the bed. If it's bad I sit on the top of the stairs."

"We both do if it's bad," the father said. "I get up if it's bad."

"You ought to sit under the staircase, not on top," said Teddy.

"Just in case," said the mother. "I like to feel I can get out."

"You see, you want to get out," the father said. "It isn't that one's afraid, but—well—you feel more comfortable."

"I sit there and I know it's wrong of me, I think of you all, if I'll ever see any of you again. I wish you were with me. I never see you all, not together like we used to be . . ."

"It is natural for a mother to feel like that," said the father

"I mean if we could be not so far apart."

"We wish you'd come down to us," Teddy said.

"I wish I could, dear," said the mother.

"Why don't you? You could, easily."

"I'd like to, but I can't."

"I don't see why not. Why don't you send her, Dad? Just for the rest."

"I've got to stay with Dad," she said.

"Your mother feels she's got to stay with me."

"But," Teddy said, "you could look after yourself for a while."

"I could look after myself all right," said the father. "Don't you worry about that."

"Well," said Teddy, "what's against it?"

"Nothing's against it," said his father. "Just herself. She feels her place is here. She just feels this is her place."

His father raised his chin and lowered his eyes bashfully. He had a small white moustache as slight as a monkey's, and

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it seemed to give a twist to the meaning of his words, putting them between sets of inverted commas.

The mother read his eyes slowly and fidgeted on her stool by the fire. She nodded from habit when she had got through her husband's words, but she glanced furtively at her son. She put on an air of light-heartedness, to close the subject.

"Some day I'll come," she said. "The Miss Andersons are very kind. They had us down last Sunday when the windows went. . . . It's safer downstairs."

"You know what I feel?" said his father, in a sprightly way. "I feel it's safe everywhere."

The son and the mother both looked at the father with very startled concern and sympathy, recognizing that in danger every one lives by his own foible. Then guiltily they glanced at each other.

"I feel it," said the father apologetically, when he saw their expression.

"I know it," he asserted, feebly scowling. Seeing he had embarrassed them, he escaped into a business-like mood. "Now I'm going down to see about the coal for the morning. I always do it at this time."

"He's wonderful," said the mother. "He always does the coal."

When the father left the room a great change came over the mother and son.

"Come nearer the fire, dear," said the mother. They were together. They came closer together like lovers.

"Just a minute, dear," she said. And she went to the curtains and peeped into the night. Then she came back to the stool.

"You see how it is, dear," she said. "He has faith." The son scowled.

"It's wonderful, his faith," she said. "He trusts in God."

A look of anger set on the son's jaw for a moment, then he wagged his head resignedly.

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"He always did. You remember, when you were a boy?" said the mother, humouring her son. "I never could. He did from the beginning when I met him. Mind you, Teddy, I don't say it's a bad thing. It's got him on. When one of those old things starts he goes to his room and he prays. I know he's praying. Really he's praying all the time, for me, for you children . . ."

"For us!" exclaimed the son.

"Yes, for everyone," said the mother. "The world—oh, I don't understand. If there's a God why did He let it happen in the first place?—but your father, he always did do things on a big scale."

She was speaking in a whisper and glancing now and then at the door.

"Too big," she murmured.

"If there is a God," said the son. "He is pitiable, weak, small. Hardly born . . ."

He checked himself when he saw that his mother looked at him without comprehension. "I am old," she shivered and he saw the tears cracking in her eyes. "I used to live in hope—you know for the future. You know, hope things would go right, hoping things for you children, but now I haven't even got hope." She looked wildly. "It's gone."

She stared over his shoulder to the walls of the room and the heavy curtains.

"It isn't this old war and these old raids," she said. "Life's gone, it's gone too quickly. There's nothing, Ted, that's how it seems to me, except if we could just be together as we were."

"Don't cry, Mother."

"No, mustn't cry, mustn't let him see I cried. Women do cry. It's silly. What shall we talk about? Let's think of something else."

She became sly and detached like a young girl running away, daring him to catch her. He knew these changes of mood in his mother very well. She began to talk in a bold taunting way.

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"It's the house," she said scornfully. "He doesn't like the house to be left. Someone must be in the house. It won't run away I tell him. Good thing if it was bombed. But his mother was just the same, cling on, cling on, scrubbing, polishing. 'You can't take it with you,' I used to say to her. She used to give me a look. 'Eh,' she said, 'you want me to die.' I can see her now. 'You wicked woman,' I said. And when they carried her out, the men bumped the coffin, dear, on the chest of drawers and I thought: 'If you could see that scratch!' Some call it faith. I call it property. Property."

His mother's eyes became sly and malicious. She laughed.

"Oh, there are things I could tell you," she cried recklessly, looking at the door. "When it starts and I hear the guns, I think of you. Things you don't know about, you were just a baby at the time. No one knows them. It's my life. All those years. Can you hear him? Is he coming upstairs?"

"No, I don't hear him."

"No, he'll be another minute or two. Quick, I'll show you something. Come along."

She got up and seizing her son's sleeve she nearly ran with him from the room.

"You're not to say anything," she said.

"His bedroom," she said. "Look at it."

It was simply a bedroom with too much furniture in it.

"Three chests of drawers," the son said. "What does he want with three?"

A look of wicked delight came into his mother's face, a look so merry that he knew he was saying what she wanted him to say.

"Two wardrobes," he exclaimed.

"Three with this!" exclaimed his mother, touching a cupboard in the corner, as if she were selling it.

"And then—just in case you want to read," his mother said satirically. She pointed one by one to several reading lamps by the bed, on the chests, on the dressing-table.

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"What's he want five for?" said the son.

"Shave?" said his mother excitedly, opening a heavy drawer. Inside was a number of razors and shaving things of all kinds. She bent to the drawer below.

"Locked," she said. Undismayed, she led him to the far wall. "Count," she said. The son began to count. At seventeen he stopped. There were many more than seventeen pairs of boots lined up, and at the end the son stopped with astonishment.

"Riding-boots. When does he ride?"

"He's never ridden in his life, my dear."

"Waders, climbing boots . . ." the son began to laugh.

"He never fished, did he?"

"When did he buy all this gear?"

"Oh, we haven't begun, dear. Look at this."

One by one she opened the wardrobes swiftly, allowed her son to glance, even to touch for a moment, and then swiftly closed the door. She showed him some thirty suits of clothes and more hats than he could count.

"I'll try one on," said the son laughing.

"No," said the mother, "he'd know you'd touched them."

"What's the idea of this hoard? It's madness," he said.

The word madness came to his head because, at this triumph of her secret-telling, she looked mad herself. Her eyes stared with all the malice of the mad, intent on their message. Then quickly as a mouse she scurried to the door and listened.

The son stood by the fireplace when she went to the door and looked at a picture over the mantelpiece. It was the only picture in the room. It was a picture of a tall, bareheaded, austere man in ancient robes, standing in the shadows of a crowded place, alone. And in those shadows crouched a prowling group of lions, their surly faces barred with scowls of anger and fear.

"Daniel in the Lion's Den. He loves old Daniel," said

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his mother, coming up behind him. "He's always talking of Daniel."

The son gaped at the picture. The room was filled with his father's life, but this picture seemed to be more profoundly his father's life than anything in the room. He suddenly felt ashamed of being in his father's room.

"Let's go back to the fire," the son said.

"Look, dear," the mother was pulling at his sleeve. "Something else, quick."

She took him to a chest of drawers and opened the drawers one by one.

"Pants," she said in her deceptive voice, and as she spoke she carefully lifted one or two of the garments. Underneath them was a silver cruet.

"Solid silver," she said. "Wait. Two dozen teaspoons. A set of fish-knives. All silver."

"Come along, Mother. I know, I know."

"Silver tea-tray. Kettle," she was at another drawer, ignoring him.

"Fish-knives, spoons, ink-stands . . ."

"Mother, stop . . ."

"You move this. It's heavy. Look at this one. Shirts." She was lifting the shirts and revealing under them a cache of silver cream-jugs, hot-water jugs . . .

"Oh dear," said his mother. "We never use them. We never see them. He thinks I don't know. He just comes home and goes straight to his bedroom and slips them in."

"Where does he pick up all this?" said the son.

"Ask no questions, hear no lies," said his mother.

"No, seriously, what's the idea?"

The old lady's face was marked suddenly by all the bewilderment of a lifetime. She was helpless.

"Don't ask me, dear," she said. "It's him. It's how he's always been."

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She looked at her son, exhausted and enquiring. She had suddenly lost interest. She was also frightened.

"Come out, in case he comes. You see, dear, how it is. We couldn't leave all that."

She turned out the lights and they walked back into the sitting-room.

"You're looking tired, dear," she said, in an unnatural voice, making conversation. "Do you sleep well?"

She went over to the curtain again and peeped out as she said this.

"Pretty well."

She came back to the fire.

"I know. You dream. Do you dream? I dream something chronic. Every night. Your father doesn't dream, of course. He just sleeps. He's always been like that. Sometimes I have a terrible dream. I dream, dear, that I'm in a palace, a king's palace, something like Windsor Castle, and I go into a great hall and it's filled with—treasure: well, things, beautiful—you know, armour, pictures, china, and I stand there and I can't get my breath and I say 'Oh. I must get out.' And I go out of a door just to get air to breathe. . . ."

"Indigestion," said her son.

"Is it? Well, through this door there's another room, just the same, but it's filled with commoner things—crockery, ironmongery, furniture—just like a second-hand shop, but thousands, dear, and I think, 'Oh, let me breathe,' and I hurry out of it by the door, and beyond that door," said the mother, holding his hand, "is another room. Ted, it's full of everything decaying, filthy. Oh, it's horrible dear. I wake up feeling sick."

"What is that?" asked the son, nodding to the ceiling. "Up there."

"On the ceiling?" she said. "Oh, that's our crack."
"It's getting bigger," she said. "It's a bad one."

THE LION'S DEN

"That was the land-mine, dear, the one that broke the windows. The one that killed old Mrs. Croft . . ."

"I know, Mother, don't . . ."

"I thought we had gone and I said, 'Oh Dad. We've gone.' Ted, dear, the dust!"

They looked at the ceiling. Beginning at the wall by the window, the crack was like a cut that has not closed.

"And perhaps it would have been a good thing if we had gone," she said, narrowing her eyes and searching her son's face with a look that terrified him. "We've had our life. What is your life? I watch that old crack and I say, 'Let's see. Are you getting larger?' But he sits there, quiet at his table and says 'Remember Daniel. There's nothing to be afraid of.' It's wonderful, really. He believes it. It does him good. There's just ourselves, dear, you see. You've all grown up, you've gone your own ways, you can't be here with me and it wouldn't be right if you could be. I always feel I've got you. I think to myself, I've got something, I've got you children. But he's got nothing. You mustn't take any notice of the things I say. I expect you know women just say things and don't know why they say them. . . . When I see him sitting there under the lamp, praying for me and you and all of us, I think, 'Poor old Daddy, that's all he's got—his faith. But I've got him.'"

"Ssh, Mother, don't cry. He's coming now," the son said. Quickly she sat on the stool by the fire and put her head forward so that the disorder of her face should be hidden in the glow of the flame.

The father tapped his fingers comically on the panel of the door.

"May I come in? Sure I'm not interrupting? Thank you. Mother and son," he smiled, nodding his head. "The old, old story, mother and son."

A flush of annoyance and guilt passed over the son's body and came to his lips in a jaunty, uneasy laugh.

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The father frowned.

"I say, old girl," he said. "I've just been outside. There was a chink of light showing in my room. We must be careful . . ."

"I was just showing Ted round," said the mother.

"Showing me round the estate," Ted said.

"I've switched it off," the mother said.

"Switch it on, old girl. Let's have that tea." He settled himself innocently on the edge of his chair with his legs tucked under it, and his pleased fingers joined over his waistcoat.

"It's a good thing I know your mother. How old are you, my boy—forty? In forty-five years I've got to know her," the father smiled.

The old lady nodded her head as she went over his words, and then she got up from her stool to make the tea.

"I don't think they'll come to-night, dear," she said with spirit.

"I'm here," the son laughed.

"Run along, old girl. Of course they won't," the father said, ordering and defending his own. "I just *know* they won't."

THE SAINT

WHEN I was seventeen years old I lost my religious faith. It had been unsteady for some time and then, very suddenly, it went as the result of an incident in a punt on the river outside the town where we lived. My uncle, with whom I was obliged to stay for long periods of my life, had started a small furniture-making business in the town. He was always in difficulties about money, but he was convinced that in some way God would help him. And this happened. An investor arrived who belonged to a sect called the Church of the Last Purification, of Toronto, Canada. Could we imagine, this man asked, a good and omnipotent God allowing his children to be short of money? We had to admit we could not imagine this. The man paid some capital into my uncle's business and we were converted. Our family were the first Purifiers—as they were called—in the town. Soon a congregation of fifty or more were meeting every Sunday in a room at the Corn Exchange.

At once we found ourselves isolated and hated people. Everyone made jokes about us. We had to stand together because we were sometimes dragged into the courts. What the unconverted could not forgive in us was first that we believed in successful prayer and, secondly, that our revelation came from Toronto. The success of our prayers had a simple foundation. We regarded it as "Error"—our name for Evil—to believe the evidence of our senses and if we had influenza or consumption, or had lost our money or were unemployed, we denied the reality of these things, saying that since God could not have made them they therefore did not exist. It was exhilarating to look at our congregation and to know that what the vulgar would call miracles were performed among us, almost as a matter of routine, every day. Not very big miracles, perhaps; but up in London and out in Toronto, we knew that

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deafness and blindness, cancer and insanity, the great scourges, were constantly vanishing before the prayers of the more advanced Purifiers.

"What!" said my schoolmaster, an Irishman with eyes like broken glass and a sniff of irritability in the bristles of his nose. "What! Do you have the impudence to tell me that if you fell off the top floor of this building and smashed your head in, you would say you hadn't fallen and were not injured?"

I was a small boy and very afraid of everybody, but not when it was a question of my religion. I was used to the kind of conundrum the Irishman had set. It was useless to argue, though our religion had already developed an interesting casuistry.

"I *would* say so," I replied with coldness and some vanity. "And my head would not be smashed."

"You would not say so," answered the Irishman. "You would not say so." His eyes sparkled with pure pleasure. "You'd be dead."

The boys laughed, but they looked at me with admiration.

Then, I do not know how or why, I began to see a difficulty. Without warning and as if I had gone into my bedroom at night and had found a gross ape seated in my bed and thereafter following me about with his grunts and his fleas and a look, relentless and ancient, scored on his brown face, I was faced with the problem which prowls at the centre of all religious faith. I was faced by the difficulty of the origin of evil. Evil was an illusion, we were taught. But even illusions have an origin. The Purifiers denied this.

I consulted my uncle. Trade was bad at the time and this made his faith abrupt. He frowned as I spoke.

"When did you brush your coat last?" he said. "You're getting slovenly about your appearance. If you spent more time studying books"—that is to say, the Purification literature—"and less with your hands in your pockets and playing about with boats on the river, you wouldn't be letting Error in."

THE SAINT

All dogmas have their jargon; my uncle as a business man loved the trade terms of the Purification. "Don't let Error in," was a favourite one. The whole point about the Purification, he said, was that it was scientific and therefore exact; in consequence it was sheer weakness to admit discussion. Indeed, betrayal. He unpinched his pince-nez, stirred his tea and indicated I must submit or change the subject. Preferably the latter. I saw, to my alarm, that my arguments had defeated my uncle. Faith and doubt pulled like strings round my throat.

"You don't mean to say you don't believe that what our Lord said was true?" my Aunt asked nervously, following me out of the room. "Your uncle does, dear."

I could not answer. I went out of the house and down the main street to the river where the punts were stuck like insects in the summery flash of the reach. Life was a dream, I thought; no, a nightmare, for the ape was beside me.

I was still in this state, half sulking and half exalted, when Mr. Hubert Timberlake came to the town. He was one of the important people from the headquarters of our Church and he had come to give an address on the Purification at the Corn Exchange. Posters announcing this were everywhere. Mr. Timberlake was to spend Sunday afternoon with us. It was unbelievable that a man so eminent would actually sit in our dining-room, use our knives and forks, and eat our food. Every imperfection in our home and our characters would jump out at him. The Truth had been revealed to man with scientific accuracy—an accuracy we could all test by experiment—and the future course of human development on earth was laid down, finally. And here in Mr. Timberlake was a man who had not merely performed many miracles—even, it was said with proper reserve, having twice raised the dead—but who had actually been to Toronto, our headquarters; where this great and revolutionary revelation had first been given.

"This is my nephew," my uncle said, introducing me. "He lives with us. He thinks he thinks, Mr. Timberlake, but I tell

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him he only thinks he does. Ha, ha." My uncle was a humorous man when he was with the great. "He's always on the river," my uncle continued. "I tell him he's got water on the brain. I've been telling Mr. Timberlake about you, my boy."

A hand as soft as the best quality chamois leather took mine. I saw a wide upright man in a double-breasted navy blue suit. He had a pink square head with very small ears and one of those torpid, enamelled smiles which were said by our enemies to be too common in our sect.

"Why, isn't that just fine?" said Mr. Timberlake who, owing to his contacts with Toronto, spoke with an American accent. "What say we tell your uncle it's funny he think's he's funny."

The eyes of Mr. Timberlake were direct and colourless. He had the look of a retired merchant captain who had become decontaminated from the sea and had reformed and made money. His defence of me had made me his at once. My doubts vanished. Whatever Mr. Timberlake believed must be true and as I listened to him at lunch, I thought there could be no finer life than his.

"I expect Mr. Timberlake's tired after his address," said my aunt.

"Tired?" exclaimed my uncle, brilliant with indignation. "How can Mr. Timberlake be tired? Don't let Error in!"

For in our faith the merely inconvenient was just as illusory as a great catastrophe would have been, if you wished to be strict, and Mr. Timberlake's presence made us very strict.

I noticed then that, after their broad smiles, Mr. Timberlake's lips had the habit of setting into a long depressed sarcastic curve.

"I guess," he drawled, "I guess the Al-mighty must have been tired sometimes, for it says He re-laxed on the seventh day. Say, do you know what I'd like to do this afternoon," he said turning to me. "While your uncle and aunt are sleep-

THE SAINT

ing off this meal let's you and me go on the river and get water on the brain. I'll show you how to punt."

Mr. Timberlake, I saw to my disappointment, was out to show he understood the young. I saw he was planning a "quiet talk" with me about my problems.

"There are too many people on the river on Sundays," said my uncle uneasily.

"Oh, I like a crowd," said Mr. Timberlake, giving my uncle a tough look. "This is the day of rest, you know." He had had my uncle gobbling up every bit of gossip from the sacred city of Toronto all the morning.

My uncle and aunt were incredulous that a man like Mr. Timberlake should go out among the blazers and gramophones of the river on a Sunday afternoon. In any other member of our Church they would have thought this sinful.

"Waal, what say?" said Mr. Timberlake. I could only murmur.

"That's fixed," said Mr. Timberlake. And on came the smile as simple, vivid and unanswerable as the smile on an advertisement. "Isn't that just fine!"

Mr. Timberlake went upstairs to wash his hands. My uncle was deeply offended and shocked, but he could say nothing. He unpinched his glasses.

"A very wonderful man," he said. "So human," he apologized.

"My boy," my uncle said. "This is going to be an experience for you. Hubert Timberlake was making a thousand a year in the insurance business ten years ago. Then he heard of the Purification. He threw everything up, just like that. He gave up his job and took up the work. It was a struggle, he told me so himself this morning. 'Many's the time,' he said to me this morning, 'when I wondered where my next meal was coming from.' But the way was shown. He came down from Worcester to London and in two years he was making fifteen hundred a year out of his practice."

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To heal the sick by prayer according to the tenets of the Church of the Last Purification was Mr. Timberlake's profession.

My uncle lowered his eyes. With his glasses off the lids were small and uneasy. He lowered his voice too.

"I have told him about your little trouble," my uncle said quietly with emotion. I was burned with shame. My uncle looked up and stuck out his chin confidently.

"He just smiled," my uncle said. "That's all."

Then we waited for Mr. Timberlake to come down.

I put on white flannels and soon I was walking down to the river with Mr. Timberlake. I felt that I was going with him under false pretences; for he would begin explaining to me the origin of evil and I would have to pretend politely that he was converting me when, already, at the first sight of him, I had believed. A stone bridge, whose two arches were like an owl's pair of eyes gazing up the reach, was close to the landing-stage. I thought what a pity it was the flannelled men and the sunburned girls there did not know I was getting a ticket for *the* Mr. Timberlake who had been speaking in the town that very morning. I looked round for him and when I saw him I was a little startled. He was standing at the edge of the water looking at it with an expression of empty incomprehension. Among the white crowds his air of brisk efficiency had dulled. He looked middle-aged, out of place and insignificant. But the smile switched on when he saw me.

"Ready?" he called. "Fine!"

I had the feeling that inside him there must be a gramophone record going round and round, stopping at that word.

He stepped into the punt and took charge.

"Now I just want you to paddle us over to the far bank," he said, "and then I'll show you how to punt."

Everything Mr. Timberlake said still seemed unreal to me. The fact that he was sitting in a punt, of all commonplace material things, was incredible. That he should propose to

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pole us up the river was terrifying. Suppose he fell into the river? At once I checked the thought. A leader of our Church under the direct guidance of God could not possibly fall into a river.

The stream is wide and deep in this reach, but on the southern bank there is a manageable depth and a hard bottom. Over the clay banks the willows hang, making their basket-work print of sun and shadow on the water, while under the gliding boats lie cloudy, chloride caverns. The hoop-like branches of the trees bend down until their tips touch the water like fingers making musical sounds. Ahead in midstream, on a day sunny as this one was, there is a path of strong light which is hard to look at unless you half close your eyes and down this path on the crowded Sundays, go the launches with their parasols and their pennants; and also the rowing boats with their beetle-leg oars, which seem to dig the sunlight out of the water as they rise. Upstream one goes, on and on between the gardens and then between fields kept for grazing. On the afternoon when Mr. Timberlake and I went out to settle the question of the origin of evil, the meadows were packed densely with buttercups.

"Now," said Mr. Timberlake decisively when I had paddled to the other side. "Now I'll take her."

He got over the seat into the well at the stern.

"I'll just get you clear of the trees," I said.

"Give me the pole," said Mr. Timberlake standing up on the little platform and making a squeak with his boots as he did so. "Thank you, sir. I haven't done this for eighteen years but I can tell you, brother, in those days I was considered some poler."

He looked around and let the pole slide down through his hands. Then he gave the first difficult push. The punt rocked pleasantly and we moved forward. I sat facing him, paddle in hand, to check any inward drift of the punt.

"How's that, you guys?" said Mr. Timberlake looking round

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at our eddies and drawing in the pole. The delightful water sished down it.

"Fine," I said. Deferentially I had caught the word.

He went on to his second and his third strokes, taking too much water on his sleeve, perhaps, and uncertain in his steering, which I corrected, but he was doing well.

"It comes back to me," he said. "How am I doing?"

"Just keep her out from the trees," I said.

"The trees?" he said.

"The willows," I said.

"I'll do it now," he said. "How's that? Not quite enough? Well, how's this?"

"Another one," I said. "The current runs strong this side."

"What? More trees?" he said. He was getting hot.

"We can shoot out past them," I said. "I'll ease us over with the paddle."

Mr. Timberlake did not like this suggestion.

"No, don't do that. I can manage it," he said. I did not want to offend one of the leaders of our Church, so I put the paddle down; but I felt I ought to have taken him farther along away from the irritation of the trees.

"Of course," I said. "We could go under them. It might be nice."

"I think," said Mr. Timberlake, "that would be a very good idea."

He lunged hard on the pole and took us towards the next archway of willow branches.

"We may have to duck a bit, that's all," I said.

"Oh, I can push the branches up," said Mr. Timberlake.

"It is better to duck," I said.

We were gliding now quickly towards the arch, in fact I was already under it.

"I think I should duck," I said. "Just bend down for this one."

THE SAINT

"What makes the trees lean over the water like this?" asked Mr. Timberlake. "Weeping willows—I'll give you a thought there. How Error likes to make us dwell on sorrow. Why not call them *laughing* willows?" discoursed Mr. Timberlake as the branch passed over my head.

"Duck," I said.

"Where? I don't see them," said Mr. Timberlake turning round.

"No, your head," I said. "The branch," I called.

"Oh, the branch. This one?" said Mr. Timberlake finding a branch just against his chest and he put out a hand to lift it. It is not easy to lift a willow branch and Mr. Timberlake was surprised. He stepped back as it gently and firmly leaned against him. He leaned back and pushed from his feet. And he pushed too far. The boat went on, I saw Mr. Timberlake's boots leave the stern as he took an unthoughtful step backwards. He made a last minute grasp at a stronger and higher branch, and then, there he hung a yard above the water, round as a blue damson that is ripe and ready, waiting only for a touch to make it fall. Too late with the paddle and shot ahead by the force of his thrust, I could not save him.

For a full minute I did not believe what I saw; indeed our religion taught us never to believe what we saw. Unbelieving I could not move. I gaped. The impossible had happened. Only a miracle, I found myself saying, could save him.

What was most striking was the silence of Mr. Timberlake as he hung from the tree. I was lost between gazing at him and trying to get the punt out of the small branches of the tree. By the time I had got the punt out there were several yards of water between us and the soles of his boots were very near the water as the branch bent under his weight. Boats were passing at the time but no one seemed to notice us. I was glad about this. This was a private agony. A double chin had appeared on the face of Mr. Timberlake and his head

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was squeezed between his shoulders and his hanging arms. I saw him blink and look up at the sky. His eyelids were pale like a chicken's. He was tidy and dignified as he hung there, the hat was not displaced and the top button of his coat was done up. He had a blue silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. So unperturbed and genteel he seemed that as the tips of his shoes came nearer and nearer to the water, I became alarmed. He could perform what are called miracles. He would be thinking at this moment that only in an erroneous and illusory sense was he hanging from the branch of the tree over six feet of water. He was probably praying one of the closely reasoned prayers of our faith which were more like conversations with Euclid than appeals to God. The calm of his face suggested this. Was he, I asked myself, within sight of the main road, the town Recreation Ground and the landing-stage crowded with people, was he about to re-enact a well-known miracle? I hoped that he was not. I prayed that he was not. I prayed with all my will that Mr. Timberlake would not walk upon the water. It was my prayer and not his that was answered.

I saw the shoes dip, the water rise above his ankles and up his socks. He tried to move his grip now to a yet higher branch—he did not succeed—and in making this effort his coat and waistcoat rose and parted from his trousers. One seam of shirt with its pant-loops and brace-tabs broke like a crack across the middle of Mr. Timberlake. It was like a fatal flaw in a statue, an earthquake crack which made the monumental mortal. The last Greeks must have felt as I felt then, when they saw a crack across the middle of some statue of Apollo. It was at this moment I realized that the final revelation about man and society on earth had come to nobody and that Mr. Timberlake knew nothing at all about the origin of evil.

All this takes long to describe, but it happened in a few seconds as I paddled towards him. I was too late to get his

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feet on the boat and the only thing to do was to let him sink until his hands were nearer the level of the punt and then to get him to change hand-holds. Then I would paddle him ashore. I did this. Amputated by the water, first a torso, then a bust, then a mere head and shoulders, Mr. Timberlake, I noticed, looked sad and lonely as he sank. He was a declining dogma. As the water lapped his collar—for he hesitated to let go of the branch to hold the punt—I saw a small triangle of deprecation and pathos between his nose and the corners of his mouth. The head resting on the platter of water had the sneer of calamity on it, such as one sees in the pictures of a beheaded saint.

"Hold on to the punt, Mr. Timberlake," I said urgently. "Hold on to the punt."

He did so.

"Push from behind," he directed in a dry businesslike voice. They were his first words. I obeyed him. Carefully I paddled him towards the bank. He turned and, with a splash, climbed ashore. There he stood, raising his arms and looking at the water running down his swollen suit and making a puddle at his feet.

"Say," said Mr. Timberlake coldly, "we let some Error in that time."

How much he must have hated our family.

"I am sorry, Mr. Timberlake," I said. "I am most awfully sorry. I should have paddled. It was my fault. I'll get you home at once. Let me wring out your coat and waistcoat. You'll catch your death . . ."

I stopped. I had nearly blasphemed. I had nearly suggested that Mr. Timberlake had fallen into the water and that to a man of his age this might be dangerous.

Mr. Timberlake corrected me. His voice was impersonal, addressing the laws of human existence, rather than myself.

"If God made water it would be ridiculous to suggest He made it capable of harming his creatures. Wouldn't it?"

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"Yes," I murmured hypocritically.

"O.K.," said Mr. Timberlake. "Let's go."

"I'll soon get you across," I said.

"No," he said. "I mean let's go on. We're not going to let a little thing like this spoil a beautiful afternoon. Where were we going? You spoke of a pretty landing-place farther on. Let's go there."

"But I must take you home. You can't sit there soaked to the skin. It will spoil your clothes."

"Now, now," said Mr. Timberlake. "Do as I say. Go on."

There was nothing to be done with him. I held the punt into the bank and he stepped in. He sat like a bursting and sodden bolster in front of me while I paddled. We had lost the pole of course.

For a long time I could hardly look at Mr. Timberlake. He was taking the line that nothing had happened and this put me at a disadvantage. I knew something considerable had happened. That glaze, which so many of the members of our sect had on their faces and persons, their minds and manners, had been washed off. There was no gleam for me from Mr. Timberlake.

"What's the house over there?" he asked. He was making conversation. I had steered into the middle of the river to get him into the strong sun. I saw steam rise from him.

I took courage and studied him. He was a man I realized, in poor physical condition, unexercised and sedentary. Now the gleam had left him one saw the veined empurpled skin of the stoutish man with a poor heart. I remember he had said at lunch:

"A young woman I know said, 'Isn't it wonderful. I can walk thirty miles in a day without being in the least tired.' I said, 'I don't see that bodily indulgence is anything a member of the Church of the Last Purification should boast about.'"

THE SAINT

Yes, there was something flaccid, passive and slack about Mr. Timberlake. Bunched in swollen clothes, he refused to take them off. It occurred to me, as he looked with boredom at the water, the passing boats and the country, that he had not been in the country before. That it was something he had agreed to do but wanted to get over quickly. He was totally uninterested. By his questions—what is that church? Are there any fish in this river? Is that a wireless or a gramophone?—I understood that Mr. Timberlake was formally acknowledging a world he did not live in. It was too interesting, too eventful a world. His spirit, inert and preoccupied, was elsewhere in an eventless and immaterial habitation. He was a dull man, duller than any man I have ever known; but his dullness was a sort of earthly deposit left by a being whose diluted mind was far away in the effervescence of metaphysical matters. There was a slightly pettish look on his face as (to himself, of course) he declared he was not wet and that he would not have a heart attack or catch pneumonia.

Mr. Timberlake spoke little. Sometimes he squeezed water out of his sleeve. He shivered a little. He watched his steam. I had planned when we set out to go up as far as the lock but now the thought of another two miles of this responsibility was too much. I pretended I wanted to go only as far as the bend which we were approaching, where one of the richest buttercup meadows was. I mentioned this to him. He turned and looked with boredom at the field. Slowly we came to the bank.

We tied up the punt and we landed.

"Fine," said Mr. Timberlake. He stood at the edge of the meadow just as he had stood at the landing-stage—lost, stupefied, uncomprehending.

"Nice to stretch our legs," I said. I led the way into the deep flowers. So dense were the buttercups there was hardly any green. Presently I sat down. Mr. Timberlake looked at me and sat down also. Then I turned to him with a

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last try at persuasion. Respectability, I was sure, was his trouble.

"No one will see us," I said. "This is out of sight of the river. Take off your coat and trousers and wring them out."

Mr. Timberlake replied firmly:

"I am satisfied to remain as I am."

"What is this flower?" he asked to change the subject.

"Buttercup," I said.

"Of course," he replied.

I could do nothing with him. I lay down full length in the sun; and, observing this and thinking to please me, Mr. Timberlake did the same. He must have supposed that this was what I had come out in the boat to do. It was only human. He had come out with me, I saw, to show me that he was only human.

But as we lay there I saw the steam still rising. I had had enough.

"A bit hot," I said getting up.

He got up at once.

"Do you want to sit in the shade," he asked politely.

"No," I said. "Would you like to?"

"No," he said. "I was thinking of you."

"Let's go back," I said. We both stood up and I let him pass in front of me. When I looked at him again I stopped dead. Mr. Timberlake was no longer a man in a navy blue suit. He was blue no longer. He was transfigured. He was yellow. He was covered with buttercup pollen, a fine yellow paste of it made by the damp, from head to foot.

"Your suit," I said.

He looked at it. He raised his thin eyebrows a little, but he did not smile or make any comment.

The man is a saint, I thought. As saintly as any of those gold-leaf figures in the churches of Sicily. Golden he sat in the punt; golden he sat for the next hour as I paddled him

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down the river. Golden and bored. Golden as we landed at the town and as we walked up the street back to my uncle's house. There he refused to change his clothes or to sit by a fire. He kept an eye on the time for his train back to London. By no word did he acknowledge the disasters or the beauties of the world. If they were printed upon him, they were printed upon a husk.

Sixteen years have passed since I dropped Mr. Timberlake in the river and since the sight of his pant loops destroyed my faith. I have not seen him since, and to-day I heard that he was dead. He was fifty-seven. His mother, a very old lady with whom he had lived all his life, went into his bedroom when he was getting ready for church and found him lying on the floor in his shirt-sleeves. A stiff collar with the tie half inserted was in one hand. Five minutes before, she told the doctor, she had been speaking to him.

The doctor who looked at the heavy body lying on the single bed saw a middle-aged man, wide rather than stout and with an extraordinarily box-like thick-jawed face. He had got fat, my uncle told me, in later years. The heavy liver coloured cheeks were like the chaps of a hound. Heart disease, it was plain, was the cause of the death of Mr. Timberlake. In death the face was lax, even coarse and degenerate. It was a miracle, the doctor said, that he had lived as long. Any time during the last twenty years the smallest shock might have killed him.

I thought of our afternoon on the river. I thought of him hanging from the tree. I thought of him, indifferent and golden in the meadow. I understood why he had made for himself a protective, sedentary blandness, an automatic smile, a collection of phrases. He kept them on like the coat after his ducking. And I understood why—though I had feared it all the time we were on the river—I understood why he

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did not talk to me about the origin of evil. He was honest. The ape was with us. The ape that merely followed me was already inside Mr. Timberlake eating out his heart.

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I SHALL not forget the fingers that fastened me into the stiff collar. Or how I was clamped down under the bowler-hat which spread my rather large ears outwards and how my nose full of the shop smell of new suit, I went off for the first time to earn my living.

"You are beginning life," they said.

"You have your foot on the first rung of the ladder," they said.

"Excelsior," my new Uncle Belton said.

I was going to work in the office of one of my uncles, a new uncle, the second husband of my mother's sister, who had just married into the family. His name was Belton, a man of 44 with a tight, bumptious little business in the upholstery trade, a business that sounded so full of possibilities that it would blow up and burst, out of sheer merit. The push of Mr. Belton, the designing of Mr. Phillimore, his partner, made it irresistible. The name of the firm was Belton and Phillimore.

On my first day I met Mr. Belton outside our railway station. I watched a horse eating and I read all the hoardings while I waited. Mr. Belton was half an hour late. He was one of those cheerful, self-centred men whose tempers shorten when they are in the wrong. They put themselves right by sailing out into general reflections.

"Punctuality, Vincent, is everything," said Mr. Belton, bitterly. "How long have you been here?"

"Half an hour,"

"*Why* have you been here half an hour?"

Mr. Belton was looked upon as a sharp-shooter, a raider in our family. He had been around his new relations trying to raise capital for his business, he had carried off my mother's sister, in marriage, he was carrying me off to his office. He was a small, round, dominant and smartly dressed man, who

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usually wore brown. His black hair was parted in the middle and when he arrived anywhere he arrived with aplomb, bouncing down as hard as a new football on asphalt and very nearly on one's toes.

A new business, a new marriage, a new outlook on life—my brand new uncle looked as though he had come straight out of a shop-window. He had been hardly more than quarter of an hour in our house before we thought our paint looked shabby and the rooms small. The very curtains seemed to shrink like the poor as he talked largely of exports, imports, agencies, overheads, discounts, rebates, cut prices and debentures. And when he had done with these he was getting at what we paid for meat, where we got our coal and how much at a time, telling us, too, where to buy carpets and clothes, gas-fires, art pottery and electric irons. He even gave us the name of a new furniture polish. It sounded like one of the books of the Old Testament. He walked about the house touching things, fingering picture-frames, turning chairs round, looking under tables, tapping his toes thoughtfully on the linoleum. Then he sat down and lifting his foot restfully to his knee and exposing the striking pattern of his socks, he seemed to be working out how much we would get if we sold up house and home. The message "Sell up and begin again" flashed on and off in the smiles of his shining new face like morse.

"I can get all these things," he said, "in the trade."

When he and I sat in the train that morning I thought Mr. Belton looked larger.

"I don't want you to think I'm lecturing you, boy," he said, "but there are many boys who would give their right hand to walk straight into this business as you are doing."

"Yes, Uncle," I said.

"A little thing—you must call me 'sir'."

"Yes, Uncle," I said, "sir".

"And you must call Mr. Phillimore 'sir'."

I had forgotten all about Mr. Belton's partner.

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"But for Mr. Phillimore you would not have this chance," Mr. Belton said, detecting at once that I had forgotten. "It's a very remarkable thing, it's really wonderful, some people would think more than wonderful, that Mr. Phillimore agreed to it. He's a very busy man. A man with a great deal on his mind. There are people in the trade who would be glad to pay for the privilege of consulting Mr. Phillimore. His word is law in the firm and I want you to be most respectful to him. Don't forget to say 'Good morning, sir' to him when you see him, and if he should offer to shake hands you must, of course, shake hands with him. I think he may offer to shake hands, but he may not. If he rings his bell or asks you to do anything you must do it at once. Be quick and mind your manners. If he is going out of the room, open the door for him. Mr. Phillimore notices everything."

Naturally, Mr. Belton had seemed all-powerful to me, and it awed me to hear that behind this god was yet another god to whom even he deferred.

It distressed me that there were other people in the compartment who might hear this conversation. The day was damp and a low smoke from the train blew along the window as though we were travelling through cloud into another universe.

My face must have looked strained and pale. I had eaten very little for breakfast and my head ached where the bowler-hat pressed a red mark on my forehead. My uncle relaxed a little. At the next station two girls got out and we were alone in the compartment.

"I shall always remember the first time I stayed with Mr. Phillimore and his mother." So far my uncle had been hectoring and glum; but now a luminous gravity of expression came on his big experienced face and covered it like the skin on a balloon. He looked curiously light, as if he had been inflated with hydrogen and would rise from the seat of the empty railway carriage and blow away out of the window. He had what

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is called a common accent, none too certain about aitches and double negatives, but his voice was musical and now became rarified when he spoke of his partner.

"In Mr. Phillimore's 'ouse—ahem, house, the gentlemen give up their chairs to the ladies when they come into the room. And when the ladies leave the room you have to let them walk in front of you," my uncle said. He stared at this picture in his memory with wonder. He seemed to hang in the higher air and then gradually he subsided and became himself again, a shade coarser than he had been before. His brown eyes looked unsteadily, a thick smile began nervously by his nose and slowly spread over his face, and a twist of deprecation came to the corners of his lips.

"You see Mr. Phillimore is a gentleman. It may seem peculiar to you and me," he said.

"But people are peculiar," he said. And the smile slowly deepened as it will on the face of a baby until he began to look fondly and sentimentally at me.

"I'll give you a little tip, boy," he said, putting his hand on my knee, a touch that sent an uncomfortable thrill through my body and flushed me with all the shyness of my age. "Do you mind if I give you a little piece of advice, something helpful?"

"No, Uncle," I murmured. "Sir."

"You needn't call me sir, now," he said kindly. "If Mr. Phillimore should ring for you," he said, "just remember the infant Samuel. You remember how when our Lord called Samuel the boy said, 'Speak Lord, Thy Servant heareth'. Well, just pause and say that, just quietly to yourself, before you go and see what Mr. Phillimore wants. Don't hang around, of course. Sharp's the word. But say it."

My throat pinched, my tongue went dry. I should have said that Mr. Belton was a religious man. His expression became dreamy.

"I think there'd be no harm in your saying it if I ring,

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too," he said. Even he looked surprised after making this suggestion.

The office and workshops of Belton and Phillimore, makers of Butifix furniture and especially of the Butifix armchair and sofa, were at No. 7, in a row of old stained houses standing behind railings. The street was flogged by trams and dray-horses. Dust flew into one's eyes from the vans. The doorstep of No. 7 was the only whitened one in the street.

"Step over it," Mr. Belton said. I nearly fell over it. From Mr. Belton's manner, from his militant walk, I had imagined I was going to work in a large factory, where hundreds of workers were frizzling under acres of glass roof. But Belton and Phillimore occupied only the ground floor of this old house whose window-sills slanted and gave a leer of depression to its aspect. A number of small businesses—a tailor or two, a lamp-shade manufacturer, and agents for pulleys, gloves and shop-fittings worked in single rooms above. A smell of glue hung like a dead animal about the doorway and there were packing-cases stored in the hall. A notice which was never taken down all the time, I was there, said "Young Improvers Wanted. Apply Schenk." Someone had written "April 26 Holborn Baths" in pencil underneath. On my uncle's floor there was first a small room, made by new glass partitions, where a typist sat. She was a large-boned, round-shouldered girl of seventeen with fine yellow hair, who worked in a green overcoat. Her office smelled of gas, paint and tea. Next door was the room occupied by Mr. Belton and Mr. Phillimore and beyond, down the passage, was the large workroom under a top light where one could hear the sound of a turning machine, the swish of a plane and the noise of hammering. Patterns of cloth, samples of hair, capock and down were on the large desk where the two partners sat in their office, and there I waited alone listening to the typewriter—an old-fashioned one—clumping up and down like the police. My uncle had changed into a white dust-coat and marched out to find Mr. Phillimore.

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Before he went he leant down and smelled a bowl of flowers on the table. "Colour," he smiled patriotically, "we're colourful people."

"Speak Lord . . ." I gabbled, but I was too afraid to get to the end of the sentence. I had had many daydreams about Mr. Phillimore. He was a myth in our family. No one had ever seen him; but it was agreed that he had been the making of my uncle. Indeed, people said, he had been my uncle's salvation. I foresaw a tall, clean, sarcastic man with a deep stiff collar, as clean as a doctor. Or perhaps one of those bullying, morally overweighted figures from the north of England whose minds pass like soft steam-rollers over you, suffocating rather than flattening you with the eiderdown gospel of work and righteousness. The door opened. I was startled by a high-pitched, eager feminine giggle; a small man stumbled towards me.

"Er—er—hullo, 'llo, my dear," the voice said. I saw a white dust-coat. I saw a pair of agonized yellow-blue eyes popping with an expression of helplessness out of a badly pimpled face. Really, Mr. Phillimore looked raw and bleeding. Then I saw his untidy wheat-coloured hair, with a pink scalp showing through it; and after that, loose lips drawn back, rabbit fashion, from a set of protruding teeth, each tooth shooting out in a different direction. It was a mouth which looked ravenous and could not close; and saliva, therefore, fizzed out of it, when he was excited. He was young, no more than thirty-five, and my first sight of Mr. Phillimore suggested the frantic, yelping disorganized expression of a copulating dog.

Before he got to me Mr. Phillimore caught the pocket of his white dust-coat on the door-handle, dropped a ruler from his pocket and trod on a pencil.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" cried Mr. Phillimore, going down on his knees with a sigh of inexpressible fatigue.

"Pick it up," said my uncle to me bitterly, giving me a push.

"Oh no, *no*, my dear!" said Mr. Phillimore from the floor.

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"My fault, Mr. B. I'm most frightfully sorry. How are you? At last, after all these months! Are you quite recovered from your illness?" He was on his feet now, a weak damp hand clung will-lessly to mine and he gazed eagerly into my eyes.

"I haven't been ill, sir," I said.

"You don't look well," he said doubtfully. Then his spirit rose again: "The moment I heard of you I *longed* for you to come. We've been waiting for you for months. We're simply *killed* with work, my dear, you've no idea."

Mr. Phillimore sat down at the partner's desk and looked at me reproachfully. He looked congenitally exhausted.

"Ah Vernon," he said.

"Vincent, sir," I murmured.

"Vincent," he said. "You and I have not the energy, the decision of the remarkable Mr. B. He is a remarkable man, Vernon, he has been my salvation. Vincent, I mean, I'm *so* sorry."

My uncle, who had sat down at his desk and was tapping a sheet of figures with a pencil, glanced up at this remark and smiled mechanically. My confusion was natural. I had always gathered Mr. Phillimore was the saviour; now I heard the rôles reversed. I blinked. The two men were saving each other.

"With two more machines, Phillimore," my uncle said, ignoring the worship of his partner and acting a part, "we could treble these figures." And he brought his soft fist down like a sponge on the desk, not heavily, but strongly enough to make Phillimore strain to attention.

Though I had been only a few minutes in the office I felt already (when I heard those words) the swirl of urgency and importance in the affairs of Belton and Phillimore. I stared at Mr. Phillimore until he must have thought I was trying to get instructions from him by hypnosis. To my disappointment a look of despair and appeal came into Mr. Phillimore's face.

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The telephone bell rang and, with a shudder, Mr. Phillimore took up the telephone, saying before he answered it :

"P*lease, Mr. B, don't expand the business any more for a moment." Then, mastering his stammer, dropping his voice into his throat, Mr. Phillimore concentrated on answering the telephone efficiently. Copying and practising Uncle Belton's gesture, Phillimore weakly hammered the air with *his* fists as he talked, glancing at my uncle nervously as he did so. When he had finished his telephone conversation and had told my uncle about it, Mr. Phillimore looked at me and said:

"It is true. I'm not exaggerating." He nodded towards my uncle, who was still tapping his pencil on the figures. "He saved my life." Then he smiled and said to my uncle: "Do you like the flowers I brought for us?"

"I'd sooner you brought me an order, Phillimore," said my uncle.

Nothing happens in an office. One day is like another. When I look back upon that year the only thing I see is a love-affair—the love-affair of Mr. Belton and Mr. Phillimore. They sat in their office like husband and wife in a sitting-room. It was not really a love-affair, but a salvation affair. Mr. Belton had the rippling mind of the natural salesman and, strengthening it, was a powerful evangelical notion that he must save people from their own undoing. He did not sell: he saved. He saved people, when he was travelling in towels or electric irons or cretonne for example, from the sadness of not having these things. When he was in the stocking business, he rescued people from the misery of not having so many hundreds of dozens of stockings. The world needed to be saved from its parsimony, its uncreative caution. Mr. Belton pumped salvation into the world, rescued men from the Slough of Despond. Giant Despair—I have heard him say to customers—is man's greatest enemy. And when he came to have businesses or agencies of his own after he had married my mother's sister, and his relations put money into these enterprises, he was rescuing

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them. He was rescuing their savings from the ignominy of 2½ per cent. or whatever it was, in some prim nibbling bank.

"Oh, ye of little faith," he said, cocking his dark eyebrow. And if things went wrong the eyebrow would straighten.

"It was an experience," he would rebuke his critics. "I had to buy *mine*."

It was my new Uncle Belton's gift of salvation which had captured Mr. Phillimore.

Now that I had seen Mr. Phillimore, Uncle Belton modified the Phillimore myth and said to me when I went home with him in the tobacco smoke of the train:

"Mr. Phillimore is peculiar. We all have our peculiarities. He is really an artist. He does our designs. When I met Mr. Phillimore three years ago he had a tiny chair-making, arts and craft shop in Somerset. He was living under his mother's thumb. Imagine a man of thirty-five who can't go out in the evening without his mother's permission. Terrible."

Uncle Belton scowled.

"The poor devil was drinking himself to death," he said. "He shut himself in his room and drank whisky out of a hot-water bottle."

Uncle Belton's face went pale as lichen.

"It might have led to women—anything," he said. Then he blinked. He had evidently been struck by the thought that he ought not to have said this to me about his partner. His voice became bland and expansive.

"There he was—and independent mind you, he had money—going downhill as fast as I have ever seen a man go—a gentleman, paralyzed, hypnotized, you might call it. I told him straight what was the matter with him. I saw it at once—he had to get away from that mother. I told her, 'You're a mother. You don't know nothing about your son.'"

His voice now became merry. "It's marvellous, reely," he said. "Marvellous the way things work out. I just went down there to look around."

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Uncle Belton saw those two provincial people with their neat lifeless little business. He saw in them a temporary gold-mine. But there was more in my uncle's passion than acquisitiveness. He had a horror of drink; he had a greater horror of spiritual disasters. He stepped back from the catastrophic crashes of the inner life. His remedy lay in that part of the Protestant tradition which deals with the conflicts of the inner life by annihilating the inner life altogether. When Uncle Belton and Mr. Phillimore left Somerset to start the firm of Belton & Phillimore their departure was like an elopement.

"It has been an experience for me, knowing your uncle," said Mr. Phillimore to me again and again. He had borrowed the word "experience" from Mr. Belton. His voice rose into the treble. "What drive, Vernon, Vincent—which is it? Vincent! What drive!"

My day's work at the office was monotonous, like family life. For if my new Uncle Belton and Mr. Phillimore were husband and wife, I was the only child who strays listlessly from room to room trying to find something to do. I stuck on stamps, I copied letters. I put clean water in the flower-bowl which Mr. Phillimore kept filled. They were a love-offering. I took messages. I went across the road to buy buns for the typist, or my uncle would send me out to collect a shirt from a shop or to buy a bottle of hair-cream at his barbers. My uncle had thick glossy hair as still as glass on his head. We lived in all the intensity of domestic life. Uncle was always willing to stop his work and address a manly mid-week sermon to Mr. Phillimore. Mr. Phillimore was always willing to stop what he was doing and talk to me. He would follow me ravenously about open mouthed as if he would graze on my hair. We had been brought up on the myth of the unapproachability of Mr. Phillimore: the myth had a germ of truth: it was he, who, continuously, made the approaches.

"Ah youth, youth, golden-headed youth," he would say as he passed me in the workshop. I had thick black hair not

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unlike my uncle's and I was trying to make it look glossy. Through the window in the partition Miss Croft, the typist, kept her little eyes on all of us. One of my anxieties was to make Miss Croft smile, but she was in her wooden teens, and her lips set firmly when I stood in the room with her. She looked at me with the swollen face of an elder sister. It was a long time before I saw that she was piqued because once *she* had been the only child in this family and that I had supplanted her. A woman's life is swayed by her feelings, but Miss Croft was not yet a woman: she was learning about her feelings, how to use them, like a young girl who is learning to play scales on the piano, and she was still awkward with them.

Mr. Phillimore would often stand at the door of her room talking to me and as he did so, his look would pop anxiously, intimately, apologetically in Miss Croft's direction. Mr. Phillimore's eyes seemed to say, "In my life I need all the help I can get from *everyone*. Don't be jealous and hurt!" One could see what had happened. Miss Croft silently reproached him.

"You are wasting Mr. Phillimore's time. That poor man is run off his feet," she said abruptly to me.

"*He* started talking to *me*," I said.

Miss Croft sat back from her typewriter.

"He is the brains of this firm," Miss Croft said. "I have been here from the beginning. I've seen it all. That man," she was developing her simple possessive instinct as if she were doing arm exercises, "tells me everything." She always called him "that man".

Yes, and now Mr. Phillimore had started telling me everything.

Miss Croft gave her head a short upward jerk. She put a lump in her chin by running her tongue round her lower gum, and began typing again with her big red fingers. I loved watching the quickness of her fingers. There were two or three other things about her that were pretty; her little starry violet eyes and her small waist; the curve of her legs was be-

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coming lovely. And she had a lisping childlike voice. But she was changing; what was pretty one week became plain the next. She was like a creature in a chrysalis.

"One thing," she said complacently, "that man won't be here long. I can see things."

When she saw how astonished and impressed I was by this remark, Miss Croft was very satisfied.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

There were things, she said primly to me, that were confidential.

My Uncle Belton was a man who was unaware of the little situations that were simmering all day long around him. He lived juicily, like an orange, within the containing rind of his objects in life. He was out two or three times a week seeing customers and walking in his dream of making the business larger and getting larger premises. When he wasn't tapping his pencil on columns of figures or abusing someone on the telephone, he was gazing vehemently at the plans of new premises he had seen. One afternoon he came back in a hearty mood and sent me to tell Mr. Phillimore he had brought *him* a present.

"A present," cried Mr. Phillimore, who was working on the frame of a sofa. Up he jumped. "How exciting," he said.

We had a foreman with bloodshot eyes, who always winked at me when I came with a message for Mr. Phillimore. He winked now.

"You've got a present for me!" cried Mr. Phillimore, almost running to Uncle Belton's office. "What a thrill."

My uncle did not give Mr. Phillimore the parcel. He wanted some of the surprise for himself. He wanted a part of everything for himself; it was not greed but part of his gregarious generosity. He would have eaten your lunch for you so that you and he could feel more genially at one. We watched Uncle undo the parcel. It contained a small framed picture. He stood it on the desk and turned it to face Mr. Phillimore.

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"Just made for you, Phillimore," he said. The picture was simply a text done in poker work. The words were: "Don't Worry—It May Never Happen."

"Don't worry—it may never happen," Phillimore read with delight and he rubbed his hands together.

"Don't Worry—it may never happen," ruminated my uncle in his deep, golden, optimistic voice.

"Wonderful," cried Phillimore. "Oh, good." Like a boy clapping a catch at cricket. Then he looked serious. He shook his head. "Very true. Very true," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what—we'll hang it on the wall."

"That's an idea," said uncle.

"Over the mantelpiece? Or over the desk, do you think?" said Mr. Phillimore.

He danced about holding the picture now in this place and now in the other. Uncle helped him. They were like a newly married couple hanging up a picture.

"Over the mantelpiece, where you can see it," said Mr. Belton.

"Here, do you think?"

"No—a little higher. There! No, a bit to the left." Yes, it was a marriage. Mr. Phillimore and Mr. Belton sat down exhausted gazing at the picture now hanging on the wall. Phillimore read it aloud again.

"True," he said. "Very true."

"Yes," he sighed, shaking his head. "It's just made for me. Why worry? There's no need to. One's desires, one's wishes, one's hopes—they won't come off. Nothing changes."

"Here," cried my uncle. "It doesn't say that. It says don't be held back by your fears, the thing you're afraid of just won't occur. You're not afraid of what you want coming true, are you? That would be ridiculous."

"My dear Vincent," said Mr. Phillimore, getting my name right for once, "that only shows how different Mr. B. is from the rest of us."

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"Good godfathers," cried my uncle. "Phillimore, you're morbid."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Mr. Phillimore with a primness and secretiveness I had never noticed before. "But one preserves one's integrity."

And Phillimore lifted his nose and one could hear a hissing intake of air like a gas escape. It was a little terrifying. Uncle scowled playfully but he was put out. For a few seconds the two men considered each other and my uncle, being by far the shorter and stouter, had the advantage of weight. Many men who were taller than my new Uncle Belton were intimidated by his vehement shortness. He seemed to be shooting upwards at one like a howitzer.

After his expeditions to the warm and buzzing platters of the world, Belton was often irritable; when he came back, he was obliged to return to earth where he found an order had been delayed, or some timber had a flaw in it, or they were short of cloth because Phillimore had advised Belton to go easy on the buying. And now after the difference over the meaning of the picture, Belton went irritably off to the workroom.

"I hope," said Mr. Phillimore, "dear Mr. B. won't upset the hands. I shall feel it is my fault." And then turning to me, begging for support, he said, "Yet how frightful, how terrifying it would be, Vincent, if what one wished came true. How futile life would be if one's fears were not realized. Don't you think?" He watched me.

"I should die!" he cried and his hands hung limply from the wrist like wet leaves.

This kind of conversation was beyond me. And he often spoke like this in front of the workers who winked at me all the time. On the other hand, I could not be sure that Mr. Phillimore wasn't mocking me. And then I suppose in our family—my own and my uncle's—we were stamped with a reserve about our personal lives. We had no private lives.

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We simply had secret lives, like secret drinkers. We were the natural opponents of private life. We regarded ourselves as units of will or energy directed upon our various purposes. Mr. Belton saw himself (for he was religious) as a new kind of fusion of science and religion, a successful sperm, fertilizing the Christian endeavour. Contact with a man like Phillimore who appeared to put feebleness, illness, fright, incapacity and failure in life first, was bewildering. Phillimore's eagerness to cut a bad figure was like an indecent physical exposure. He was the sperm which fails.

So when Mr. Phillimore cried out "I should die", I saw something new in his expression, something watchful, crystal-line, and with the madman's order, in his eye. For a second or two I had the impression that Mr. Phillimore was *not* a fool; that he was cunning and obstinate, and longsighted. The impression dissolved and indeed I forgot about it or he made me forget it by a sudden change of his mood. He was as limp as a willow. What I would call his good-bye air appeared. I mean that after some gust of confidence, some anxious tail-wagging spaniel-like prance of intimacy, Mr. Phillimore would draw back and fade. He would gradually back to the door and stand there getting dimmer. It was like being in a train which is moving out and Mr. Phillimore stood on the platform stammering about how lucky you were to be going away, while he was left behind. The weak hands seemed to wave. It was his vanity to be left behind.

"Ah well, Vernon," he said (I was beginning to think he got my name wrong out of malice), "where shall we all be in ten years' time? You—I see you—rich, successful, in the arms of some superb mistress—Miss Croft, shall we say, but in a tiger skin. And I . . . alas, in my solitary room . . ."

He had gone.

Every firm has its Devil, that is to say, its chief competitor.

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And this Devil is always a firm of the same size or perhaps a little more important. Belton and Phillimore were not afraid of their big competitors: the huge furniture manufacturers and upholsterers who devoured the trade like ranging wolves. Belton and Phillimore admired these great firms. They were afraid of the little ones and especially of one little one.

If my uncle wanted to give Mr. Phillimore a fright he would say:

"Salter's on the move again. He's cut his prices." Or, holding up a letter: "Look at this. Salter's giving six months' credit."

My uncle would look bitter and belligerent. One was warring against Sin. Salter, my uncle conveyed, was a cheat, a fraud, a sinister figure who was plotting against their lives. Salter copied our designs and cheapened them. He stole our customers. He would try and get hold of our workers. Like a highwayman, he preyed on our labour. He wanted to strangle us. My uncle was not eloquent about this; he was as curt, as stubborn as a soldier. Salter might have been outside on the street sniping at him.

"We can't fight *that*," my uncle would say, meaning, of course, the opposite.

"That defeats us," Phillimore eagerly agreed. He put down his ruler and his pencil, leaned back in his chair and made a noise in his throat like the death-rattle—a noise natural to him. He also had an irritating habit of whistling through the gap in his front teeth, a whistle of surrender. It was he, at these times, who appeared to be "saving" my uncle; one saw the emergence of Phillimore's hatred of success, the trembling of compassion in his nature. An expression of one lying blissfully in hospital came on Phillimore's face. He would have done anything for Belton at that moment, and if Belton had observed the character of his partner—which, of course, he had not; he did not believe in any one's character but his own—he would have chosen this moment to say to Mr. Phillimore:

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"Go down to your mother, tell her we are on the edge of bankruptcy, get her to give us this extra capital we need. Tell her it is a terrible risk, that we may very likely lose it. Tell her it's desperate. Tell her we may not last another month. Go out and get drunk, it's the only thing to do."

The prospect of ruin would have been irresistible to Mr. Phillimore. He would have done in this mood, what in a more confident one, he would have resisted. Alas, Belton was no reader of the heart. He turned and attacked Phillimore.

"Defeat us," he said, setting his chin. "I don't understand the meaning of the word, Phillimore. There is no defeat. What's Salter? A draper"—Uncle's lowest word of contempt—"a draper, Phillimore. Give me the price list. Get me Dobson's on the 'phone. Miss Croft, come and take these letters. Boy, take this note up to the bank . . ."

The crisis of sacrifice, loss, abandonment was passed. Like a wife who sees her husband recover and so free himself from helpless reliance on her, Phillimore saw his compassion scattered. Phillimore would have liked to rock my uncle like a baby—and indeed Belton often looked like one. But optimism had won. And when my uncle did raise the question of getting more capital, Mr. Phillimore became evasive. The "good-bye" look came back. He admired my uncle's resilience, but the admiration itself exhausted him and left him—how shall I say it? I can remember only his appearance, the open mouth, the choking open mouth under the dropping teeth—it left him in a condition of—nausea. And one heard the sound, the sinister air rushing up his nostrils, like a preparation for suicide.

About this time I used to go out to lunch with Mr. Phillimore and one day I saw this Devil who haunted our firm and planned our destruction. Phillimore and I were in a teashop.

"Oh dear," said Phillimore, "there's that poor wretch, Salter." My heart jumped. The devilries of Salter had so impressed me that I was ready to run out of the place.

"Has he seen us?" I said trying to look undisturbed. I

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ought not to have been surprised by the self-possession of Phillimore: Salter meant disaster.

"That man might have ruined us," said Phillimore sadly. "But for your wonderful uncle, Vernon, we should be in Queer Street, up the spout, right in the middle of the puree."

Phillimore sighed and shook his head. He gazed in Salter's direction with affection. He gazed, I now suspect, with nostalgia. And I, gazing there too, saw a stringy and dejected man, bald but not sufficiently so, with pince-nez like a dismal pair of birds on either side of his nose, and a grey moustache, damp with tea. The teashop was under a railway arch and we could hear the trains rumbling over our heads like rollers. They seemed to flatten and crush the figure of Mr. Salter in his old raincoat. I suppose he knew us, for he looked at us miserably and I have never seen a figure which conveyed more resignation to injustice, more passive disquiet. To judge by the look he gave us this hypocrite Salter was muttering aloud that we were cheating and ruining him. We were copying *his* designs, undercutting *his* prices, stealing *his* customers. He got up and went to pay his bill listlessly just as I was putting a spoonful of Queen's pudding into my mouth. I was relieved when he gave an accusing nod to Phillimore as he passed our table. He did not speak. We saw him stand on the step of the restaurant for a moment, looking at the traffic; and when he at last chose to cross the road and walked northward, I tried to work out which of our customers he was going to steal. But Phillimore said:

"Salter has an ulcerated stomach through living on tinned food on a hospital ship in the war. He was in the Middle East."

Phillimore said this in a subdued enthusiastic voice. The illness, the cheatings, the plots of Salter excited Phillimore's imagination. To my uncle he talked about nothing else for days.

The year passed and another year began. I found myself

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growing. I spent more time in the workroom now working with my hands. I would check the timber or the cloth or help with the packing or sort certain kinds of hair and down. I was not penned in the little glass room with Miss Croft. I was free to walk about. I liked the workroom because it had a glass roof and through that one sometimes saw the white clouds smoking in the sky and I would think of the country you would be able to see if you could lie on top of one of those clouds. I liked to think that fields and woods existed, but that I too existed and was working. I wished I was in love and the wish itself was delightful, for there was no pain nor melancholy in it, no emptiness and defeat. I was in love already. I had fallen in love with myself, a lover as close as my own skin.

One morning in May the firm was delivering some chairs in the West End, and I was sent in a hired van with them, riding high up with the driver, to see that the chairs were delivered without damage, to an important special customer. I did not go straight back to the office. I left the van. Up till then I had never been in a restaurant north of the Thames, but now I decided to try a place in some narrow alley of the city. One after the other I rejected. The thoughtless traveller wanders in circles. I was delighted to wander and, in fact, wandered so long that I found myself near the office and in the teashop under the arches. There I saw a most remarkable person. No, not Salter. I saw Miss Croft.

A Miss Croft I had never seen in my life before because I had never seen her outside the office. As surprised as I was, she blushed like a country rose, she smiled, she beckoned to me. Her awkwardness had gone, mine went too. Our eyes, our tongues were excited. I sat down at her table.

"Don't have the fish. It's awful," she said. "Dry."

"I won't have the poached egg, either," I said.

These two sentences seemed brilliant to us. A beautiful waitress, much 'more beautiful than Miss Croft, came up and looked at us sulkily. And the sneer on the waitress's face

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made us feel we were even more brilliant. We were escaped prisoners.

The new thing about Miss Croft was that she had put her hair up. Before it had hung, tied in a schoolgirlish black bow, on her shoulders. Now her head was lighter, like a flower which had long been sheathed by its leaves; and her body was lighter too. She parted her lips when she spoke instead of mumbling; the sisterly, sermonizing line had gone from her brows and she looked arch when she caught me looking at the two small hills in her white blouse and even leaned forward to tempt and confuse me more. For my part, I made one or two brilliant remarks about the people in the restaurant, remarks which made her say, "Oh, you are!"

"I'm coming to sit on your side of the table," I said, very encouraged, for I had the insane idea of putting my arm round her waist; but a waitress dropped a tray and I think Miss Croft did not hear me, for she began to talk very quickly about the only subject that really interested us: our daily bread, the air we breathed, the latest instalment of the inner story of Belton and Phillimore.

"Where did you take those chairs this morning?" she asked me. I parried this. I was not sure whether I was supposed to say.

"To Naseley, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yes."

"Mr. Phillimore has gone to Somerset," she said, "to get money. Dadda says there's something going on." I ought to have said that when she wanted to give authority to anything she said she always quoted her father. She called him Dadda.

"Dadda says 'You wait—there's another man.'" She said this in the voice a woman uses when she says "There is another woman."

"I don't believe it," I said, not because I did not believe it, but because I did not like the idea of Miss Croft having a father.

"Mr. Belton and Mr. Naseley are on the 'phone to each

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other every day. When he says he's going out to a customer, he's going to see this Naseley. He knows I know. I can read faces."

She said this not in the moralizing, maternal way she had had a year before, but with a new feminine recklessness. She was tasting the new feminine delight in saying anything that came into her head; and as she said this she leaned forward, touching the back of her hair and looking over the faces of the people in the restaurant, so that she could give me another chance of looking at her throat and her neck and have the pleasure of catching me do so.

"I can," she said, catching me. I coloured. And then she went on to soothe the wound:

"Why are you so vain?" she said. Then quickly changed to: "I said to Mr. Phillimore, when he left to catch the train, 'I can read faces, Mr. Phillimore'. He looked at me. You should have seen the look he gave. Really I'm sorry for that man. He said to me, 'Can you'. Just that, nothing more," she said, her small eyes brightening. She closed her handbag and said firmly:

"Dadda says Naseley and Belton will buy him out if he doesn't get that money from his mother." And she got up to go.

Two days later Phillimore returned from Somerset. It was clear, after he came out of my uncle's office, that there was a change in him. He had always been anxious to chatter with me, but for a while he said nothing to me. He nodded, stared, paused: there was that hissing intake of breath and then he said nothing. I became familiar.

"Coming out to lunch," I called to him forgetting to call him "sir". He looked at me coldly.

"No, Vincent," he said, "go to your beautiful waitress alone."

And the next day

"Not to-day, Vernon," he said, "but beware of the auburn glory at the Dyers and Cleaners."

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if he went down to see his mother. He knew it. Where is he? Oh I'm frightened. Don't let him come near me."

I left her biting her lips. I put my arm round her, but she pushed me away.

"Dadda will make me give my notice when I tell him," she was sobbing. "He won't have me insulted."

"I didn't insult you," I said.

"Don't be a fool," said Miss Croft.

In the workshop when I went there I heard the sound of snoring. The packer was nailing up a case, hitting the nails as loudly as he could and giving a huge wink and a nod to the other men. They were nodding at Mr. Phillimore fast asleep on the heap of capok. It was clinging to his trousers like burrs.

"He's been boozed up since four o'clock yes'day," said the foreman. He winked. "He's a case."

Mr. Phillimore left the office when he woke up and went away with the foreman who beckoned to two of his mates to come with them. Miss Croft and I stood on the step watching Mr. Phillimore's hat, tipped back, wagging in a slowly advancing group of caps. Sometimes he stopped to put a hand on the foreman's shoulder and make a speech to him. A roar of laughter ended the speech and a man on the outside of the group swivelled round with his hands in his pockets and made a flying kick at a stone. We saw no more of Mr. Phillimore for a week. The people at the boarding-house where he lived telephoned to say he had influenza.

In the early days of their marriage my Uncle Belton would have called a taxi and raced to Mr. Phillimore's bedside; but now, bemused by the advance of his infidelities with Mr. Naseley he did nothing. But he did make a speech to me in the train, for the motion of a train and its isolation from the world, encouraged moral reflection in my uncle.

"The important thing in life," Uncle Belton said to me, getting out a toothpick, "is to do the right thing. The Devil

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is always on the look out for our weaknesses. Two and two make four, you can't argue with the law of progress. Phillimore can't argue with it any more than I can or you can, Vincent. I am disappointed in Mr. Phillimore. I said to him, multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision, the servant who buried his talents was made to give to the others. Thou base and foolish servant. I don't want to influence nobody. I'm just putting the case as God sees it; and when Mr. Naseley said something the other day about the partners in his firm, two brothers who don't get on—pretty dreadful that, isn't it, two brothers—I said 'God is my partner'. Naseley said to me, 'By God, Belton, you're right'. I said '*I'm* not right. God is right. He will guide us.' By the way I shouldn't mention Mr. Naseley's name at the office . . ."

After a week Mr. Phillimore came back. He was wearing a new suit. He had a flower in his button-hole. He whistled quietly to himself. Phillimore had improved his appearance by clipping his moustache. I do not know what passed between himself and my uncle except that I heard my uncle say, "Pull yourself together, Phillimore."

Phillimore's manner to me was an indication: "How's the Queen of Clapham, Vernon?" he said. "Dusting and tidying the eternal mantelpiece of her virginity?" Then he put his fingers under my chin and tipped it up. "What a bitch she must be, my poor boy," he said and walked away.

Miss Croft kept the door of her room open, hoping to catch sight of him. He came in at last. She was wearing a new, pale blue frock and when she walked she made sudden half turns so that we saw the silk swimming over the full line of her leg, and she frowned when she looked back. Phillimore stopped in the doorway and clicked his tongue loudly.

"Woman," he said, giving me a nudge. He looked very vulgar. She put on a puzzled expression which asked Mr. Phillimore to explain. He just rolled his eyes. It was more than vulgar. She sat down quickly and began to type.

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"I'm busy," she said. "Haven't you anything better to look at?"

"N'no. N'no," said Phillimore, advancing a step and leering.

"You are being rude, Mr. Phillimore," she said. He was punctured. His boldness went. He tried to explain. She became angrier. He went.

"Sometimes," sighed Miss Croft, "I'm frightened of what that man will do." And added: "It's a new dress. Dadda says blue is my colour."

Phillimore said to me: "What have I done? What have you done, Vernon? Why is it that you and I are unspeakable in the eyes of that virgin? Because we must, a little while longer, presume she is one. We are innocent. We are children, Vernon. She plays with us. I beg of you, Vernon," he said, seizing me by the shoulders and looking into my eyes: his own eyes were wild as though a pack of wolves were racing out of them towards me. "I beg of you for the sake of the peace of this office, save us from that torture."

I laughed. I laughed and stepped away because I thought he was going to cry and to kiss me: no, chiefly because I thought by all this acting he was laughing at me.

The hours went slowly. I did the stock books, the invoice books; then in the late afternoon I had to go and help Uncle and Phillimore in the workroom. Phillimore left us. Uncle had taken it into his head to investigate a collection of chair-springs. He hated being helped, but if you were there he obliged you to stand there and watch. I had to wait a long time before I could get step by step away from him, but at last I managed it and got back to his office. The workmen had gone and I sat reading a trade paper. Phillimore was in Miss Croft's office, sitting in his hat and coat. He too was waiting for my uncle. Miss Croft was not there. She was washing her hands and I saw her, through the open door, pass across the the room and go to get her hat and coat. It was very quiet

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now the lathes had stopped and the evening cries of children in the street could be heard now the traffic had gone.

Suddenly I heard Mr. Phillimore's voice. It was bold and decisive, the voice he had been training for use on our telephone.

"Duckie," I heard him say. "Don't be cross." No answer.

"I say don't be cross."

"I'm not cross."

"You look it."

Miss Croft was picking up her things.

"I must fly," she said.

"Fly, fly," he said. "My wings are broken. The wings of youth are strong."

"Don't," said Miss Croft.

"Take me in your strong wings," said Mr. Phillimore.

"Oh, don't," said Miss Croft.

Phillimore had got up and they were now both out of my sight.

"On your strong wings . . ." he was saying.

"I must catch my train," she said.

"I am wrecked. My life is ruined . . ."

"I'll miss it if I don't dash," she said.

"Dash," he muttered very loudly. "Yes, dash. Don't you understand, I love you!" The sounds suggested that Mr. Phillimore had jumped across the room, or was about to do so. A chair fell over. "You say, dash," I heard him say.

And then a screech came from Miss Croft. I ran into the room. There was Mr. Phillimore with one foot standing on his hat, holding Miss Croft in his arms and trying to kiss her, and she was pushing away from him not with anger, but with an unnecessarily helpless, sulky expression.

"I'll miss my train," she was saying breathlessly. And then her face settled, she looked him in the eyes, stiffened, opened her mouth in a manner that I thought was inviting, but instead of a kiss, a high, pure, perfectly calculated and piercing scream came out of her. It was a marvel. By the

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fight in her little eyes I would have said it was a challenge. She waited to see what Mr. Phillimore would do. My uncle came running up the passage and arrived with a plonk like a bouncing ball in the room.

Phillimore loosened his grip and the girl wriggled away. At the sight of my uncle she broke into tears.

"I . . ." gasped Phillimore. "I—I—was—saying—good-bye—to Miss Croft."

"Phillimore," said my uncle.

"Good-bye," said Phillimore to me. He did not look at my uncle. "Dash," he said.

And before we knew more about it, he *had* dashed. He dashed from the room and Uncle's new horn-rimmed glasses fell off.

"Oh—he's gone," said Miss Croft, looking at the empty doorway. We all looked at it. But in a second he was back, a scornful face printed with derision which did not look at Miss Croft or myself but stared at Uncle Belton.

"I forgot to tell you I'm joining Salters," he said ironically. And then his self-control went: "That's what you've all done to me." This time he went for good. Uncle Belton and Miss Croft stepped towards each other instinctively.

"Oh, Mr. Belton, did you hear?" she said. "How awful."

"Mr. Belton," she said, "the deceit." She put her hand on my uncle's coat-sleeve; but he was simply staring. He always stood square shouldered and now his shoulders seemed to spread wider. He was very pale, as pale as a loaf of bread. He still did not speak, but slowly sat down in a chair.

"The double-crossing swine," he said.

It was quite simple, my Uncle Belton explained to me. When he had seen that Mr. Phillimore was not going to keep his promise and bring in more capital, he had had to look elsewhere. It was hard to credit, but Mr. Phillimore thought he had been badly treated—said "I wasn't open with him"—and all the time he was seeing Salter! "But there is a law of

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justice in the world," Uncle said with a smile. "Salter is on the point of bankruptcy."

There were no more flowers on the desk now until Miss Croft started bringing them. She devoted herself to my uncle and every day came out with little pieces of news about the wickedness of Mr. Phillimore. I saw him once, it must have been eighteen months later. He was standing on London Bridge looking up at a high building where a man was cleaning windows.

"I should die," I heard him say to someone in the crowd. Then he saw me. He bared his teeth as if he were going to spit, but changed his mind. His look suggested that I was the most ridiculous thing on earth, as he turned away.

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THE CITIES fall, but what survives? It is the common, patient, indigenous grass. After Mr. Pocock's death this thought lay in a muddle in Rogers's mind; if Rogers had a mind. He was enormously fat; a jellyfish which is washed and rocked by sensations and not by thought. The Wilcoxes, the Stockses and Rogerses, the three ordinary, far-back tribes who made the village, alone had history; and this plain corporate history, like the eternal grass, choked out the singular blooms. The death of a Rogers is something. A card is shuffled into another pack and he joins the great phalanx of village Rogerses beyond the grave, formidable in their anonymity. But the death of a stranger like Pocock, who had been in the place only a few months, was like a motor smash. Vivid but trivial, it sank out of village memory to the bottom of time.

Rogers admitted to himself that he had had a fright. Mr. Pocock had been a man of fifty like himself, as fat as Rogers was, too—they had compared waist measurements once—and he drank heavily: that came home rather close. So close that although Rogers was Mr. Pocock's only friend in the last months of his life, Rogers could not bring himself to go to the funeral. He put on his black to show willingness, but at the hour of the funeral slipped on the doorstep and twisted his knee and had to be kept in his house. With a sort of penitence or hoping for a last order, Askew, the village publican, went—he followed all his customers to the end—and came back saying:

"Mr. Pocock, he drank too much. I often tried to stop him."

Then it was that Rogers, who had gone down to the pub once the funeral was over and Pocock was set in his grave—then it was that Rogers saw a profound truth:

"You're wrong there," he said.

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"He didn't drink too much," he said. "The trouble with Mr. Pocock was that he didn't drink enough."

One thing the death of Mr. Pocock did for Rogers was to make him stay at home. There was nothing to go out for. Outside was the road, the village, the four-eyed faces of the villas called Heart's Desire Estate which Rogers had built on the flat fields and had sold before anyone had discovered that the site was a water meadow. There was his wooden hut too, where he slept over the typewriter sometimes, and with its Estate Agent's plate on the door. His wife ran his business now—such as it was. Above all this was the sky. He was inclined to see a hole in things like the street or sky after Pocock's death, a hole with simply nothing beyond it. Staying at home with his family kept Rogers from seeing the hole. Hearing his wife use the typewriter or telephone in the office, drinking a cup of tea, listening to his two girls, torpidly watching them, his slow mind lay down like a dog in the domestic basket. "Wife and family—you're lucky, ol' boy," Mr. Pocock had said many times in his husky, half-rapacious voice. Rogers brooded. Perhaps he, surviving, was the better man.

Yet with all his heart and with some plain builder's shrewdness and village vanity, Rogers had wanted to believe in the singularity of Mr. Pocock. People came down from London and took a house in old age, and when they died, these strangers always turned out to be less than they had at first seemed to be. He was used to that. A handful of dust—often scandalous dust—was all they were against the great tribal burial mound of the village Wilcoxes, Stockses and Rogerses. Pocock had not only looked different but had sounded different and behaved accordingly. Yet the death of Pocock had left in Rogers's mind some suspicion of fraud—indeterminate yet disturbing, like waking in the night and thinking you smell a carpet smouldering, and yet no coal on it when you get out to look.

Pocock was a painter. Not only that, he was a well-known painter from London; he knew other painters. Not only other

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painters, but studios and actresses. He knew the stage. Yet after the ambulance went like a soft clap of low white wings between the hedges of the main road, taking Pocock to the hospital and his end, Rogers said to people who had come to look at property: "We had Pocock here." They merely said blankly, "What's that? Never heard of him." No one at all had heard of Mr. Pocock, the famous painter.

Rogers and Mr. Pocock had come together not because of their minds or tastes, but because of their bodies. They were drawn will-lessly together by the magnetic force of their phenomenal obesities. There is a loneliness in fat. Atlas met Atlas, astonished to find each saddened by the burden of a world. Rogers was short and had that douce, pleading melancholy of the enormous. His little blue eyes, above the bumps of fat on his cheek-bones, looked like sinking lights at sea; and he had the gentle and bewildered air of a man who watches himself daily getting uncontrollably and hopelessly fatter. His outsize navy blue jacket hung on him like another man's overcoat. The coarseness and grossness of his appearance, the spread of his nostrils, the crease of his neck, gave him a pathos: there is an inherent delicacy, a dignity and spirituality in pork. He lived in a quiet sedentary fever in which, as his own bounds daily grew, the world seemed farther away to him. His gentleness was like that of the blind, indicating how far he was from other people. There was no one like him in the village. Rogers was a show-piece. His visits to the public-house were a hopeless try for gregariousness, but there were no seats broad enough in the tap, it didn't "do" for him to go to the bar where his workmen were and, anyway, there were no seats in it. He went instead to the small parlour and was usually there alone, like a human exhibit, with an aspidistra and a picture of Edward VII.

Rogers's first impression, as he came into the parlour one night, was that an enormous bull terrier in a black-and-white chessboard jacket had got up on to a chair in the darker corner.

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Rogers's perceptions were slow; but at last he saw the figure was a man and not a dog. Between the check suit and check cloth-hat was a face, a raw-meat face which had grown a grey moustache, and under that was a small, furiously proud and querulous mouth. An old dog who would fly out at you if spoken to. The check coat went on to check knickerbockers. There was a rose in Pocock's buttonhole—the smell of the rose and of Turkish cigarettes in the room—and he had a spotted bow to his collar. But what surprised Rogers, after he had said "good evening" and was leaning forward with the usual difficulty to tap the bell on the table, was the stranger's voice. Husky, swaggering, full-tempered, it said, daring you to contradict and yet somehow weary: "What are you having, old boy?"

Deep called unto deep: Rogers saw to his astonishment, not a stranger, but a brother. Not his blood brother, of course, but something closer—a brother in obesity.

Mr. Pocock's was a different kind of fatness, tight where Rogers's was loose, dynamic where Rogers's was passive and poetic, aggressive where Rogers's was silkily receptive. Mr. Pocock's pathos was fiery and bitter. A pair of stiffly inflated balloons seemed to have been placed, one under and one above Mr. Pocock's waist-line, and the load forced his short legs apart on either side of the chair, like the splayed speckled legs of a frog. And there was another bond. Mr. Pocock, it was evident, was a drinker. A gentleman, too (Rogers observed), as the evening went on, arrogantly free with money. A sportsman also. There were a couple of illustrated papers on the table and one had a photograph of tropical game. A peeress had taken these photographs. One showed a hippopotamus rising like a sofa out of a lake.

"Damn' cruel, old boy," said Mr. Pocock in a grating gasp, having an imaginary row with the aristocracy and Rogers about it. "All these bloody white women following poor defenceless animals around with cameras, old boy. Bloody

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hippopotamus can't even drink in peace. Animals much sooner be shot, old boy—what?"

Yes, Mr. Pocock was a sportsman, a blaspheming sportsman of some elegance, for now Rogers noticed a couple of rings on one hand.

Yet not a sportsman, after all, for he looked bored when Rogers spoke of the duck and snipe and the teal which float like commas on the meres at the back of the village.

"Can't eat it, old boy," replied Pocock. "Game's poison to me. Bloody waste of time following birds, if you ask me. Need every ounce of daylight for my work."

The bell on the table was tapped again and again. In and out went Askew, the publican. Even he straightened up under the snapping orders of Mr. Pocock.

And there was no reserve in Mr. Pocock. His talk was free and self-explanatory. "I've come down here to see if there is anything," said Pocock. "If there is, well and good. If not, all right. There may be something."

("What?" wondered Rogers.)

"I've got to, old boy," said Mr. Pocock. "I've got to cut down the overheads. Have another, old boy? With this bloody crisis," he said with an angry and frightened look in his eyes. "I had my own studio in London and a housekeeper, but with this crisis, and the critics in league against you, the bottom's gone out of things. There may be something here—I don't know— Two rooms, a bed, a table, do my own cleaning up and cooking—that's all I want and no women about. No," said Mr. Pocock, "no more women."

"You married, old boy?" asked Mr. Pocock.

"Yes," said Rogers.

"You're lucky, old boy," said Mr. Pocock. "Bloody lucky. Excuse my language, old boy, but woman's a b . . ."

"Oh, fifty-fifty," said Rogers, not clear whether he meant only half lucky or wholly lucky to have a wife he could share everything with, she doing the office work and looking after

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his house while he built up his figure and did the drinking. For Rogers had reached the point of saturation in his own life when drinking was work. It never stopped.

Rogers's slow mind wanted to explain, but Pocock interrupted.

"I know, old boy. You can't tell me anything about women. They're a bloody question-mark, old boy. There's two answers to it, one's right and one's wrong. When I want what I want, I don't ask anyone's opinion, I go and get it."

"What?" added Mr. Pocock.

"You're right," said Rogers in his slow, groping voice. "You know the story of the couple who . . ."

They didn't laugh out loud at the story. Rogers shook and shook and his eyes sank out of sight. Mr. Pocock strained in his chair and seemed to fizz with austere pleasure like a bottle of soda-water.

"It's nature," said Mr. Pocock when his head stopped fizzing.

Rogers was out of his depth here. His head was lolling forward. He had reached the stage when Mr. Pocock had a tendency to rise to the ceiling and then to drift away sideways towards the door in great numbers.

"Take salmon," said Rogers heavily, this coming into his mind at the moment.

"Salmon, old boy? Why bloody salmon?" said Mr. Pocock.

"They go . . ." said Rogers. "They go—up fresh water."

"Salmon?" said Mr. Pocock. "Salmon? They come from the sea."

"They don't breed in it," said Rogers uncertainly. He was beginning to forget why he had mentioned them.

"I know," said Mr. Pocock peremptorily. "They live in the sea and go up the river when they feel like it."

"Feel like it," repeated Rogers. Somewhere near here was the reason for raising the matter.

". . . I've seen 'em, old boy," continued Mr. Pocock, putting down his glass with a bang.

"Out of the sea," insisted Rogers.

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"Don't be bloody funny, old boy," said Mr. Pocock, banging his glass again. "We know they do."

The landlord called "Time".

Rogers and Mr. Pocock got up with common difficulty, exchanging a look of sympathy. Foot by foot, after they had unbent, stopping between paragraphs, they talked and stopped their way out of the public-house and outside its door. Facing the night, surprised by it, they halted again. The moon arrested them. It was a white full moon, the most obese of planets, with its little mouth open in the sad face.

"Just made for an artist, I should say," said Rogers, slapped across the face by the cold wind, but warm within in his linings. Yet as a villager he had an obscure feeling that for a London stranger to paint the place insulted it. His feeling was primitive; he did not want the magic of an alien eye upon his home.

"It *used* to be pretty, old boy," said Mr. Pocock. "Till some bastard ran up those bloody villas."

"I put them up ten years ago", said Rogers dispassionately; and he meant that time justified and forgave all things.

"Good God, old boy. Bloody ugly," fizzed Mr. Pocock.

They stared at the villas and grinned, almost sniggered, like boys peeping through a fence at something shocking. It gave Rogers and Mr. Pocock pleasure, they being human, to know the worst about each other. And as they gazed with tenderness upon the raped virgin, the sight started Pocock's mind on his own affairs and prompted him to the words which were the final thing to bind Rogers to him.

"I don't mind telling you, old boy, I've been hurt," Mr. Pocock said. "I've had a jerk. I haven't told a bloody soul so far, but I'll tell you. *Last year I started living on my capital.*"

Rogers turned his back on Mr. Pocock and affected to look up the road for traffic. It was empty. All lights in the village houses were out. He felt a stirring of the bowels. His wife did not know, he hardly let himself know—but he, too, had passed the crest of his life, he, too, was beginning the first

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harassed footsteps downhill, crumbling away to pieces like a town in a fog, and no one, hitherto, to watch or share the process. Rogers also had started living on his capital.

After this, day by day, they sought each other out like two dogs. First of all they were halting and suspicious. Rogers said: "Have you been painting, Mr. Pocock?" but this was not, he discovered, a welcome question. Mr. Pocock replied that he was sizing up the situation. Midday, Mr. Pocock could always be found sizing things up at "The Grapes" or "The Waggoner". He was sizing up and settling in. And, anyway, he hadn't been feeling too well lately.

"Been having trouble with my foot," said Mr. Pocock defiantly at Rogers.

"It's the weight you carry," said Rogers. "I get it myself."

Mr. Pocock, as one heavy drinker to another, appreciated the tact of that lie.

"I keep clear of doctors, old boy," said Mr. Pocock. "Always have."

"They cut you down," said Rogers, emptying his glass.

"All wrong, old boy," said Mr. Pocock. "Want to kill you."

At night they met like lovers. They were religious drinkers. Whisky was Mr. Pocock's religion, beer was the faith of Rogers. An active faith ranges widely. After the public-houses of the village there were two or three on the main road. The headlights of cars howling through the dark to the coast picked out two balloons in coats and trousers, bouncing and blowing down the road. Dramas halted them.

"What's that, old boy?"

"Rabbit."

"No, old boy, not a rabbit. It was a fox. I know a fox."

"I reckon it was a stoat."

The point became intricate under the stars.

"Bring Mr. Pocock in to supper one evening," Mrs. Rogers said. She was a plump, practical woman, with hair set like a

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teacake. She was a one-time nurse, abnormally good-tempered, pleasantly unimaginative. She ate well and enjoyed the anxiety of being the business management of an exhibit like her husband. Incapable herself of his deterioration, hers was the craving, so strong in the orderly and new, for its opposite, the romantic ruin. Rogers, like many men, and especially drinking men, who neglect their wives and are slowly ruining their families, had an ideal picture of his family in his mind, a picture to which his fancy was always putting more delicate touches of reminiscence. For, like all the world beyond his hazy corpulence, his family became remote, a little farther away each day, like a memory or an old master.

"Bloody funny thing, old boy," Mr. Pocock said. "When I paint a picture, I get the feeling I have for a woman."

It was Rogers's feeling about his own picture, of his family, that private masterpiece of his. Rogers wasn't interested in any other pictures; Mr. Pocock wasn't interested in domestic life. And "The Crown" was placed strategically between their homes.

About once every couple of months, Mr. Pocock hinted, he "broke out". He always had. He always would. There was a large manufacturing town with a river, pleasure-boats and a Hippodrome twenty miles away, where life, said Rogers, abounded. He and Mr. Pocock put roses in their buttonholes, cigars in their mouths and went. Rogers explained that he hadn't seen quite so much life since he was married, but when he was a youngster . . . Oh, dear. This stirred up memories in Mr. Pocock. They arrived and, to make a start, went to the station buffet. After this the past was vivid. They went to the Hippodrome for the second act of a play about divorce. The seats were narrow and Mr. Pocock said he couldn't breathe. They left. Mr. Pocock said all this modern stuff was dirty. Nothing but sex. (What's yours, old boy?) Dirt, like Epstein and Cézanne.

The last train back was the 12.17. It brought the Hippo-

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drome people. For a long time the station with its hoardings and iron and glass façade seemed unattainable, but at last, after a long time on the kerb opposite, they rushed it. The train was crowded. Rogers had been sorry to leave the Hippodrome. He smiled, wagging his head, thinking about it, then he began to laugh and nudge his neighbours. They were soon entertained by Rogers. It was like the old days.

"I've been divorced to-day," Rogers suddenly said; "and he's my co-respondent." Mr. Pocock at once offered him a cigarette. Rogers refused.

"Why do you refuse my cigarettes, old boy?" Mr. Pocock asked abruptly. He was out for a quarrel.

"Do you think I want your wife?" exclaimed Mr. Pocock angrily. Rogers laughed idiotically.

"Because you're a swine if you do," said Mr. Pocock.

But they didn't fight. They got out at their station, helped out by the passengers, and the guard, while the engine-driver watched from the cab. They passed Rogers's villas.

"Damned awful, old boy," said Mr. Pocock.

"Come in," said Rogers when they got to his house.

A look of sobered terror came into Mr. Pocock's face.

"Your wife in?" he said.

"She's in bed," Rogers said.

"Thank God," said Mr. Pocock. "I'm drunk."

"Come in," said Rogers.

"She'd hear my language," said Mr. Pocock. Rogers opened the door and led the way into the sitting-room.

Mr. Pocock sat down while Rogers went to the whisky-bottle.

"It's empty, old man," Rogers said, looking blankly at Mr. Pocock.

"Thank God, old boy." Mr. Pocock stood appalled, like a man who had never been in an inhabited house before. He looked shocked. He saw with horror the cretonne-covered sofa, the photographs, the slim silver vases with maidenhair fern in them.

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"She's taken the other one away and put this one here."

"Women," said Mr. Pocock.

They stared at each other.

"Come round to my place," said Mr. Pocock.

Still talking, they went out, leaving the door open. A woman's head appeared at the window.

"Alfred!" the voice called.

Rogers stopped and stared at Mr. Pocock. Mr. Pocock stared back like a fierce dog at Rogers.

"Better answer, old boy," said Mr. Pocock, banging his stick on the ground.

"Yes," called Rogers.

"Had a good time?" said the woman's voice. They could not see her in the darkness, but Mr. Pocock raised his hat.

"Better go," he whispered.

He went off alone. Rogers followed him at last. Mr. Pocock's house was the last of a row of labourer's cottages, one room and the scullery downstairs and two little rooms up. Now Rogers was shocked by what he saw. In the downstairs room was an old bit of carpet laid to the edge of a cooking range, and the carpet was stained with grease. Tins and the remains of a meal were on the table. Mr. Pocock used only one of the rooms upstairs. They went up. Its boards were bare. There was a suitcase on the floor and there was an iron bed and a chair. The place smelled of mice and also of the smoking candle stuck on the mantelpiece. They sat down.

"That's what I ought to have done—got married," said Mr. Pocock. His face looked greenish in the candlelight. "Bloody lonely without a woman, old boy."

"There's a woman," Mr. Pocock exclaimed violently. There were canvases stacked against the dirty wall. He turned one round. He filled his glass. What Rogers saw shocked him. It was the picture of a thin, dark-haired woman sitting on a bed, naked. Not lascivious, not beautiful, not enticing,

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just naked and seeming to say, "It don't feel natural, I mean having nothing on."

"Oh dear, oh dear," was all Rogers could say. He went hot. It was the painting of the bed that shocked him. Mr. Pocock seemed to him a monster.

Mr. Pocock began to boast and Rogers hardly listened. There was a bottle of whisky. Rogers's eye kept going with astonishment to the picture. A dancer, Mr. Pocock said. He knew all the stage crowd, he said. Could have had her, he said. Words and words came out of Mr. Pocock, gobbling and strutting like a blown-out turkey in the room, words making an ever-softening roar in the set, cold silence of the cottage where no clock ticked.

Suddenly Rogers had a shock. It was daylight. He had been asleep on the floor and the sun was shining on him. He gaped. There was Mr. Pocock on the bed. Still holding his cane, the rings shining on his podgy fingers which had grey hair at the knuckles, Mr. Pocock lay. He was snoring. His body heaved up and down in the loud suit, like a marquee with the wind loose in it. Remote in sleep with his picture above him, Mr. Pocock looked sacred and innocent, in the bare room.

The spring came with its glassy winds, its air going warm and cold and the lengthening light becoming frail in the evenings. Rogers and Mr. Pocock were both ill. Rogers received illness as part of his burden; he was more aware of his wife and of his children when he was ill. But Mr. Pocock was an aggressive invalid. He saw conspiracy. He was terrified and he blustered to conceal this and made war on the doctor. He would not stay in bed.

"Kimble thinks he's got me, old boy. Knocked off my beer and cut me down to two whiskies a day. It isn't right! It isn't human! He's got to be fair."

When Rogers got up they met in the pub.

"I've had seven, old boy," Mr. Pocock said. "But if Kimble says anything to you about what I drink—it's two. I've treated

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him fairly. I've been reasonable. That man wants to kill me. But not a word to him! You've got to deal with these doctors."

First of all when he had come to the village Mr. Pocock had a charwoman to clean and wash up for him, but he was hardly ever in his cottage and he ate at any time. He had got rid of the charwoman and looked after himself. He had brought his bed downstairs when he was first ill because he had been frightened in the upstairs room. One night he felt tired and low. A bus-ride had upset him. He went to bed early. In the middle of the night he woke up in black terror. He felt sick and he was fainting, and he was sure he was in London. He reached for his stick and knocked on the floor to make the woman come up to him, the woman whose portrait Rogers had seen and who lived downstairs. All the night sleeping and waking he dreamed he was knocking to make himself heard on the floor. For the model, then for Mrs. Rogers, then for his mother.

In the morning he could hardly move. Then he remembered he was on the ground floor and had been knocking on the carpet which covered the flags, which covered the earth. He had been knocking on the hard crust of the earth. All he could do was to crawl from his bed to the cupboard where the whisky-bottle was and then crawl back. But he called no one; he stiffened with anger if there were any signs of anyone coming to the door. He was not going to be caught like this. He was not going to admit anything. He cursed the doctor.

It was two days before Mr. Pocock's illness was discovered.

"Mr. Pocock's ill," Rogers's wife brought the news. She knew all the illnesses of the village.

Rogers sat up, alert. He was at once frightened for himself. He did not want to see Mr. Pocock before the doctor had been. Rogers sat in his chair, unable to move. He wanted to do something for Mr. Pocock, but he was paralysed. He sat in

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a stupor of inertia and incompetence. He looked appealingly at his wife. She got a car and had Mr. Pocock brought to the house.

"It's the bloody sugar, old boy," murmured Mr. Pocock with a regal weariness as three men carried him upstairs.

Mrs. Rogers was glad when the ambulance came that, for once in his life, Mr. Pocock had had a real home with a woman to look after him.

That was the last of him.

A dealer came down to look at the pictures after the funeral, but he would not take them. One or two others came hoping for frames. But the twenty-odd canvases there had no frames on them. A brother came down to clear up Mr. Pocock's affairs.

"We never corresponded," said the brother. Of all things he was a clergyman.

Two fair and tall young men in *suede* shoes and pull-overs, so alike they looked like a pair of tap dancers, turned up at the same time. They *were* tap-dancers.

"Terrible," they said. They were looking at the pictures; but Rogers supposed they referred to the death, the poverty of the house—or perhaps the clergyman. Rogers had been told by Mr. Pocock that in reward for his kindness he might have one of the pictures, but he did not know which to choose. The only picture he felt anything about was the picture on the bedroom wall, the nude. He detested it.

"Women," he thought, "that must have been Mr. Pocock's trouble. Not drink. Oh dear, not drink, women." So when everyone had gone, he took the small picture, wrapped it in newspaper and put it in a shed in his garden. That picture, and a corkscrew which he stuffed in his pocket, because a corkscrew was useful. He took the picture because, without knowing it, he felt it symbolized the incomprehensibility of the existence of other people. The corkscrew was the man he knew, the picture the man he did not know at all. He thought

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that one day he had better destroy the picture—in case a bad impression of his friend was formed.

And so, slipping out of the funeral, keeping in the background afterwards, staying in his own house, Rogers eluded the memory of Mr. Pocock. Rogers was forgetting everything as he grew larger. He forgot yesterday, last week, last year—he dreamed through time like an idle whale, with its mouth open, letting what would come into it. He contemplated through a haze his own work of art—his family. He watched his wife's second chin when she gave her practical laugh. His two girls swam up to him like fish. They were an extra pair of eyes and ears for him. They saw things quickly. They laughed at things long before he heard them. On Saturdays he took them to the cinema. Every Saturday. A year passed, and then two years. He never said now: "We had Mr. Pocock, the painter, here." He had learned his lesson.

And then came the most extraordinary fortnight of Rogers's life. He was with his daughters in the cinema. They were watching a gangster film. A film four years old: they only got the old films in these country towns. Two men were going quietly up the stairs of an hotel and then along a corridor. It was at night. They were making for the room where a Mexican, behind closed doors, was covering a girl with a gun. But they were not sure of the room. They hesitated at doors. It was trying for Rogers, because his mind was still in the pillared lounge below, reminded by it that he was living on his capital. How had the Mexican got the girl in the room? Then the two men stopped. One said "O.K.", and they pushed open a door marked 13 and switched on the light. Rogers's daughters jumped in their seats and a shout of laughter came from the audience. A large, round-faced man with a huge stomach was lying on a bed in check suit and knickerbockers, asleep and snoring, with a bottle, rolled on its side, near by.

"Mr. Pocock!" the girls shouted.

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It was. Rogers's heart went small in his chest and seemed to shoot like a stone in his throat. The gangsters rolled their eyes ironically. The audience laughed. One of the gangsters picked up the bottle and made to prod Mr. Pocock with it. The audience sent up blast after blast of laughter; especially shrill laughter went up first from the children in front. The other gangster touched his friend's arm, raised his eyes to the ceiling and said: "R.I.P.". Wave after wave of laughter passed by as the snores stopped and then began again like a car toiling and missing up hill.

"It's Mr. Pocock, Mr. Pocock, Dad," Rogers's daughters cried, jumping on their seats. And the laughter went on. For the achievement of Mr. Pocock was that he did nothing, nothing at all. He just lay and snored, the human balloon.

Rogers couldn't believe it.

It became urgent for him after this to decide the matter. Films in the town moved down the road, ten or twenty miles to the next place in the week. Four times he followed that film in a fortnight. Four times he saw that scene. It was unmistakably Pocock. And each place the audience roared until one night at the Hippodrome where it was the big picture, he heard a packed house shout out with enthusiasm at Pocock's sublime unconsciousness. He had three minutes of the film, but those three minutes brought the house down.

It terrified Rogers. Pocock was lying exactly as Rogers had seen him that morning after the binge when he had woken up in Pocock's cottage. He dreaded that the eyes would open, the voice speak. And then, after the sixth time of seeing the film, as he walked home down the village street he longed to meet that preposterous figure, to slap him on the back and tell him. He longed for him to wake up on the screen and hear that helpless applause, to see those wide open laughing mouths. "He kept it quiet," thought Rogers. And the drowning soul saw no irony in it all; but rather felt that life was incomprehensible no more. Something had been settled.

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When he took the picture from his garden shed and burned it on the rubbish heap soon after, Rogers heard in the husky roar of the flame the sound of a soul set free, all stain removed.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

"Good morning, Mr. P," said Mr. Pollfax, rinsing and drying his hands after the last patient. "How's Mr. P.?" I was always Mr. P. until I sat in the chair and he switched the lamp on and had my mouth open. Then I got a peerage.

"That's fine, my lord," said Mr. Pollfax having a look inside.

Dogged, with its slight suggestion of doggish, was the word for Mr. Pollfax. He was a short man, jaunty, hair going thin with jaunty buttocks and a sway to his walk. He had two lines, from habitual grinning, cut deep from the nostrils, and scores of lesser lines like the fine hair of a bird's nest round his egg-blue eyes. There was something innocent, heroic and determined about Mr. Pollfax, something of the English Tommy in tin hat and full pack going up the line. He suggested in a quiet way—war.

He was the best dentist I ever had. He got you into the chair, turned on the light, tapped around a bit with a thing like a spoon and then, dropping his white-coated arm to his side, told you a story. Several more stories followed in his flat Somerset voice, when he had your mouth jacked up. And then removing the towel and with a final "Rinse that lot out", he finished with the strangest story of all and let you go. A month or so later the bill came in. Mr. Pollfax presents his compliments and across the bottom of it, in his hand, "Be good". I have never known a dentist like Mr. Pollfax.

"Open, my lord," said Mr. Pollfax. Let's see what sort of life his lordship has been leading. Still smoking that filthy pipe, I see. I shall have to do some cleaning up."

He tapped around and then dropped his arm. A look of anxiety came on his face. "Did I tell you that one about the girl who went to the Punch and Judy show? No? Nor the one about the engine-driver who was put on sentry duty in Syria? You're sure? When did I see you last? What was

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the last one I told you? That sounds like last April? Lord, you *have* been letting things go. Well," said Mr. Pollfax, tipping back my head and squirting something on to a tooth, "we'll have a go at that root at the back. It's not doing you any good. It was like this. There was a girl sitting on the beach at Barmouth with her young man watching a Punch and Judy show . . ." (Closer and closer came Mr. Pollfax's head, lower and lower went his voice.)

He took an instrument and began chipping his way through the tooth and the tale.

"Not bad, eh?" he said, stepping back with a sudden shout of laughter.

"Ah," I mouthed.

"All right, my lord," said Mr. Pollfax, withdrawing the instrument and relapsing into his dead professional manner. "Spit that lot out."

He began again.

There was just that root, Mr. Pollfax was saying. It was no good there. There was nothing else wrong; he'd have it out in a couple of shakes.

"Though, my lord," he said, "you did grow it about as far back in your throat as you could, didn't you, trying to make it as difficult as you could for Mr. Pollfax? What we'll do first of all is to give it a dose of something."

He swivelled the dish of instruments towards me and gave a tilt to the lamp. I remembered that lamp because once the bulb had exploded, sending glass all over the room. It was fortunate, Mr. Pollfax said at the time, that it had blown the other way and none of it had hit me, for someone might have brought a case for damages against someone—which reminded him of the story of the honeymoon couple who went to a small hotel in Aberdeen. . . .

"Now," said Mr. Pollfax, dipping things in little pots and coming to me with an injection needle; "open wide, keep dead still. I was reading Freud the other day. There's a man.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Oedipus complex? Ever read about that? Don't move, don't breathe, you'll feel a prick, but for God's sake don't jump. I don't want it to break in your gum. I've never had one break yet, touch wood, but they're thin, and if it broke off you'd be in a nursing home three weeks and Mr. Pollfax would be down your throat looking for it. The trouble about these little bits of wire is they move a bit farther into the system every time you swallow."

"There now," said Mr. Pollfax.

"Feel anything? Feel it prick?" he said. "Fine."

He went to a cupboard and picked out the instrument of extraction and then stood, working it up and down like a gardener's secateurs in his hand. He studied my face. He was a clean-shaven man and looked like a priest in his white coat.

"Some of the stories you hear!" exclaimed Mr. Pollfax. "And some of the songs. I mean where I come from. 'The Lot that Lily Lost in the Lottery'—know that one? Is your skin beginning to tingle, do you feel it on the tip of your tongue yet? That's fine, my lord. I'll sing it to you."

Mr. Pollfax began to sing. He'd give it another minute, he said, when he'd done with Lily; he'd just give me the chorus of "The Night Uncle's Waistcoat Caught Fire."

"Tra la la," sang Mr. Pollfax.

"I bet," said Mr. Pollfax sadistically, "one side of his lordship's face has gone dead and his tongue feels like a pin cushion."

"Blah," I said.

"I think," he said, "we'll begin."

So Mr. Pollfax moved round to the side of me, got a grip on my shoulders and began to press on the instrument in my mouth. Pressing and drawing firmly he worked upon the root. Then he paused and increased the pressure. He seemed to be hanging from a crowbar fixed to my jaw. Nothing happened. He withdrew.

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"The Great Flood begins," said Mr. Pollfax putting a tube in my mouth and taking another weapon from the tray.

The operation began again. Mr. Pollfax now seemed to hang and swing on the crowbar. It was not successful.

"Dug himself in, has he?" muttered Mr. Pollfax. He had a look at his instruments. "You can spit, my lord," he said.

Mr. Pollfax now seized me with great determination, hung, swung, pressed and tugged with increased energy.

"It's no good you thinking you're going to stay in," said Mr. Pollfax in mid-air, muttering to the root. But the instrument slipped and a piece of tooth broke off as he spoke.

"So that's the game is it?" said Mr. Pollfax withdrawing. "Good rinse, my lord, while Mr. Pollfax considers the position."

He was breathing hard.

Oh well, he said, there were more ways than one of killing a cat. He'd get the drill on it. There were two Jews standing outside Buckingham Palace when a policeman came by, he said, coming at me with the drill which made a whistling noise like a fishing line as he drew it through. The tube gurgled in my mouth. I was looking, as I always did at Mr. Pollfax's, at the cowls busily twirling on the chimneys opposite. Wind or no wind these cowls always seemed to be twirling round. Two metal cowls on two yellow chimneys. I always remember them.

"Spit, my lord," said Mr. Pollfax, changing to a coarser drill. "Sorry old man, if it slipped, but Mr. Pollfax is not to be beaten."

The drill whirled again, skidding and whining; the cowls twirled on the chimneys, Mr. Pollfax's knuckles were on my nose. What he was trying to do, he said, was to get a purchase.

Mr. Pollfax's movements got quicker. He hung up the drill, he tapped impatiently on the tray, looking for something. He came at me with something like a button-hook. He got it in. He levered like a signal man changing points.

"I'm just digging," he said. Another piece of tooth broke off.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Mr. Pollfax started when he heard it go and drew back.

"Mr. Pollfax in a dilemma," he said.

Well, he'd try the other side. Down came the drill again. There were beads of sweat on his brow. His breath was shorter.

"You see," exclaimed Mr. Pollfax suddenly and loudly, looking angrily up at his clock. "I'm fighting against time. Keep that head this way, hold the mouth. That's right. Sorry, my lord, I've got to bash you about, but time's against me."

"Why, damn this root," said Mr. Pollfax hanging up again. "It's wearing out my drill. We'll have to saw. Mr. Pollfax is up against it."

His face was red now, he was gasping and his eyes were glittering. A troubled and emotional look came over Mr. Pollfax's face.

"I've been up against it in my time," exclaimed Mr. Pollfax forcefully between his teeth. "You heard me mention the Oedipus complex to you?"

"Blah," I managed.

"I started well by ruining my father. I took every penny he had. That's a good start, isn't it?" he said, speaking very rapidly. "Then I got married. Perfectly happy marriage, but I went and bust it up. I went off with a French girl and her husband shot at us out in the car one day. I was with that girl eighteen months and she broke her back in a railway accident and I sat with her six months watching her die. Six ruddy months. I've been through it. Then my mother died and my father was going to marry again, a girl young enough to be his daughter. I went up and took that girl off him, ran off to Hungary with her, married her and we've got seven children. Perfect happiness at last. I've been through the mill," said Mr. Pollfax, relaxing his chin and shining a torch down my mouth, "but I've come out in the end."

"A good rinse, my noble lord," said Mr. Pollfax.

"The oldest's fourteen," he said, getting the saw. "Clever girl. Very clever with her hands."

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He seized me again. Did I feel anything? Well, thank God for that, said Mr. Pollfax. Here we'd been forty minutes with this damned root.

"And I bet you're thinking why didn't Lord Pollfax let sleeping dogs lie, like the telephone operator said. Did I tell you that one about the telephone operator? That gum of yours is going to be sore."

He was standing legs apart, chin trembling, eyes blinking, hacking with the button-hook, like a wrestler putting on a headlock.

"Mr. Pollfax with his back against the wall," he said, between his teeth.

"Mr. Pollfax making a last-minute stand," he hissed.

"On the burning deck!" he gasped.

"Whence," he added, "all but he had fled."

"Spit," he said. "And now let's have another look." He wiped his brow. "Don't say anything. Keep dead still. For God's sake don't let it hear you. My lords, ladies and gentlemen, pray silence for Mr. Pollfax. It's coming, it isn't. No, it isn't. It is. It is. There," he cried, holding a fragment in his fingers.

He stood gravely to attention.

"And his chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead."

said Mr. Pollfax. "A good and final spit, my lord and prince."

THE VOICE

A MESSAGE came from the rescue party who straightened up and leaned on their spades in the rubble. The policeman said to the crowd: "Everyone keep quiet for five minutes. No talking, please. They're trying to hear where he is."

The silent crowd raised their faces and looked across the ropes to the church which, now it was destroyed, broke the line of the street like a decayed tooth. The bomb had brought down the front wall and the roof, the balcony had capsized. Freakishly untouched, the hymnboard still announced the previous Sunday's hymns.

A small wind blew a smell of smouldering cloth across people's noses from another street where there was another scene like this. A bus roared by and heads turned in passive anger until the sound of the engine had gone. People blinked as a pigeon flew from a roof and crossed the building like an omen of release. There was dead quietness again. Presently a murmuring sound was heard by the rescue party. The man buried under the debris was singing again.

At first difficult to hear, soon a tune became definite. Two of the rescuers took up their shovels and shouted down to encourage the buried man, and the voice became stronger and louder. Words became clear. The leader of the rescue party held back the others and those who were near strained to hear. Then the words were unmistakable:

"Oh Thou whose Voice the waters heard,
And hushed their raging at Thy Word."

The buried man was singing a hymn.

A clergyman was standing with the warden in the middle of the ruined church.

"That's Mr. Morgan all right," the warden said. "He could sing. He got silver medals for it."

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The Rev. Frank Lewis frowned.

"Gold, I shouldn't wonder," said Mr. Lewis, dryly. Now he knew Morgan was alive he said: "What the devil's he doing in there? How did he get in? I locked up at eight o'clock last night myself."

Lewis was a wiry, middle-aged man, but the white dust on his hair and his eye-lashes, and the way he kept licking the dust off his dry lips, moving his jaws all the time, gave him the monkeyish, testy and suspicious air of an old man. He had been up all night on rescue work in the raid and he was tired out. The last straw was to find the church had gone and that Morgan, the so-called Rev. Morgan, was buried under it.

The rescue workers were digging again. There was a wide hole now and a man was down in it filling a basket with his hands. The dust rose like smoke from the hole as he worked.

The voice had not stopped singing. It went on, rich, virile, masculine, from verse to verse of the hymn. Shooting up like a stem through the rubbish the voice seemed to rise and branch out powerfully, luxuriantly and even theatrically, like a tree, until everything was in its shade. It was a shade that came towards one like dark arms.

"All the Welsh can sing," the warden said. Then he remembered that Lewis was Welsh also. "Not that I've got anything against the Welsh," the warden said.

"The scandal of it," Lewis was thinking. "Must he sing so loud, must he advertise himself? I locked up myself last night. How the devil did he get in?" And he really meant: "How did the devil get in?"

To Lewis, Morgan was the nearest human thing to the devil. He could never pass that purple-gowned figure, sauntering like a cardinal in his skull cap on the sunny side of the street, without a shudder of distaste and derision. An unfrocked priest, his predecessor in the church, Morgan ought in strict justice to have been in prison, and would have been but for the indulgence of the bishop. But this did not prevent the old man with the

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saintly white head and the eyes half-closed by the worldly juices of food and wine, from walking about dressed in his vestments, like an actor walking in the sun of his own vanity, a hook-nosed satyr, a he-goat significant to servant girls, the crony of the public-house, the chaser of bookmakers, the smoker of cigars. It was terrible, but it was just that the bomb had buried him; only the malice of the Evil One would have thought of bringing the punishment of the sinner upon the church as well. And now, from the ruins, the voice of the wicked man rose up in all the elaborate pride of art and evil.

Suddenly there was a moan from the sloping timber, slates began to skate down.

"Get out. It's going," shouted the warden.

The man who was digging struggled out of the hole as it bulged under the landslide. There was a dull crumble, the crashing and splitting of wood and then the sound of brick and dust tearing down below the water. Thick dust clouded over and choked them all. The rubble rocked like a cake-walk. Everyone rushed back and looked behind at the wreckage as if it were still alive. It remained still. They all stood there, frightened and suspicious. Presently one of the men with the shovel said: "The bloke's shut up."

Everyone stared stupidly. It was true. The man had stopped singing. The clergyman was the first to move. Gingerly he went to what was left of the hole and got down on his knees.

"Morgan!" he said, in a low voice.

Then he called out more loudly:

"Morgan!"

Getting no reply, Lewis began to scramble the rubble away with his hands.

"Morgan!" he shouted. "Can you hear?" He snatched a shovel from one of the men and began digging and shovelling the stuff away. He had stopped chewing and muttering. His expression had entirely changed. "Morgan!" he called. He

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dug for two feet and no one stopped him. They looked with bewilderment at the sudden frenzy of the small man grubbing like a monkey, spitting out the dust, filing down his nails. They saw the spade at last shoot through the old hole. He was down the hole widening it at once, letting himself down as he worked. He disappeared under a ledge made by the fallen timber.

The party above could do nothing. "Morgan," they heard him call. "It's Lewis. We're coming. Can you hear?" He shouted for an axe and presently they heard him smashing with it. He was scratching like a dog or a rabbit.

A voice like that to have stopped, to have gone! Lewis was thinking. How unbearable this silence was. A beautiful proud voice, the voice of a man, a voice like a tree, the soul of a man spreading in the air like the cedars of Lebanon. "Only one man I have heard with a bass like that. Owen the Bank, at Newtown before the war. Morgan!" he shouted. "Sing! God will forgive you everything, only sing!"

One of the rescue party following behind the clergyman in the tunnel shouted back to his mates.

"I can't do nothing. This bleeder's blocking the gangway."

Half an hour Lewis worked in the tunnel. Then an extraordinary thing happened to him. The tunnel grew damp and its floor went as soft as clay to the touch. Suddenly his knees went through. There was a gap with a yard of cloth, the vestry curtain or the carpet at the communion rail was unwound and hanging through it. Lewis found himself looking down into the blackness of the crypt. He lay down and put his head and shoulders through the hole and felt about him until he found something solid again. The beams of the floor were tilted down into the crypt.

"Morgan. Are you there, man?" he called.

He listened to the echo of his voice. He was reminded of the time he had talked into a cistern when he was a boy. Then his heart jumped. A voice answered him out of the darkness from under the fallen floor. It was like the voice of a man

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lying comfortably and waking up from a snooze, a voice thick and sleepy.

"Who's that?" asked the voice.

"Morgan, man. It's Lewis. Are you hurt?" Tears pricked the dust in Lewis's eyes and his throat ached with anxiety as he spoke. Forgiveness and love were flowing out of him. From below the deep thick voice of Morgan came back.

"You've been a hell of a long time," it said. "I've damn near finished my whisky."

"Hell" was the word which changed Mr. Lewis's mind. Hell was a real thing, a real place for him. He believed in it. When he read out the word "Hell" in the Scriptures he could see the flames rising as they rise out of the furnaces at Swansea. "Hell" was a professional and poetic word for Mr. Lewis. A man who had been turned out of the church had no right to use it. Strong language and strong drink, Mr. Lewis hated both of them. The idea of whisky being in his church made his soul rise like an angered stomach. There was Morgan, insolent and comfortable, lying (so he said) under the old altar-table, which was propping up the fallen floor, drinking a bottle of whisky.

"How did you get in?" Lewis said, sharply, from the hole. "Were you in the church last night when I locked up?"

The old man sounded not as bold as he had been. He even sounded shifty when he replied, "I've got my key."

"*Your* key. I have the only key of the church. Where did you get a key?"

"My old key. I always had a key."

The man in the tunnel behind the clergyman crawled back up the tunnel to the daylight.

"O.K.," the man said. "He's got him. They're having a ruddy row."

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"Reminds me of ferreting. I used to go ferreting with my old dad," said the policeman.

"You should have given that key up," said Mr. Lewis. "Have you been in here before?"

"Yes, but I shan't come here again," said the old man.

There was the dribble of powdered rubble, pouring down like sand in an hour-glass, the ticking of the strained timber like the loud ticking of a clock.

Mr. Lewis felt that at last after years he was face to face with the devil and the devil was trapped and caught. The tick-tock of the wood went on.

"Men have been risking their lives, working and digging for hours because of this," said Lewis. "I've ruined a suit of . . ."

The tick-tock had grown louder in the middle of the words. There was a sudden lurching and groaning of the floor, followed by a big heaving and splitting sound.

"It's going," said Morgan with detachment from below. "The table leg." The floor crashed down. The hole in the tunnel was torn wide and Lewis grabbed at the darkness until he caught a board. It swung him out and in a second he found himself hanging by both hands over the pit:

"I'm falling. Help me," shouted Lewis in terror. "Help me." There was no answer.

"Oh, God," shouted Lewis, kicking for a foothold. "Morgan, are you there? Catch me. I'm going."

Then a groan like a snore came out of Lewis. He could hold no longer. He fell. He fell exactly two feet.

The sweat ran down his legs and caked on his face. He was as wet as a rat. He was on his hands and knees gasping. When he got his breath again he was afraid to raise his voice.

"Morgan," he said quietly, panting.

"Only one leg went," the old man said in a quiet grating voice. "The other three are all right."

Lewis lay panting on the floor. There was a long silence. "Haven't you ever been afraid before, Lewis?" Morgan said.

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Lewis had no breath to reply. "Haven't you ever felt rotten with fear," said the old man, calmly, "like an old tree, infested and worm-eaten with it, soft as a rotten orange?"

"You were a fool to come down here after me. I wouldn't have done the same for you," Morgan said.

"You would," Lewis managed to say.

"I wouldn't," said the old man. "I'm afraid. I'm an old man, Lewis, and I can't stand it. I've been down here every night since the raids got bad."

Lewis listened to the voice. It was low with shame, it had the roughness of the earth, the kicked and trodden choking dust of Adam. The earth of Mr. Lewis listened for the first time to the earth of Morgan. Coarsened and sordid and unlike the singing voice, the voice of Morgan was also gentle and fragmentary.

"When you stop feeling shaky," Morgan said, "you'd better sing. I'll do a bar, but I can't do much. The whisky's gone. Sing, Lewis. Even if they don't hear, it does you good. Take the tenor, Lewis."

Above in the daylight the look of pain went from the mouths of the rescue party, a grin came on the dusty lips of the warden.

"Hear it?" he said. "A ruddy Welsh choir!"

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THE NAME of the street where my Aunt Gertrude lived was Dorinda Gardens. The house was a new one with builders' putty, a tin of undercoating and a roll of wallpaper in the attic. A smell of paint and size was on the stairs, and a shop smell still in the carpets, the upholstery and the new furniture. Uncle owned the house, too, as a mortgagee, and that, Aunt said, was a new thing for him. There was the pride of being one of a regiment in this house, for it was one of several hundred, each with a small white balcony over the front door. The balcony had seduced Uncle. He said one could have breakfast on it "like they did on the Riveera", and in his imagination I am sure he did so, though there was room for only one person to stand on it and certain there was no room for a table. A railway lay in a shallow green cutting at the end of the back garden and in front were two plots of waste land which had not yet been sold. From the bedroom, where I sometimes went in the afternoon when Aunt Gertrude was lying down, one could see a hoarding standing in the field, with the words Easipay Estates Ltd. Ideal Sites for Ideal Houses. The waste grass was spiked with thistles, lumpy with old horse manure, where yellow flies congregated. From Uncle we understood we were in Ideal Surroundings, but to us three boys the paddock was the snag of evil. Its wildness fascinated us and we loosened a paling in order to creep in and smoke our first cigarettes among its dungy stench, feeling that here was the native place of sin. Rusted kettles, a sour heap of old rags and the sight of a prowling dog which looked savage, as it ran sniffing in the hot climate of this enclosure, gave us the fright we longed for. One day as we looked through, Harold said, "There's a man". The man was making water in a corner. We moved off. The man had confirmed our belief in the horror of the place.

There was a small passe-partout picture in the hall of my

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aunt's house which defined our lives. It was a picture of a letter-box with a letter sticking out of it and on the letter in good writing was the address:

Messrs Sell and Repent,
Prosperous Place,
The Earth.

"Some sell and wish they hadn't" said Uncle Smith, cocking a shrewd, pleased eyebrow at the picture.

"Buy and repent you mean," said Aunt Gertrude, whose face used to puff into small lumps when she was contradicting. If Uncle Smith was the sun of the house, Aunt Gertrude was the critical and watery moon, ringed with omens of bad weather.

There was a canal at the end of Dorinda Gardens, the road went over it by a bridge and from the bridge one saw the slow worm of water pass under the girders of the railway. The days were warming and summer was blistering the new paint of the doors. One Sunday Aunt Gertrude said to Harold, her eldest son:

"Where's your dad? What's he doing?"

"S'upstairs, mum."

"He's a long time," said Aunt Gertrude.

She was tied to her husband by fear. He was out all day and sometimes he would be away for two or three nights, and in these absences she sank back into an undercurrent of uneasiness. His absences, even in another room, had the same effect on her as the silences of a child. What calamity had occurred? She was far from being one of those women who have the pose of treating their husbands as children. She was afraid of him and she knew it.

"Pop up and see," said Aunt to Harold, but he did not want to go.

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A time passed and then Uncle came downstairs. He was a quiet and secretive walker. He opened the kitchen door.

"Gert," he said.

We gaped at him. He had dressed himself in a dark blue blazer with the initials H.B.S. worked on the pocket, white flannel trousers, white boots and on his head was a yachting cap. He kept his right hand in his blazer pocket.

He smiled shyly and modestly.

"I thought I'd take you for a row on the canal."

We all laughed until he blushed like a boy. He had to laugh too.

"What's the joke? I see no joke," he said grinning.

"Where did you get that hat?" called Harold.

"No need to be vulgar," Uncle said, with a smirk. "We may not have a yacht, but we're close to the water."

Aunt stopped laughing and into her face came a glint of fear such as she always had whenever he did a new thing.

"Look at your mother," said Uncle to Leslie. "Pretending she's never been in a boat. We used to go out every Sunday when we were courting."

"I was a young limb," said Aunt Gertrude tenderly and dreamily; but while there was a glow in Uncle's dreams, Aunt Gertrude's had an edge to them and suggested that if anyone went back with her into her memories, they would get their hands scratched or their clothes torn.

We did not go rowing on the canal. There were no boats. But we walked down to the bridge, Uncle still in his regalia. We saw men fishing in the oil-green water and the thundery marble of summer clouds crested as white as cherry blossom and very still over our heads, as if the London sky were in a glass case. The men sat in the stillness smoking their pipes and watching their floats. Or leaving their rods, they went for short circular walks and grunted to one another. While we watched from the bridge one of the men whipped up his line. There was the squeal of rapid winding and at the end of the

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line was a fish like a slip of dancing tin. Uncle took us down to the towpath and the man showed us the fish.

"That's what we ought to do," said Uncle. "We're on the water. We ought to catch our own fish. Imagine herrings straight out of the river."

He said this to Aunt Gertrude when we got back. "You don't get herrings in rivers," she said tartly.

This genuinely astonished Uncle, but he recovered.

"Imagine it!" he cried, giving her a smack on the bottom.

"Ah, come on, old girl," he bullied. "Cheer up. Imagine it!"

Our only visitor at Dorinda Gardens was my Grandma Carter. She came in her black bead bonnet, her red nose and the red-rimmed eyes showing like knife-cuts through her black veil, and wearing a black cape of some shiny material, the death-watch beetle of grief. She carried a string bag with her, for wherever she went she seemed always to travel with a few groceries, some sewing and a bottle of stout. There was the smell of the sharp grocer's about her, something compounded of tea, biscuits, bacon and pickles, and her tongue was the vinegar. Grief, one thinks, should purge and exalt the soul, but it had made her ugly, bad-tempered and given her also a morbid shuffling humility, a look of guilt and shame. She came every Wednesday to see us and she would suddenly appear, letting herself in by the back door and saying every time apologetically:

"I came round the back, Gert dear, because I see you done your front." Then she pushed back her veil to the bridge of her nose, and turning slowly in a circle as a dog does before it lies down to sleep, she would give a sniff and put her string bag down on a chair. Her loneliness, her unhappiness and her snuffling made us afraid.

Aunt Gertrude was very guarded with her mother, for Gran had a tongue.

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"Where d'you get that from?" Grandma Carter would exclaim at once, pointing perhaps at the coat and umbrella stand in the hall. She was very jealous of her daughter's new furniture.

"Horace bought it at Freebody's."

"What's wrong with a hook and two nails?" Gran sniffed. "Now I've come round to see what's happening to my boy's money." I, of course, was her boy; but so many she had loved had repaid her treacherously by dying that she was distant and suspicious and erratic in the show of affection to me. She had had a scare when she thought she might be landed with me when my mother died. Gran gave me a whiskered kiss which smelled of sugar-bags, and tears came off her face on to mine. She was small but there was something muscular in her grip when she hugged me and she would tell Aunt of the dozens of times when "the poor lamb" (myself) had shown that I regarded her as a second mother—a delusion, for Gran terrified me. Gran's life was filled with guilt towards the living, whom she looked at slyly, and her tears were not tears of sorrow, but issued to conceal this guilt. She was guilty because she forgot the living and neglected them in her absorption with the dead.

When they had settled down and Grandma Carter had asked perfunctorily after her son-in-law with a "How's Smith?" Aunt Gertrude asked after Gran's lodgers. They were never called lodgers.

"How is . . . er . . ." Aunt said, not finishing the sentence and looking up at the silk shade over the gas-bracket in the middle of the room.

"Studying for his . . ." Gran replied, nodding with a genteel expression. The word "examination" suggested a rare, upper atmosphere which it did not become her to investigate or even mention.

After this Aunt and Gran got down to the dead. The two women raised them and wept. Poor Flo, how she had suffered; my father's cough, that horse which had kicked my

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grandfather—the horse had died too, for they had had it shot—then Harry being taken and the brightness of my mother, her last words—some dispute about them—and then poor Great Aunt Emily, her last years darkened, and her brother Wilf, the deaf fishmonger. Having exhausted the human dead, unwrapping the cerements of memory and gazing at the closed faces, Aunt and Gran would feel hungry, as if death had been their appetizer, and would get out the beetroot, the vinegar and the mutton bone. Aunt called from the kitchen in a high giggling voice.

“Gran! Gran!”

“Yes, dear?”

“I was thinking of Aunt Emily’s dog Rover.” And Aunt went off into a shriek of laughter. “How it went away that night, do you remember? And they found it two days later drowned in the canal!”

Aunt came in holding the mutton bone in her hand, waving it as she laughed, and they both laughed and laughed till they had to sit down.

“Don’t be so reel, Ma,” said Aunt Gertrude. “It’s wicked to laugh. She loved that dog. Oh, don’t, I’ll die . . .”

“Emily was a fool about that dog,” said Gran Carter to steady their laughter.

But Aunt was “off” now, “off” being Gran’s word for it. She remembered other dogs, then Wilf’s jackdaw, Flo’s goldfish, my mother’s canary, which Aunt Gertrude’s cat had got when they were young—for there was a jealousy between the sisters and Aunt was always guilty about having left the cage door open—human beings had given place to the animals and birds. And then Aunt’s face and Gran’s straightened and the two women ended with the horse which had given Gran’s husband the fatal kick.

“I’ll never forget the day poor Jessie was shot.” The purgation was complete, Gran started to admire all the new furniture now and said, “Smith’s paid for it, I hope,” and a

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defiance came into Aunt Gertrude's salty green eyes and she said, "Yes, he has." And then Gran went. She took a roll of wallpaper that day to paper her closet. She was an active woman and a natural picker up of trifles by the way.

Women are the terrors, the sergeant majors of childhood. Their hard quick fingers pull at the neck, get at your ears, strain at buttons, one moment they are cuffing, the next they are hugging. Their moods last about a quarter of an hour. It's easy to scare them, simple to delude them. . . . Not all women. My mother was not like this. Our shop must have put some order into her femininity. But Aunt Gertrude had the disorder of a story. When she wasn't weeping, she was laughing, swaying up and down and covering her face with her hands, or she was in a temper, or she was sulking. She sulked when she was tired of us, especially when Uncle was away for a day or two, waiting for him to come home. She was not a beautiful woman, but the nearer the time of his return came, her restless face calmed in a sulk which was a kind of beauty. She set her yellow hair under a net, until it was as firm as a scone, her underlip drooped and the pupils of her grey eyes turned darker, almost blue. She put on her best dress and watered a small fern in the middle of the table and sat in the front room without moving. It made her rather impressive that in the middle of the afternoon she had had a bath and we had to keep away from her so as not to spoil her clothes. She was one of those fair, freckled women who sweat easily and after a bath the smell, half of soap, and half hay-like, of her skin, put an excitement into the air, as if we were walking in a summer field. Harold, her son, was in love with her at these times, and spoke very piously and devotedly and kept us away from her. He wanted her to stay like this and did not want his father to return. But she was not in love with her son.

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"Why don't you behave yourself like this all the time?" she said sarcastically to him. Harold had the sanctimoniousness of a once-spoiled and now easily envious eldest child. She preferred Leslie, the younger boy, at this moment because he too was longing for Uncle to come back and stood for hours at the window. The time when she was in love with Harold was just after Uncle had gone away; but Harold was excited by freedom then and did not want her.

Aunt Gertrude was like a book of stories to me. When there were holidays I would leave the boys who were playing in the garden or the kitchen, pretending to them I was going to the lavatory. I would go upstairs and try to get into Aunt Gertrude's bedroom where she used to lie down in the afternoon.

"Who's that? Stop fiddling at the door. What do you want?"

I got into the habit of going there and standing at the window, watching the road and telling her what was happening. A wide road, sandy; the hoarding opposite; a dog in the paddock; a pile of new bricks in the lot which had been sold.

"There goes the lady with the dog."

Once or twice Aunt got off the bed when I said this. She lay on the bed in a pair of grey bloomers and a loose vest with her thick hair down over her shoulders so that her face seemed to be looking out of the flap of a hairy tent, like a savage's. She got off the bed and kicked the chamber pot and peeped through the curtains. The tall grey-haired woman with the dog fascinated my aunt.

"There she goes," she repeated to herself. "Look at her. And the dog." It was a fox terrier.

"She's a lady," Aunt Gertrude said in a dreamy voice, coming away and pushing the chamber pot under the bed in a refined way. "She spoke to me in the grocer's. Her little dog got its lead all twisted up round me and she said,"—here Aunt imitated the woman's accent—" 'Ooh, Ai'm soo sorr'eh.'"

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Oh noo reely, its quite all right,' I said. I could see she was a lady. 'Ooh, but mai leetle dawg is being ai nuis-ance. Come heah, Tiny.' And she smiled. 'Ooh, don't mention it,' I said."

Now she was out of bed, Aunt sat at her dressing table. Like all the other furniture it was new; the price of the dressing table was marked in blue chalk on the back of the mirror. I looked at her. She had slim arms and small shoulders and the skin, except at the armpits where it was the colour of dry yellow grass, was very white. She told me to have another look at the window, and, when I obeyed, with a furtive blush, she took her clothes off and put on the new ones in a hurry in case I should see. I turned to watch her brush her straight thick hair.

One afternoon she was doing her hair like this when an accident happened, something which dominated her thoughts for months afterwards. She was holding her hand-mirror in one hand and talking to herself in it while she did her hair at the back.

"Is it right at the back? There's another bit. Let's put a pin in it. Here," she said, handing me a hairpin over her shoulder, "put it in, do you see? No, not there. That bit. Oh come on, give it to me."

She had quick nervy hands, and she put out her hand for the pin and placed the mirror on the table.

"Here it is," I said. She was trying to get the pin from me without looking round and then she turned round with one of her sudden movements. Her elbow caught the mirror and it fell to the floor.

Aunt Gertrude's face changed.

"Don't touch it," she said.

I stood back, startled by the crash. She stared down at the mirror which was lying on its face. Her manner frightened me.

"It's gone," she exclaimed. "I heard it go." Her face went very red and her cheeks became lumpy as she bent down

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and picked up the mirror. The glass had cracked across the face.

"Oh I wish I hadn't done that," she said, gazing at the crack.

It was nothing for Aunt to smash things, tear things, drop things. She was a careless woman. And she did not mind except to say to the boys: "Don't tell your father." But as she held the mirror, she looked with helpless appeal at it, blown out with unbelief.

"That's seven years' bad luck to me," she said.

"Don't be silly," I said.

"You see. I know it," she said. "I broke one before my wedding-day. And for seven years your uncle had nothing but trouble."

Then she stood up and got in a temper with me and everything, telling me to pick up her clothes and fold them straight and muttering such things as: "Where's your Uncle? Brush your hair before he comes. Three late nights this week! Look at my hair—it's coming down again."

And suddenly she pulled half her hair down, picked up the cracked mirror and started again angrily. Half her face was swollen and the other half looked fierce, distraught and mad, as she picked up lengths of hair and pulled them into place on top.

"Trouble the whole time. Never in the same job five minutes," she spat at the mirror. "That's your uncle. What's he doing now?"

She had hairpins in her teeth and pulled one out after every sentence.

"Pay as you go," she said. And out came a hairpin.

"That's how us girls were brought up. If you haven't got it, don't spend it." Another pin.

"It's robbery. They say I don't understand these things, but right's right." Another pin.

Aunt began to talk to invisible presences in the room.

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"If your precious son's so perfect why did I have to come up here with a babe in arms begging for bread and say 'Thank you' for every mouthful? 'Eh,' *she* says. 'There's some have no business to get married and may be some *has* to get married.' Vernon," she swung round to me, taking out the remaining pins and holding them wildly. "I could have skinned the old bitch. 'You mind what you're saying,' I said. 'A better-living lot of girls you won't find. Gran had her troubles as we all know, but us girls were straight.'"

The temper went and she sulked dreamily into the mirror.

"It's a good thing he met a straight girl like me," she said quietly. "A young country boy like that, he might have had someone who would have got hold of him. There was one or two in the shop. But I could stick up for myself. It was my hair," she said, lifting up the final strand and curling it round her finger, "he fell in love with, your poor mother could sit on hers.

"Vernon," she said, turning round again. "He had the cleanest hands I've ever seen on a man. I'll never forget in all my natural how clean his hands were. That was the first thing I noticed. Your dead dad used to say Horace Smith's the only man in this shop that washes.

"He got that from old Mrs. Smith, of course. She scrubbed Horace and Mildred when they were kids till they were as clean as her kitchen. Too clean, if you ask me. But, of course, I didn't go out with him for the asking. I led him on. I didn't half make him jealous. There he was in his spats—a regular k-nut, shop-walker, see—of course, he would have everything just so, your uncle!—and he says, 'Buttons forward, Miss Carter,' I can see him now. 'Gloves here, not buttons, caught you bending,' I said. The cheek of me when you come to think of it. I was terrible." Aunt's eyes flashed green as the sea.

"Girl-like," she said dreamily. And then she saw the crack in the mirror and tears came into her eyes, large tears like the

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pearl buttons in her blouse. To me they were not like the tears I had seen before, for her common tears were hardly personal, but a general oblation to the unexplainable coming and going of woe in the world.

MANY ARE DISAPPOINTED

HEADS down to the wind from the hidden sea, the four men were cycling up a deserted road in the country. Bert, who was the youngest, dreamed:

"You get to the pub, and there's a girl at the pub, a dark girl with bare arms and bare legs in a white frock, the daughter of the house, or an orphan—may be it's better she should be an orphan—and you say something to her, or better still, you don't say anything to her—she just comes and puts her arms round you, and you can feel her skin through her frock and she brings you some beer and the other chaps aren't there and the people don't say anything except laugh and go away, because it's all natural and she doesn't have a baby. Same at the next place, same anywhere, different place, different girl, or same girl—same girl always turning up, always waiting. Dunno how she got there. Just slips along without you knowing it and waiting like all those songs . . ."

And there the pub was. It stood on the crown of the long hill, straight ahead of them, a small red brick house with out-buildings and a single chimney trailing out smoke against the strong white light which seemed to be thrown up by great reflectors from the hidden sea.

"There's our beer, Mr. Blake," shouted Sid on his pink racing tyres, who was the first to see it, the first to see everything. The four men glanced up.

Yes, there's our beer, they said. Our ruddy beer. They had been thinking about it for miles. A pub at the cross-roads, a pub where the old Roman road crossed this road that went on to the land's end, a funny place for a pub but a pub all right, the only pub for ten miles at Harry's ruddy Roman road, marked on the map which stuck out of the backside pocket of Harry's breeches. Yes, that was the pub, and Ted, the oldest and the married one, slacked on the long hill and said all he

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hoped was that the Romans had left a drop in the bottom of the barrel for posterity.

When they had left in the morning there had been little wind. The skylarks were over the fields and the sun itself was like one of their steel wheels flashing in the sky. Sid was the first, but Harry with the stubborn red neck and the close dull fair curls was the leader. In the week he sat in the office making the plan. He had this mania for Roman roads. "Ask our Mr. Newton," they said, "the man with the big head and the brain." They had passed through the cream-walled villages and out again to pick up once more the singing of the larks ; and then cloud had covered the sun like a grey hand, west of Handleyford the country had emptied and it was astonishing to hear a bird. Reeds were in the small meadows. Hedges crawled uncut and there had been no villages, only long tablelands of common and bald wiry grass for sheep and the isolated farm with no ivy on the brick.

Well, they were there at last. They piled their bicycles against the wall of the house. They were shy before these country places. They waited for Ted. He was walking the last thirty yards. They looked at the four windows with their lace curtains and the varnished door. There was a chicken in the road and no sound but the whimper of the telegraph wire on the hill. In an open barn was a cart tipped down, its shaft white with the winter's mud, and last year's swallow nests, now empty, were under the eaves. Then Ted came and when he had piled his bicycle, they read the black sign over the door. "Tavern," it said. A funny old-fashioned word, Ted said, that you didn't often see.

"Well," Sid said, "a couple of pints all round?"

They looked to Harry. He always opened doors, but this door was so emphatically closed that he took off his fur gauntlet first and knocked before he opened it. The four men were surprised to see a woman standing behind the door, waiting there as if she had been listening to them. She was a frail, drab

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woman, not much past thirty, in a white blouse that drooped low over her chest.

"Good morning," said Sid. "This the bar?"

"The bar?" said the woman timidly. She spoke in a flat wondering voice and not in the sing song of this part of the country.

"Yes, the bar," Ted said, "It says 'Tavern,'" he said, nodding up at the notice.

"Oh yes," she said, hesitating. "Come in. Come in here."

She showed them not into the bar but into a sitting-room. There was a bowl of tomatoes in the window and a notice said "Teas".

The four men were tall and large beside her in the little room and she gazed up at them as if she feared they would burst its walls. And yet she was pleased. She was trying to smile.

"This is on me," Sid said. "Mild and bitter four times."

"O.K., Mr. Blake," Ted said. "Bring me my beer."

"But let's get into the bar," said Bert.

Seeing an armchair Ted sank into it and now the woman was reassured. She succeeded in smiling but she did not go out of the room. Sid looked at her and her smile was vacant and faint like the smile fading on an old photograph. Her hair was short, an impure yellow and the pale skin of her face and her neck and her breast seemed to be moist as if she had just got out of bed. The high strong light of this place drank all colour from her.

"There isn't a bar," she said. "This isn't a public-house. They call it the Tavern, but it isn't a tavern by rights."

Very anxiously she raised her hands to her blouse.

"What!" they exclaimed. "Not a pub! Here, Harry, it's marked on your map." They were dumbfounded and angry.

"What you mean, don't sell beer," they said.

Their voices were very loud.

"Yes," said Harry. "Here it is. See? Inn."

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He put the map before her face accusingly.

"You don't sell beer?" said Bert. He looked at the pale-blue-veined chest of the woman.

"No," she said. She hesitated. "Many are disappointed," she said; and she spoke like a child reciting a piece without knowing its meaning. He lowered his eyes.

"You bet they ruddy well are," said Ted from the chair.

"Where is the pub?" said Sid.

She put out her hand and a little girl came into the room and clung close to her mother. Now she felt happier.

"My little girl," she said.

She was a tiny, frail child with yellow hair and pale blue eyes like her mother's. The four men smiled and spoke more quietly because of the resemblance between the woman and her child.

"Which way did you come?" she asked, and her hand moving over the child's hair got courage from the child. "Handleyford?" she said. "That's it. It's ten miles. The Queen's Arms, Handleyford, the way you came. That's the nearest pub."

"My God!" said Bert. "What a country!"

"The Queen's Arms," said Ted stupefied.

He remembered it. They were passing through Handleyford. He was the oldest, a flat wide man in loose clothes, loose in the chin too, with watery rings under his eyes and a small golden sun of baldness at the back of his head. "Queen's Arms" he had called. "Here, what's the ruddy game?" But the others had grinned back at him. When you drop back to number four on the hills it comes back to you: they're single, nothing to worry about, you're married and you're forty. What's the hurry? Ease up, take what you can get. "Queen's Arms"—he remembered looking back. The best things are in the past.

"Well, that's that!" said Sid.

"Queen's Arms, Harry," Ted said.

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And Bert looked at the woman. "Let's go on," he said fiercely. She was not the woman he had expected. Then he blushed and turned away from the woman.

She was afraid they were going and in a placating voice she said "I do teas".

Sid was sitting on the arm of a chair and the child was gazing at a gold ring he wore on his little finger. He saw the child was gazing and he smiled.

"What's wrong with tea?" Sid said.

"Ask the man with the brain," said Ted. "Ask the man with the map."

Harry said, "If you can't have beer, you'd better take what you can get, Mr. Richards."

"Tea," nodded Sid to the woman. "Make it strong."

The woman looked at Sid as if he had performed a miracle.

"I'll get you tea," she said eagerly. "I always do teas for people." She spoke with delight as if a bell had suddenly tinkled inside her. Her eyes shone. She would get them tea, she said, and bread and butter, but no eggs, because the man had not been that morning, and no ham. It was too early, she said, for ham. "But there are tomatoes," she said. And then, like a child, "I put them in the window so as people can see."

"O.K.," Sid said. "Four teas."

She did not move at once but still, like a shy child, stood watching them, waiting for them to be settled and fearful that they would not stay. But at last she put out her hand to the child and hurried out to the kitchen.

"Well, Mr. Blake," said Ted, "there's a ruddy sell."

"Have a gasper, Mr. Richards," said Sid.

"Try my lighter," said Ted.

He clicked the lighter but no flame came.

"Wrong number," said Ted. "Dial O and try again."

A steak, said Sid, had been his idea. A couple of pints just to ease the passage and then some real drinking, Ted said. But Bert was drumming on a biscuit tin and was looking inside.

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There was nothing in it. "Many," said Bert, "are disappointed."

They looked at the room. There were two new treacle-coloured armchairs. There was a sofa with a pattern of black ferns on it. The new plush was damp and sticky to the hands from the air of the hidden sea. There was a gun-metal fender and there was crinkled, green paper in the fireplace. A cupboard with a glass door was empty except for the lowest shelf. On that was a thick book called *The Marvels of Science*.

The room was cold. They thought in the winter it must be damn' cold. They thought of the ten drizzling miles to Handleyford.

They listened to the cold clatter of the plates in the kitchen and the sound of the woman's excited voice and the child's. There was the bare linoleum on the floor and the chill glass of the window. Outside was the road with blown sand at the edges and, beyond a wall, there were rows of cabbages, then a bit of field and the expressionless sky. There was no sound on the road. They—it occurred to them—had been the only sound on that road for hours.

The woman came in with a cup and then with a plate. The child brought a plate and the woman came in with another cup. She looked in a dazed way at the men, amazed that they were still there. It seemed to Ted, who was married, that she didn't know how to lay a table. "And now I've forgotten the sugar," she laughed. Every time she came into the room she glanced at Bert timidly and yet pityingly, because he was the youngest and had been the most angry. He lowered his eyes and avoided her look. But to Ted she said, "That's right, you make yourselves comfortable," and at Sid she smiled because he had been the kindest. At Harry she did not look at all.

She was very startled then when he stood at the door and said "Where's this Roman road?"

She was in the kitchen. She told him the road by the white gate and showed him from the doorway of the house.

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"There he goes," said Sid at the window. "He's looking over the gate."

They waited. The milk was put on the table. The woman came in at last with the bread and butter and the tea.

"He'll miss his tea next," Ted said.

"Well," Ted said, when Harry came back. "See any Romans?"

"It's just grass," Harry said. "Nothing on it." He stared in his baffled, bull-necked way.

"No beer and no Romans," Ted said.

The woman, who was standing there, smiled. In a faltering voice, wishing to make them happy, she said:

"We don't often get no Romans here."

"Oh God!" Bert laughed very loudly and Ted shook with laughter too. Harry stared.

"Don't take any notice of them, missus," Sid said. And then to them: "She means gypsies."

"That come with brooms," she said, bewildered by their laughter, wondering what she had done.

When she had gone and had closed the door, Bert and Ted touched their heads with their fingers and said she was dippy, but Sid told them to speak quietly.

Noisily they had drawn up their chairs and were eating and drinking. Ted cut up tomatoes, salted them, and put them on his bread. They were good for the blood, he told them, and Harry said they reckoned at home his grandad got the cancer he died of from eating tomatoes day after day. Bert, with his mouth full, said he'd read somewhere that tea was the most dangerous drink on earth. Then the child came in with a paper and said her mother had sent it. Sid looked at the door when it closed again.

"Funny thing," he said. "I think I've seen that woman before."

That, they said, was Sid's trouble. He'd seen too many girls before.



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He was a lanky man with a high forehead and a Hitler moustache and his lips lay over his mouth as if they were kissing the air or whispering to it. He was a dark, harsh-looking, cocksure man, but with a gentle voice and it was hard to see his eyes under his strong glasses. His lashes were long and his lids often half lowered which gave him an air of seriousness and shyness. But he stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat and stuck out his legs to show his loud check stockings and he had that ring on his finger. "Move that up a couple and he'd be spliced," they said. "Not me," he said, "Look at Ted." A man with no ideals, Bert thought, a man whose life was hidden behind the syrup-thick lens of his glasses. Flash Sid. See the typists draw themselves up, tilt back their heads and get their hands ready to keep him off. Not a man with ideals. See them watch his arms and his hands, see them start tapping hard on the typewriter keys and pretending to be busy when he leant over to tell them a story. And then, when he was gone, see them peep through the Enquiry window to watch where he went, quarrel about him and dawdle in the street when the office closed, hoping to see him.

"Well," said Harry when they had cleared the table and got out the map. Sid said:

"You gen'lemen settle it. I'll go and fix her up."

Sid's off, they said. First on the road, always leading, getting the first of the air, licking the cream off everything.

He found her in the kitchen and he had to lower his head because of the ceiling. She was sitting drably at the table which was covered with unwashed plates and the remains of a meal. There were unwashed clothes on the backs of the chairs and there was a man's waistcoat. The child was reading a comic paper at the table and singing in a high small voice.

A delicate stalk of neck, he thought, and eyes like the pale wild scabious you see in the ditches.

Four shillings, she said, would that be too much?

She put her hand nervously to her breast.



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"That's all right," Sid said and put the money in her hand. It was coarsened by work. "We cleared up everything," he said.

"Don't get many people, I expect," he said.

"Not this time of year."

"A bit lonely," he said.

"Some think it is," she said.

"How long have you been here?" he said.

"Only three years. It seems," she said with her continual wonder, "longer."

"I thought it wasn't long," Sid said. "I thought I seen you somewhere. You weren't in . . . in Horsham, were you?"

"I come from Ashford," she said.

"Ashford," he said. "I knew you weren't from these parts."

She brightened and she was fascinated because he took off his glasses and she saw the deep serious shadows of his eyes and the pale drooping of the naked lids. The eyes looked tired and as if they had seen many things and she was tired too.

"I bin ill," she said. Her story came irresistibly to her lips. "The doctor told us to come here. My husband gave up his job and everything. Things are different here. The money's not so good . . ." Her voice quickened, "But I try to make it up with the teas."

She paused, trying to read from his face if she should say any more. She seemed to be standing on the edge of another country. The pale blue eyes seemed to be the pale sky of a far away place where she had been living.

"I nearly died," she said. She was a little amazed by this fact.

"You're O.K. now," Sid said.

"I'm better," she said. "But it seems I get lonely now I'm better."

"You want your health but you want a bit of company," Sid said.

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"My husband says, 'You got your health what you want company for?'"

She put this to Sid in case her husband was not right but she picked up her husband's waistcoat from the chair and looked over its buttons because she felt, timorously, she had been disloyal to her husband.

"A woman wants company," said Sid.

He looked shy now to her, like Bert, the young one; but she was most astonished that someone should agree with her and not her husband.

Then she flushed and put out her hand to the little girl who came to her mother's side, pressing against her. The woman felt safer and raised her eyes and looked more boldly at him.

"You and your friends going far?"

He told her. She nodded, counting the miles as if she were coming along with them. And then Sid felt a hand touch his.

It was the child's hand touching the ring on his finger.

"Ha!" laughed Sid. "You saw that before." He was quick. The child was delighted with his quickness. The woman put the waistcoat down at once. He took off the ring and put it in the palm of his hand and bent down so that his head nearly brushed the woman's arm. "That's lucky," he said. "Here," he said. He slipped the ring on the child's little finger. "See," he said. "Keeps me out of mischief. Keep a ring on your little finger and you'll be lucky."

The child looked at him without belief.

"Here y'are," he said, taking back the ring. "Your mother wants it," he said, winking at the woman. "She's got her's on the wrong finger. Little one luck, big one trouble."

She laughed and she blushed and her eyes shone. He moved to the door and her pale lips pouted a little. Then, taking the child by the hand she hurried over to him as if both of them would cling to him. Excitedly, avidly, they followed him to the other room.

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"Come on, Mr. Blake," said Ted. The three others rose to their feet.

The child clung to her mother's hand and danced up and down. She was in the midst of them. They zipped up their jackets, stubbed their cigarettes, folded up the map. Harry put on his gauntlets. He stared at the child and then slowly took off his glove and pulled out a sixpence. "No," murmured Ted, the married man, but the child was too quick.

They went out of the room and stood in the road. They stretched themselves in the open air. The sun was shining now on the fields. The woman came to the door to see them. They took their bicycles from the wall, looked up and down the road and then swung on. To the sea, the coast road and then perhaps a girl, some girl. But the others were shouting.

"Good-bye," they called. "Good-bye."

And Bert, the last, remembered then to wave good-bye too, and glanced up at the misleading notice. When they were all together, heads down to the wind, they turned again. "Good God," they said. The woman and the child had come out into the middle of the road hand in hand and their arms were still raised and their hands were fluttering under the strong light of that high place. It was long time before they went back into the house.

And now for a pub, a real pub, the three men called to Harry. Sid was ahead on his slim pink tyres getting the first of the new wind, with the ring shining on his finger.

THE CHESTNUT TREE

THE FIRST firm I worked for was a leather merchants' in the south of London. To look at, their place was like a pair of muddy Methodist chapels with a jail attached; there were bars to the windows and, inside, the office smelled of feet, ink and boots. The name of the firm was Greenhythe & Co. They had been established for 150 years.

I was fifteen when my father took me there. I had never been to London before and, in the train, after the ticket collector had passed, we walked down the corridor to an empty first-class carriage, pulled down the blinds and then knelt in prayer. Afterwards we read the 91st Psalm. I had diarrhoea that morning because I was afraid.

When we came to the office we were shown at once to Mr. Greenhythe's room.

"I want this boy to begin at the bottom of the ladder," my father said, speaking as a self-made man.

"Do you speak French, boy? *Parlez-vous français?*" said Mr. Greenhythe. I could not answer. He was a very old man with long white hair which was the colour of vaseline at the roots. He had a hump on one shoulder and the head of a lion.

He then said there was a French proverb which went: "*C'est le premier pas qui coûte.*"

After that my father and Mr. Greenhythe exchanged memories about the Wesleyan movement and the two men walked to the door. There was something noble, savage and prophet-like about Mr. Greenhythe. But as he walked nimbly and cautiously to the door, with his bearded head sunk forward, his long arms hanging loosely, his old, cracked blue eyes raised and his boots hissing on the ground like a boxer's in the sawdust, I noticed he had the punched-in face of a fighter and wicked little teeth. Only people, he said, who had been recommended by

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the chapel and were known for their seriousness ever worked for the firm of Greenhythe & Co. And so it seemed. Ten clerks were bending over their ledgers as if over the Scriptures when I was led to the cashier's desk.

My work began at eight in the morning. First of all I went down into the basement where the lavatory was to collect the pads used for copying the letters. The pads had been soaking all night. A smell of cigar smoke and scent came from water closet and the sound of a newspaper being unfolded. Then of singing. Out came Mr. Cook, a fat bald man of sixty with a pair of nostrils like pink bubbles, and as fresh and perfumed as a flower; he had indeed a carnation in his buttonhole for he grew these plants in his garden. "La da, di da, hijorico," he sang and stood biting his finger-nails sulkily and scratching his womanish backside. Mr. Cook opened the office every morning at half-past seven. Later, when we went upstairs and while I was filling the ink wells, this old man would lift up his desk lid, peep over the top and shout "Ya! Ya! Ya!" and duck again. Then, once more, he sat biting the nails of his short dirty fingers.

At ten to nine the clerks began to arrive. When they had hung up their coats and hats they came to the fireplace and stood warming themselves. If there was no fire, they stood there all the same. Williams, the sandy, flat-footed one, with a sneering voice and misery in his skinny legs; Hodgkin, like a young actor, raising dark eyebrows as if he were looking at himself sideways in a mirror, and very stage-struck; Porter, the shipping clerk, with food stains on his waistcoat, the puffing father of a large family who was often making mistakes in an authoritative way, sending bills of lading to the wrong ports, delivery orders to the wrong wharves and who sat among the muddle of his papers like a hen having a dust bath; Turpin, the limp dandy in patent shoes, lined and sick-looking, always with a smile stamped dead on his face, and smelling of cachous; then Sawston. Cook did not join them. Popping his head above his desk lid he shouted

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out: "Ha ya! Ha ya!" And when they turned in condescension, some word like "Flambustigation". Sawston used to turn to him and tell him, in dry, morose voice, to shut up. Cook put down his lid and laughed till the tears ran down his face.

Then the outer door swung and in came Drake, the cashier and head of the office. All the clerks moved guiltily to their desks. Except Sawston. He glanced up at the clock. If it wanted two minutes or one minute of nine, he stayed where he was and watched Drake, a tall man with a gloomy voice like a chapel organ and grizzled hair and gold-rimmed glasses, come glowering towards him, clearing his throat.

"Good morning, Mr. Drake," said Mr. Sawston with loud effrontery. Drake looked at the clock; Sawston's small black eyes in his baldish, bullet head dared Mr. Drake to have the courage to tell him to go to his desk. Mr. Drake blew his nose and did not dare. "Um. Um. Umph." Mr. Drake made a characteristic sigh on three notes, a noise famous in the office, and at once perfectly imitated by Mr Cook, who again lifted his desk lid, ducked his head and spluttered with laughter. Nine o'clock struck and slowly Mr. Sawston walked to his desk, carefully cleaned his pens, wiped his ruler, sharpened his pencils, put a pile of invoices tidily on his blotter and began writing in his small girlish hand. Moodily Mr. Drake gazed at the back of Mr. Sawston's cheap grey suit and shook his head.

In Greenhythe's office the hours were long. At seven in the evening when I left, Williams and Sawston were still at their books under the green shades of the lights, Porter the shipping clerk was sunk in his muddle; the partners, Mr. Greenhythe's sons, had gone, but a bell which snapped outside his office and a weak bad light shining through the glass door, showed that Mr. Greenhythe was still working. On Saturdays we left early—four o'clock. Only Mr. Cook enjoyed this régime. Leaving the office at eleven o'clock in the morning to take documents or large cheques to the City, he would waggle his rump as he went

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out, saying "Ya! Ya! dears!" and would spend the next few hours in the West End, sometimes at theatres for an act or two, sometimes in pubs and occasionally with girls. He came back, short-tempered, rosy and smelling of cigars.

One Monday when I had been four or five months in the firm, a woman came to the office counter. She was a tall, soft woman who wore a big floating hat with flowers in it and a blue serge coat and skirt. She had the bust of a draper's model. "I have an appointment with Mr. Greenhythe," she said in a delicate, aloof and dreamy voice, looking down at me as if I were a fly on the counter. She was touching her nose affectingly with a handkerchief and I thought she was a royalty with a cold.

"What name, please?"

"Miss Browne," she said. "Browne with an 'e'."

After an hour she came out of Mr. Greenhythe's room with Mr. Drake as well and they led her to the street door. They were talking about Mr. Greenhythe's Bible class. A week later she came again and then two days running. In his harmonium voice, Mr. Drake murmured to Mr. Porter that the firm were thinking of employing "a lady book-keeper."

The word "lady" fell like a boulder upon us. There were typists upstairs who arrived late and who never spoke to us; in the General Office there were no women at all.

"A leedy book-keepah!" called Mr. Cook from his desk. "Ya ha!"

"Who's getting the sack?" said Williams.

"Who's getting the bird?" said Hodgkin and hummed an air from *La Bohème*.

"There are two," said Turpin, the tired sick young man who always knew everything. "She said she could not work in an office unless she were chaperoned by her sister."

"One for you, one for Mr. Turpin," sneered Williams.

"Let us pray," called Mr. Cook, hiding behind his desk-lid.

THE CHESTNUT TREE

Mr. Drake was coming in. The clerks moved to their desks. The lines on Mr. Turpin's face became deep seams. He was a martyr to the seduction of women. Women set him off, like a machine, against his will. They confided in him at once; just as Mr. Drake confided to him the worries of a cashier, Mr. Porter the muddles of his shipping, Mr. Williams his troubles with his stomach, Mr. Greenhythe the number of well-known preachers he had heard. The bold sick eyes of Mr. Turpin, the sympathy of his manners, even his large ears which stuck out like comical microphones from his long head, the smile which was the tired smile of a man with a headache, brought men and women to him helplessly. He was a clever man from the flat, sing-song Midlands, but he had the long stupid face of an animal that is mindless and sad.

The two lady book-keepers arrived. Miss Browne the elder, whom we had seen, was like a swan and thought so herself. Her fair hair, she conveyed to you, was her glory. She was curving and sedate. With the sleepy smile of one lying on a feather bed in Paradise, with tiny grey eyes behind the pince-nez which sat on her nose, with the swell of long low breasts balanced by the swell of her dawdling rump, she moved swan-like to her desk. But not like a swan in the water; like a swan on land. She waddled. Her feet were planted obliquely. One would have said that they were webbed.

Behind her came the cygnet and chaperone, her sister and protector. When I saw her I felt I had been struck in the heart by a stone. Mr. Drake frowned and drummed his fingers, Mr. Cook began biting his thumb-nail and leered in fury, Mr. Porter became homely and paternal, Williams gave a scheming look at her legs, the stage-struck Hodgkin took a comb out of his pocket and ran it through his waved hair. Turpin and Sawston, who were on opposite sides of the same high, tilted desk, looked at each other fixedly. They looked as though they were trying to hypnotize each other. Taking small hard steps, her red lips pettishly drooping, her head in a cap

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of short black curls, her small breasts, her hips, her waist, set off by her silk dress, the sister of Miss Browne walked as if at any moment, if she shrugged her shoulders again, she could make her clothes fall off her. Her dress had some small design of red and white daisies. She looked at us tenderly and without innocence. She was as hard as a bird. When she spoke her voice was like a high cross voice in a garden.

Turpin put one leg down from his stool at once. He was about to introduce himself to the women; to walk between them with his hand just touching their waists. In such times his limpness went; he was decided. The dull buzz of his voice was the sound of the machine which had started inside him. But this time he sat back on his stool. Sawston was looking at him. Sawston's face was bloodless, as set and chalky as a clown's. The thick black brows were rigid and seemed to have been painted on, his eyes had a light so peremptory in them that one might have been looking into a pair of pistol barrels. Turpin was arrested by Sawston's eyes.

"O.K., laddie," Turpin said. A slight smile came to Sawston's face and he went on staring with indulgence at Turpin whom he had silently conquered. Sawston's eyes appeared to be printing off thousands of words which Turpin read as rapidly as they were printed. Sawston folded his arms and his fists were clenched. His coat sleeves were short and his wrists were spidery with black hair. The smile became fainter, more ironically acid and delighted.

At the end of the morning Sawston, who had worked very little—and ordinarily he worked hard—but had sat staring defiantly at his own life, got down from his stool and walked back to the desk by the fireplace where Mr. Drake ruled. Drake was tall. Sawston was a short man, wide for his size, and he wore collars so low that they did not show above his jacket. This gave the impression that he was a collarless workman or was perhaps wearing a boxer's sweater. He was one of those men who have to shave twice a day and whose beard leaves

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a dark indigo stain like ink on a blotter. He was a curt man, blunt and independent.

"I think, Mr. Drake," he said, "I think the younger Miss Browne had better work with me."

It was a demand, an order. Drake's jaws chewed, he blew into his moustache and was flustered. He tried to glower. He looked sideways up at the bars of the window, he made his harmonium noises. In the office he had the kind of authority which is despised but obeyed. But with Sawston Mr. Drake could do nothing. He looked down resentfully at Sawston as if Sawston were a bear who had put him up a tree.

"Obviously," continued Sawston, "the girl hasn't got a brain in her head. I'll teach her."

Sawston had a cocky habit of clicking his tongue in his mouth when he was amused by his own self-possession. Having said this he walked back to his desk.

After lunch Sawston called across two rows of desks in a clear voice which was much louder than the tone which was thought suitable in this office:

"Miss Browne. Will you come over here, please."

She pouted and, affecting lack of interest, walked over to him. The black curls shook on her head, the small breasts pushed like nuts against her blouse. Her eyes were hot-blue with freckles on the pale skin under them and her clockwork voice said, "Yes, what do you want?"

"Call over these invoices," he said. She shrugged her rounded shoulders and held a pencil in her teeth. Sawston put his hand out and took the pencil out of her mouth. She was astonished. Sitting behind them the elder Miss Browne saw this incident and awoke from her dream. She gazed at Sawston's shiny back with dislike.

We were afraid of Sawston, all of us. Without authority he suggested independent power. He was small, but our fear was physical. His walk, for example—he walked, not as some swaggerers did, who thought the place belonged to them, but as

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if he owned the precise yard of floor he happened to stand on. That was a vaster claim. His desk was his, not the firm's. His pens were his. He sharpened *his* pencils. He made no mistakes in his books—well, once a year he might make a mistake and no one cared to mention it to him. He would admit it. This was inhuman and alarming; there was no one else in the building who did not make a scene about their mistakes and try to argue them on to someone else. A peculiar physical thing about him was the smallness of his wrists and his hands. Then of what were we afraid? His indifference. He was a man, Mr. Turpin said admiringly, who would ruin himself. And Mr. Turpin understood ruin.

Sometimes the two sisters sat together, sometimes the elder Miss Browne sat beside Mr. Drake, calling over the big ledgers. High on their stools these two looked like a King and Queen. Mr. Drake was respectful to her. She had a romantic queenly air, sighed majestically or made little regal yawns behind her hands, sometimes stretching her arms to the back of her head and looking at us from a great, pale pillow of voluptuousness through her rimless glasses. No one, not even Mr. Turpin, responded to the voluptuousness of the elder Miss Browne. She dropped her pens, but only Mr. Drake grovelled on the floor for them. She watched him grovelling, thanked him with languor, spoke in the exhausted voice of a great hostess. Her favourite subject was, Woman.

When the sisters sat together was the time to attempt a flirtation with the younger one. The swan prevented it. She had a weary musical sarcasm:

"Have you nothing else to occupy yourself with, Mr. Williams?"

One day she said:

"Heestings is a beautiful spot. One can have any kind of holiday there—quiet, noisy or musical."

"Quiet with her about," said Williams, digging his pen in the younger one's ribs. The younger one astonished us, as pretty

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women do, by making a horrible face, squaring her mouth as if she were going to be sick and nodding at her sister. Delight! The two sisters detested each other. The great actress was jealous; the chaperone was venomous. Left alone together they bickered in refined voices.

"But you did, Hester, you said so yourself."

"I didn't."

"You did. You said he said . . ."

"I said nothing of the sort."

We rolled our eyes. Lovely! Lady book-keepers! The young one saw me listening and turned and smiled intimately at me. I went scarlet and when she spoke to me I could not answer. The elder sister looked over the young one's black curls at me and said remotely: "He's only a child." She pronounced it "charld".

Turpin and I sat opposite Sawston and when the young one was with him we heard him reading the invoices and she copying or checking; but between the dates and the figures, a low conversation was interpolated. Sitting side by side they did not look at each other but looked across at Turpin and me, or at their books. But all the time, like the dry mutter of a telegraph, their talk went on.

Lady book-keepers! What happiness it was to see them arrive in the morning. The elder one holding her hair at the back and tilting her flowery hat forward, came in with her coat flying and swayed as if drunk to the cloakroom, murmuring loudly to the young one who came pattering trimly, crossly, shrugging her shoulders and snapping out words, behind.

"Ha ya," called Mr. Cook. "Late again."

"And hot," said Mr. Williams. Covering his mouth with his hand he added to the remark.

"Sisters, sisters," called Mr. Cook when they came to their desk. "Do not quarrel." The young one ignored him and went to Sawston and started intense whispering.

"The big cow," said Sawston aloud one morning.

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"What do you want?" he snapped at me seeing I was listening. She smiled at me. She reached across to the library book I had on the desk and said:

"What are you reading?"

It was poetry, the poetical works of Sir Walter Scott. I was reading *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.

"Pooh," she said. "Dry."

Sawston looked quizzically at me.

"The boy's brain will bust," he said.

They both smiled, united by the same irony. I felt sad; I might have been their son.

But the cashier was watching our little group. "Press on, Mr. Sawston," he moaned. "Press on! Boy. Come here." Colouring I went to the side of his desk. He had his pen long-ways in his teeth and he went on turning the pages of his ledger.

"I do not want you to waste Miss Hester's time," he said. "We are very busy. How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I lied. I was fifteen years and two months old. I stood there waiting for his next remark. He went on turning the pages of his ledger. "Um. Um. Um," he sighed on his three notes. I had never been so near to this legendary noise before. It was like the rumination of humanity. A cage had been opened and out had come the humdrum rumour of the human race, the neutral, aimless, mindless rumble of the ape, digesting its inexplicable years on earth.

"Yes?" said Mr. Drake, observing me again, surprised to see me still there. Then: "That's all." I went back in a sulk. My cheeks were hot. I scowled at Miss Hester Browne. She had been my undoing.

In the garden of the house where I lodged was a chestnut tree. In the morning when I left to catch my train the sky was clear and blue and against it the leaves of the tree hung down like the tongues of dark green dogs and the pink candles of blossom stood up from among them. I listened to the sound of my feet on the pavement. It was without will of mine that they touched

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the ground. There was a throbbing in my ears, so that I could hear only my own body, the clapping of my heart. I seemed to be flying, not walking. Would people in the train be uneasy because I was mad? The spirit and the flesh—two animals that were always in my head—were pulling me apart. The spirit was desire, the spirit was Hester Browne; the flesh had no desire, it clothed the torpor and the innumerable dreads of the mind and body.

My train went on to London, past the factories. Why were there no lakes, no mountains? For: "He, neglected and oppressed, wished to be with them and at rest." And why was great literature so boring? Into the pages of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* I had put a folded sheet of the *Windsor Magazine* with a poem printed on it.

Stars of the heavens I love her
Spread the glad news afar,

it began. I was ashamed to think that terrible poem described my feelings better than anything in Scott.

"I should say you were an idealist," Mr. Turpin said gravely to me while he opened the firm's letters. In the morning, when he was tired, he used to talk about life.

But now, Mr. Drake had broken me. I was watched. Shame, vanity, spite thickened my head and bit my throat. The spirit and the flesh turned a somersault inside me, I tore up my cutting from the magazine; the flesh triumphed. I hated Hester Browne. My desire had become a poison. I saw the deadly nightshade shadows under her eyes and I was pleased by what Mr. Turpin had said.

Turpin wore a small, mauve silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and it was very long. An idealist! I bought myself a handkerchief and wore it like his. Williams shuffled over to me and, putting his hand over his mouth in his secretive way, bent towards me slyly so that I could smell the tobacco on his breath.

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"Imitation," he sneered, "is the sincerest form of flattery." Giving a sharp look back at me, he went off.

Now I hated Hester Browne I had the courage to observe her. She began to arrive after her sister and went breathless and damp-skinned to her desk. The pretty eyes were sticky with sleep as if she hadn't washed. To a connoisseur like Turpin this was very attractive. Her dress, the one with the small daisies, had scores of small creases in it. There was a weck like this, her lips sulked and an exciting hay-like smell followed her in a warm current as she walked.

"Do you notice, Mr. Turpin, anything about the atmosphere?" said Williams.

"Yes, I do," said Mr. Turpin shortly. "Pleasanter than leather, isn't it?"

"A matter of opinion," leered Mr. Williams. Up went the inevitable hand to his lips. "Perhaps a matter of experience."

There was a lift up to the top floor of the warehouse and sometimes I had to take messages there. I was waiting on the third floor when the lift went groaning past me. Inside were two people, a man and a woman. The man was limp and tall and his head was close to her looking down at her neck. She was the elder Miss Browne. She was talking violently and the man was Mr. Turpin who paid no attention to what she said but kept murmuring:

"You great big doll."

"He's a married man," she was saying. "Look at his face. It's a cruel face. The way he speaks to her even."

Two coats, a skirt, and a pair of trousers were carried upstairs out of my sight.

"I can be cruel too, duckie," Mr. Turpin was saying as his patent shoes went up beyond me.

It was August. Mr. Cook put his carnation in a glass of water and smelled it from time to time. He was 62 on the

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Bank Holiday and went up in an aeroplane. Mr. Greenhythe's secretary, an elderly woman who looked like Queen Victoria, put a pamphlet with the heading *Repent Ye* on our desks. Turpin read it through carefully. Then he lit his cigarette with it and said respectfully:

"I must go upstairs and thank her." Hodgkin took a clean sheet of paper and wrote with flourishes the words *The Marriage of Figaro*. Underneath he wrote in smaller letters: The Duke: Rupert Hodgkin. He looked in a pocket mirror and watched the movements of his mouth. "Press on, Mr. Hodgkin," said Mr. Drake. Mr. Sawston and Hester Browne went out to lunch together, waiting for Mr. Drake to go first.

On an afternoon in the middle of that week children in the street began shouting at a balloon in the sky. "Listen to those children," said Mr. Porter tenderly, making a mistake in a weighing slip as he spoke. Between two and three was a slow hour; we all went to look at the balloon.

"Before the war," said Mr. Drake, unbending. "There used to be a number of balloons." We did not notice the elder Miss Browne get down from her desk and go into Mr. Greenhythe's room and so we were astonished to see her coming out of it. The top part of her was gliding in a drowsy and smiling dream. She had the smile of one who has opened a bazaar, of a boa-constrictor that has fed.

Mr. Drake pulled himself together.

"March 1," came Mr. Drake's voice. "By goods, cash. £26 17s. 1d." And her voice repeated, "£26 17s. 1d".

"March 3," Mr. Drake went on. "By goods, cash. £462 16s. 3d. March 14," the voice was chanting the office litany. "Have you got March 14, Miss Browne? Goods, thirteen and a penny? Put a query against that."

He peered over Miss Browne to the page to see she had done this. As she wrote in the great ledger she was looking at the childish pink and white frock of her sister like a woman who is

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thinking of lengthening the sleeves. She also looked ironically at the slack, shiny coat of Mr. Sawston.

There was a bell over Mr. Greenhythe's door and it snapped two or three times. It was my business to answer the bell and sometimes the old man used to ring it by mistake or forget what he wanted. I went into his office which had a green light, for the sun-blind was down. His elderly secretary was just leaving the room. The old lion put down the telephone.

"Boy," he said breathlessly, "the *Alexandra Castle* has docked."

I stared at him. He looked at me suspiciously.

"Is your father well?" he asked.

I said he was.

He looked absently at his secretary.

"What was I thinking about?" he asked pathetically.

"Mr. Sawston," she said.

"Ah, boy!" he barked at me, showing his little teeth. "Send Mr. Sawston to me."

Mr. Sawston went into Mr. Greenhythe's room.

"Sawston's on the carpet," Williams said.

"Hi yi," said Cook, smelling his carnation. "What do I ca-ah? What do I ca-ah? I've got tickets for the Palladium."

Turpin leaned across to Hester Browne, who was looking resentfully towards Mr. Greenhythe's door and straightening her shoulder straps.

"Keep on doing that," said Mr. Turpin in a dead voice. "And I will bite your shoulders."

"I was thinking, Mr. Drake," said the elder Miss Browne with a yawn, "what thousands of people there must be at the sea."

A pencil rolled down the desk and dropped on to the floor. "Boy," called a curt voice. "Pick up my pencil." It was Sawston. He was back again. Suddenly sitting at the desk.

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His eyebrows appeared to be stamped an inch higher on his forehead. His eyes seemed to be filled with points of flint. I picked up the pencil.

"The damned, impudent old man," he said so loudly that everyone looked up. He did not look at Hester Browne. She spoke to him.

"Shut up," he said very loudly.

He collected his invoice forms together, folded his blotter and put those into his desk. Then he put away his pens and his round ruler.

The girl put her hand on his sleeve, but he lifted it off. Then he got down, looked round the office, taking in every detail of it and after that walked to the cloakroom. He came out in his bowler-hat with his mackintosh over his shoulder. He stopped, lit a cigarette and threw the match-stick over the counter. We all stared. At three o'clock in the afternoon, smoking without permission, Mr. Sawston walked out of the office.

A moan, indignant, and forlorn, like the sound of a ship's siren as it goes out with foreboding into the ruin of the sea, went up from Mr. Drake.

"Mr. Sawston!" called the appalled voice. Mr. Sawston glanced back, showed the whites of his eyes and raised his bowler hat. He was gone. Hester Browne jumped down, knocked her stool over and ran to the counter.

"Hetty," shouted her sister and came heavily after her. "Leave that man alone!"

She was in time to catch Hester by the sleeve.

"Stop it," shouted Hester and, turning like a rat, struck at the elder one's face.

"Ooh you, you . . . you," cried Miss Browne and hit out. The young one's sleeve tore, down went the elder's glasses.

"Just look at that," said Williams.

They were at each other's hair, screeching and shouting.

"You little tart! You little tart! You—you—you—little tart!" screamed Miss Browne.

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The swing door on the counter flew open and Miss Browne fell through on to the floor.

We rushed to them. Their blouses were ripped, their hair was down, their faces were bleeding. The little one underneath was biting her sister's wrist, the big one was striking out and hitting the counter. They rolled.

"Miss Browne. Miss Hester," sobbed Mr. Drake shaking his pen at them and spattering them with ink. He bent to pull down Miss Browne's skirt which was round her waist and exposing thighs whose sight astonished us.

At once the pair of them got free and flew at Mr. Drake. This was beyond us. Mr. Hodgkin stepped back, Mr. Cook lowered his head and blushed, Mr. Williams cried out.

"Remove them, remove them," pleaded Mr. Drake. Mr. Porter, eternally wrong, began to pull at Mr. Drake. A loud slap startled us. Miss Hester had caught Mr. Drake on the cheek. There was silence. And then we saw Mr. Turpin. Sitting sideways on his stool, detached, interested and thoughtful, he was watching us.

"Mr. Turpin!" Drake and Porter called out together. It was a cry to the expert. Sadly he got down from his stool and came to the two panting girls.

"Darlings . . ." he began and put his arms round their waists, but at this word the big one swooned and hung on him so that he was hardly able to support her. "I told Mr. Greenhythe," she was gasping quietly. "Save her, save her. He's a married man."

But the little one had jumped away. Screeching, she escaped us and ran into the street to follow Mr. Sawston. And that was the last we saw of either of them. The thing that struck us all dumb was that Mr. Sawston had not fallen to the fear that hung over all of us: he had not been sacked. He had sacked himself.

THE APE

THE FRUIT robbery was over. It was the greatest fruit robbery, and from our point of view, the most successful ever known in our part of the jungle. Not that we can take all the credit for that, for it was not ourselves who started the fight, but our enemies, a colony of apes who live in another tree. They were the first to attack and by the time the great slaughter was over hundreds of their dead, of both sexes, lay on the ground, and we had taken all their fruit. It was a fortunate triumph for us.

But apes are not a complacent or ungrateful race. Once we were back in our tree binding up our wounds, we thought at once of commemorating our victory and thanking our god for it. For we are aware that if we do not thank our god for his benefactions he might well think twice before he sent us another fruit robbery of this triumphant kind. We thought therefore of how we might best please him. We tried to put ourselves in his place. What would most impress him? There were many discussions about this: we screamed and screeched in passionate argument and the din grew so loud—far louder than the noise we make in the ordinary business of eating or defending our places in the tree or making love and dying—that at last our oldest and wisest ape who lived at the very top, slyly observed: “If I were god and had been looking down at this tree of screeching monkeys for thousands of years, the thing that would really impress me would be silence.” We were dumbfounded. Then one or two of us shouted: “That’s got it. Let silence be the commemoration of our victory.”

So at last it was arranged. On the anniversary of the day when the great fruit robbery began, we arranged that all of us would stop whatever we were doing and would be silent.

But nothing is perfect in the jungle. You would think that all apes would be proud to be alike, and would have the wisdom

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to abide by the traditions of their race and the edicts of their leader. You would think all would destroy the individual doubt with the reflection that however different an ape may fancy he is, the glory of the ape is that as he is now so he always has been, unchangeable and unchanged. There were, however, some and one in particular as you will see, who did not think so.

We heard of them from a pterodactyl, a rather ridiculous neighbour of ours.

The pterodactyl lived on a cliff just above our tree and often, scaly and long necked, he would flop clumsily down to talk to us. He was a sensationalist and newsmonger, a creature with more curiosity than brains. He was always worried. What (he would ask us) is the meaning of life? We scratched our heads. Where was it all leading? We spat out fruit pips. Did we apes think that we would always go on as we were? That question was easy. Of course, we said. How fortunate we were, he said, for he had doubts about himself. "It seems to me that I am becoming—extinct," he said.

It was all very well of us to make light of it, he said, but "if I had not lived near you such an idea would never have entered my head". We replied that we did not see what we had done to upset him. "Oh, not you in particular," he said. "It is your young apes that are worrying me. They keep talking about their tails."—"No livelier or more flourishing subject," we said. "We apes delight in our tails."—"As far as I can see," the pterodactyl said, "among your younger apes, they are being worn shorter and will soon be discarded altogether"—"What!" we exclaimed—he could have touched us on no more sensitive spot—"How dare you make such a suggestion!"—"The suggestion," the pterodactyl said, "does not come from me but from your young apes. There's a group of them. They caught me by the neck the other day—I am very vulnerable in the neck—and ridiculed me publicly before a large audience. 'A flying reptile,' they said. 'Study him while you can for the species won't exist much longer—any more than *we*

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apes shall go about on four legs and have tails. We shall, at some unknown time in the future, but a time that comes rapidly nearer, cease to be apes. We shall become man. The pterodactyl, poor creature, came to the end of his evolutionary possibilities long ago.' "

"Man!" we exclaimed. "Man! What is that?" And what on earth, we asked the pterodactyl, did he mean by "evolution". We had never heard of it. We pressed the pterodactyl to tell us more, but he would only repeat what he had already said. When he had flopped back to his cliff again we sat scratching ourselves, deep in thought. Presently our old and wisest ape, a horny and scarred old warrior who sits dribbling away quietly to himself all day and rubbing his scars on the highest branch of all, gave a snigger and said, "Cutting off their tails to spite the ape." We did not laugh. We couldn't take the matter as lightly as he took it. We, on the contrary, raged. It was blasphemy. The joy, the pride, the whole apehood of us apes is in our tails. They are the flag under which we fight, the sheet-anchor of our patriotism, the vital insignia of our race. This young, decadent post-fruit-robbery generation was proposing to mutilate the symbol which is at the base of all our being. We did not hesitate. Spies were at once sent down to the lower branches to see if what the pterodactyl had told us was true and to bring the leader into our presence.

But before I tell what happened I must describe what life in our tree is like. The tree is a vast and leafy one, dense in the ramification of its twigs and branches. In the upper branches where the air is freer and purer and the sunlight is plentiful, live those of us who are called the higher apes; in the branches below, and even to the bottom of the trunk, swarm the thousands of lower apes, clawing and scrambling over one another's backs, massing on the boughs until they nearly break, clutching at twigs and leaves, hanging on to one another's legs and tails and all bellowing and screeching in the struggle to get up a little higher and to find a place to sit, so that when we say, as we do, that the

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nature of life is struggle and war we are giving a faithful report from what is going on below us.

We in the upper branches eat our fruit in peace and spit out the pips and drop the rind upon the crowd below. It is they who, without of course intending to do so, bring us our food. Each of them carries fruit for himself, but the struggle is so violent that it is hard for them to hold the fruit or to find a quiet place where they can eat it. Accordingly we send down some of our cleverer apes—those who are not quite at the top of the tree yet and perhaps will never get there because they have more brain than claw—and these hang down by their tails and adroitly flick the fruit out of the hands of the climbers. Very amusing it is to watch the astonishment of the climbers when they see their fruit go, because a minute before, they were full of confidence; then astonishment changes to anger and you see them grab the fruit from their nearest neighbours who in turn grab from the next. Failing in this, they have to go down once more to the bottom to get more fruit and begin again; and as no part of the struggle is more difficult than the one which takes place at the bottom, an ape will go to any lengths, even to the risk of his life, to avoid that catastrophe. So for thousands of years have we lived and only when fruit on our own tree is short or when we can bear no longer the sight of an abundance of fruit on another tree, occupied by just such a tribe of apes as ourselves, do our masses cease their engaging civil struggle and at an order from us higher apes above, go forth upon our great fruit robberies. It is plain that if in any respect an ape ceased to be an ape, our greatness would decline, and anarchy would follow, i.e. how would we at the top get our food?—and we should lose our tree and be destroyed by some stronger tribe. Our thoughts can therefore be imagined when the spies brought before us the leader of that group of apes who were preparing to monkey with our dearest emblem. He stood before us—and that is astonishing, for we apes do not habitually stand for long. Then he was paler than our race usually is, less hairy, fearless—

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very un-ape like that—and upright on his hind legs, not seeking support for his forelegs on some branch. These hung at his side or fidgeted with an aimless embarrassment behind his back. We growled at him and averted our eyes from his stupidly steadfast stare—for as a fighting race we are made subtle by fear and look restlessly, suspiciously around us, continually preparing for the sudden feint, the secret calculation, the necessary retreat, the unexpected attack. Nothing delivers an ape more readily to his enemy than a transparently straightforward look; but this upright ape had already lost so much of his apehood that he had forgotten the evasions of a warrior race. He was not even furtive. And in another way, too, he had lost our tradition. He spoke what was in his mind. This, I need hardly say, is ridiculous in a warrior whose business is to conceal his real purpose from his enemy. I note these facts merely as a matter of curiosity and to show how this new ape, from the very beginning, gave himself helplessly into our hands. We had supposed him to be guilty of race-treachery only, a bodily perversion which is, perhaps, a sin and not a crime—but the moment he spoke he went much further. He accused himself of sedition from his own mouth. He spoke as follows;

“Since my arrest has given me an opportunity of speaking to higher apes for the first time in my life, I will speak what (perhaps unknown to you), has been in the minds of us who are lower in the tree for hundreds of years. We think that there is no greater evil than the vast fruit slaughters. Now there could be no slaughter if our teeth and claws were not sharp, and they would not be sharp if we were not perpetually engaged in struggle. We believe that a crucial time has arrived in the evolution,” (we pricked up our ears at that word) “of the ape. Our tails, that used to swirl us (as they waved above our heads) into blood-thirsty states of mind, are shortening; we have not shortened them ourselves by any act of will. If we apes will work to order our lives in a new way, the struggle will cease, no more great fruit slaughters will be necessary and everyone

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will have all the fruit he needs and can eat in peace in his appropriate place in the tree. For we do not think that even you in the higher branches for whom unconsciously we labour, really benefit by the great slaughters. Some of you are killed as thousands of us are, many of you are maimed and carry unbeautiful scars. From what we below hear of your private lives and talk in the upper branches, your privileges do not make you either sensible or happy."

We were ready to fall upon him after this blasphemous speech, but our oldest ape, steeped in the wisdom and slyness of his great age, silenced us. "And when there is a shortage of fruit for everyone in the tree, high and low alike?" he asked. "If our teeth and claws are not sharpened," replied the new ape, "we shall not want to attack other trees but, when we need fruit, we shall go to the others and instead of tearing them apart we shall talk to them, stroke them and persuade them. They, seeing how gentle our hands are, will like being stroked and will smile and coo in their pleasure; for, as all of us apes know from intimate experience, there is nothing more delightful than a gentle tickling and scratching—and then they will share their fruit with us."—"What a hope!" we laughed. And some cried with disgust, "That ape's a pansy!" But a shout went up from the lower branches where a mass of his supporters were gathered. "You'd better do as he says," the cry came "or soon there will be none of us left to bring you your fruit." "Yes," said the leader, "another fruit robbery and there will be no more workers for you to steal from."

"Now," we whispered to our oldest ape on the highest branch, "now let us kill him."

"Remember," said the old one, "that he has followers. They are too many for us and we are unprepared."

This was true, so, reluctantly, we let the leader go and swing back down the branches to his own people.

After he had gone we gathered in conference in the upper branches. When we were seated our oldest ape said, "No

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doubt to you there seems to be something new, startling and dangerous in the speech you have just heard. I expect you think it the speech of a revolutionary. So it is—but there's nothing new in that. From the beginning of time there have been revolutions and what difference do they make? None whatever. Everything goes on afterwards exactly as it went on before. Do not worry therefore about revolutionaries. I have seen dozens of such people and with a little art they can be made to die very comfortably of their own enthusiasm. And, in one way, I agree with what that strange ape said. He said that violence is wasteful. It is—for to exterminate our own workers would mean that we would be without food or would have to go down out of our comfortable places in the tree and get it for ourselves. That would indeed be a calamity. No, I think if we wish to remove the danger from this particular movement we should support it."

"Support blasphemy and treachery!" we cried with indignation.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old ape wistfully. "There speaks the honest warrior. But I am old and political and it would seem to me a mistake to let all that enthusiasm get out of our hands. After our last great fruit robbery we are rather tired, you know, and enthusiasm is not easily come by again."

"But our tails!" we shouted.

"Your honour and your tails!" said our weary and ancient one. "I guarantee to show you such a display of tails wagging, curling, prehensile and triumphant as you have never seen before."

"Well, if your plan will safeguard our sacred tails and preserve us from evolution," we said, "there may be something in it. Tell us what it is."

"It is very simple," he said. "First of all we shall announce the end of all fruit robbery . . ."

"Impossible," we interrupted.

"It is never impossible to *announce* anything," he said. "I repeat we shall announce the end of all fruit robbery. But

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the lower ape is an emotional creature. It is useless to argue with him—indeed we know that the free interchange of ideas in open argument, is extremely dangerous, for the lower apes are hungry and hunger sharpens the mind, just as it sharpens the claws. No, we must appeal to his emotions, for it is here that he is untrained and inexperienced. So when we announce the end of all fruit robbery we must perform an act which shall symbolize our intention. That is easy. Almost anything would do. The best, I think, would be merely to alter the date of the commemoration of our last robbery from the anniversary of its call to battle, to the day on which it ended and when peace was declared. I'll lay you a hundred to one in pomegranates that you will see the tails wag on that day."

We who listened were doubtful of the success of a trick so simple and, moreover, we were disappointed not to have the opportunity of killing the rebel ape. But when we heard the enthusiasm in the lower branches, we realized that our oldest ape had judged rightly. Those short-tailed evolutionists were so diddled that they shouted for joy. "Peace!" "The end of all fruit robberies," "To each according to his needs"—we above heard their delirious cries and winked. And when the inquisitive pterodactyl came down to see what it was all about, we slapped him on the back and pulled his wings about merrily and nearly choked him with pomegranate seeds which do not agree with him. "Cheer up, you're not extinct yet," we said. And even that cheerless reptile, though he said his nerves couldn't stand monkey tricks any more, had to smile.

And the ceremony took place. We appointed the day, and just before noon the yelling ceased and all the struggling and climbing. Just where they were, on whatever twig or branch, our apes coiled their tails and squatted in silence. The only movement was the blinking of our eyes, thousands of eyes in the hot rays of the sun. I do not know if you have ever seen a tree full of apes squatting in silence on their haunches. It is an impressive sight. There was our oldest ape on the topmost

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branch; a little beneath him was our circle of privileged ones, and below, thick in the descending hierarchy, were the others.

And then, before a minute had gone by, an event occurred, which filled us with horror. The lengths to which blasphemy will go were revealed to us. Taking advantage of the stillness of the multitude, an ape leapt up the tree, from back to back, from branch to branch and burst through our unprepared ranks at the top. It was the leader to whom we had spoken.

"This is a fraud," he shouted. "You are pretending to commemorate peace when all the time you are planning greater robberies. You are not even silent. Listen to the grinding and sharpening of your claws and teeth."

It was, of course, our habit. We do it unconsciously.

Too startled for a moment to act, we hesitated. Then: "Lynch him. Kill him," cried the crowd with a sudden roar. We hesitated no more and at least a score of us leapt upon him. You would think we had an easy task. But there was extraordinary strength in that creature. He fought like a god, skilfully, and he had laid out half of our number with a science and ferocity such as we had never seen before our numbers overwhelmed him. Some spirit must have been in him and we still wonder, not without apprehension, if that spirit is lying asleep in his followers. However that may be, we threw him down at last upon the branch. Our oldest ape came down to look upon the panting creature and then what we saw made us gasp. He was lying on his face. There was a backside bare and hairless—he had no tail. No tail at all.

"It is man!" we cried. And our stomachs turned.

THE CLERK'S TALE

THERE were two railway stations in the town where I lived when I was a boy, the Junction and the East Station, and from both of them the suburban trains went up to London. It was during the War, when I was sixteen, that I last used that line. I used to go from the East station and the trains were very crowded. We all sat or stood, jammed against each other, and people rarely talked.

There was, nevertheless, one talker, if what he said can be called talk. He started with us at the East station. The moment he got into the compartment he would begin. "Must we have that window open?" he would say. Or, "Will you kindly move up and give me more room. Five passengers are allowed each side." Or, "Kindly sit on the opposite side, your smoke is annoying me." Or, if a woman opened the door, he would say, "This is a smoking compartment. Can't you go to the special compartment for ladies?" He hated women. All these things he planked down like a man throwing aside a spade in a temper. And after he said them he took off his glasses, showed his large, cold, snail-grey naked eyes, jerked back his shoulders and spread his fingers as if preparing to slap someone hard on the face. He was a hard-chinned, grey-haired man of fifty. People turned away to the window, raised their papers, looked more closely at their books and said nothing.

One day somebody said to me, "You should be sorry for that man. You should not mock him. One of his sons has been killed in the war. And the other has been wounded." I was silent. This conveyed little to me. I was sixteen. The world, the war—I hardly saw or heard of them. The mark of the war on that train meant nothing. I lived in a different world. I lived in a dream. Looking out of the carriage window, sunk in some book, watching the slow clock in the ware-

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house where I worked, I lived only for one thing in those days: that time should be urged on and the week pass.

So that it would be Sunday once more. For on Sunday, during one hour on Sunday morning, I saw Isabel Hertz. She was in my class at Sunday School, a girl who was half-Swedish, with hair as yellow as thick sunflowers and candid eyes like blue pebbles of ice. Her throat, her lips which broke apart in piety when she sang the hymns, and her silk legs, intoxicated me. Once I fell down the Sunday School stairs when I heard her voice in the doorway below. When she spoke I thought of a crystal of snow falling on a warm hand and instantly melting; a particle of herself melted away with every word and passed with a sigh to Heaven. There, ardent but purified by her purity, I joined her in melodious, fleshless and speechless union. In one of those northern landscapes of snow, perhaps, where time is frozen in the sky, where sleigh-bells ring and there is the dry mutter of skates saying, "Inevitable, for ever. Inevitable, for ever," like our love, over iron lakes of ice.

It was a very small incident which had started my love for Isabel Hertz. It occurred one Sunday at the school. With her Bible on her lap she was sitting opposite to me, for I was afraid to sit next to her.

"Isabel, dear," the teacher said, "what is God?" Isabel, who always held her head a little to one side as if her small ears were listening to the spring sky, turned her head. She hesitated, as if waiting for the voice of Heaven; then she replied, "God is love."

I was looking at her, waiting for her to speak, and she caught my eye and smiled. A pain like hunger pinched my throat.

All that day, I could eat nothing, but my mouth seemed to drink and eat the air because she, miles away, was breathing it. There was a laburnum tree in our garden, and I cut her initials, I.H. on the trunk and went to have a look at them every hour. I even went out after dark before I went to bed and struck a match to see them. I told my parents I had dropped a pencil

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there and was looking for it. I was awake all night and horses seemed to be galloping over my heart.

I longed to dream at night about Isabel Hertz, but this never happened. I was dreaming about her all day; but when the next Sunday and the next came I felt my body was covered with the garish tattoo of guilt and I could not speak. I never spoke to her. Once when she spoke to me, I choked.

Man cannot live by the spirit alone. It was about this time that, thinking always of the face and walk of Isabel Hertz, I started imagining things I could do with girls with round shoulders and protruding upper teeth. The uglier the better. I used to follow them. There was a girl who got into the train at the next station one morning. She carried a small cardboard attaché case which had the initials D.O.M. on it. At the London station, some nights after, I saw her again. The fact that I had now seen her twice, by accident, overruled everything. I dropped all other girls with protruding teeth and followed D.O.M. Her teeth stuck out like tusks.

D.O.M. was a dark, shabby, stumpy girl with thin legs and high scared shoulders. Her hollowed, sparrow-brown eyes and those teeth which spread her lips and left her mouth open, gave her an expression of craving and hunger. The thing about her that moved me was the sad wideness of her white forehead. She was always with a tall friend and as they walked up the platform they bumped their hips against each other or pushed and pinched. They were always laughing and made people stare.

I used to follow in the evenings. My technique was like this. I got out at her station and gave her about 50 yards start and then I went after her. She and her friend went first down the station road; then they turned to the left and went up a long street of small villas. At the two corners I used to put on speed when she and her friend were out of sight; but when, racing round the corner, I found I was only ten yards behind them, I eased off and let them go ahead. At last they would turn

THE CLERK'S TALE

inside a side street where, I supposed, she lived. There I left her and went on home. The idea of knowing exactly where D.O.M. lived was repugnant.

At first there was excitement in this pursuit; then dead but obliged boredom and finally the humiliation of secrecy. For the more I saw of D.O.M. the more I disliked her. I shuddered at the worn fur collar of her coat, her bad complexion, her giggle, the silly way in which she was always bumping into her friend, her bad, scraping walk which turned over the heel of her left shoe. All these things gave me a horror which I could not resist for I felt in my own mouth the hunger which I saw in hers. But once she had gone, there were freedom, weariness and relief. I went home exhausted. Once more I could dream freely about Isabel Hertz.

This went on into the summer. It was a bondage. I believed that D.O.M. did not know I followed her. But one evening towards the end of September something did happen which changed the situation and altered my life. Just as we were all at the end of the long straight road of villas and D.O.M. was about to turn into her street and set me free, she gave a sudden twist to her shoulders, as a pomeranian does when it starts prancing and yapping, opened her mouth wide and put her tongue out at me three or four times. After this she put her hand to her throat and pretended to be sick. She knew. She had known all the time. I felt deep shame and anger. But this soon gave place to a decisive bombast and brutality. The next time I saw her I was determined to speak.

The following evening I walked past the barrier on to the platform of the London station and searched for D.O.M. She was at her usual place near the indicator. I was late in getting there and I had not reached it when the train came in. I saw her get into a compartment and I was going to join her but, at the last moment, I was afraid. I pretended to myself I would be more subtle. I would get into the next compartment. I opened the door and got in and, as I did so, I heard a voice shout:

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"Full up here." I saw the violent man. He was wearing a light grey pistol-coloured suit.

But the train moved. There was nothing to be done. He couldn't turn me out. I stayed at the window. The draught of the rushing train was blowing in my face. One of those yellow sunsets of the autumn, with cloud like the brown smoke that runs off paraffin flares in the street markets, was painted over the manure-coloured brick of London and the approaching pink brick of the suburbs. The train snuffled on. I looked out of the window and then I saw D.O.M. at the next one, not her face but the elbow of her green coat and the fur of her collar. She was standing too. I stared until the wind made my eyes sting. Presently her head showed. But she did not turn, the metals crossed like scissors under the train at the points outside the coming station. Someone got out of our compartment at this station and I went to take his place. In doing so I kicked the violent man's toe. He dropped his paper, stiffened his chin and muttered. I apologized and sat down.

At the next station another person got out and left the door open. "Close the door!" shouted the man. I was glad to curry favour. I stood up, closed the door and looked out. I saw her head again. I stared and stared and waited. She did not look my way. I went back to my place. But I couldn't stay there. I had to get up again. She was there. She saw me. She affected not to see me. I was excited. I had entirely lost all sense of the people in the compartment. They were nothing but wagging and shaking sacks. I went back, got up again, a half-dozen times. I opened and closed the window, stepped across people's legs, gazed out, sometimes rewarded and sometimes disappointed. As I went to my seat once more I hardly heard the man opposite to me say:

"What the devil do you think you're doing, you young fool. Can't you sit still?"

"This is not your compartment," I said.

The wind in my eyes and the sight of D.O.M. at the window

THE CLERK'S TALE

had given me defiance. All the brutality that lies under humiliation was ready.

"Perpetually getting up and treading on my feet," said the man.

"There is no need to lose your temper," I said. I was swept into another world, away from everything I had known. I felt the recklessness of a blasphemer in defying a man thirty years older than myself, a man with grey hair. I felt I had grown up ten years with a word.

"You dare talk to me like that," said the man, removing his pince-nez and showing me his naked grey eyes.

The other passengers looked at us in a stupor of displeasure.

"If you were my son," he said, "I'd thrash you within an inch of your life."

"Try," I said. "Go on." I felt about thirty. I suddenly felt I had fought in the war. "Why aren't you in the army, anyway," I said. It was a phrase I had often heard.

The man threw down his paper, jumped up and was about to strike me when a passenger touched his arm.

"I shall call an inspector," he said.

An expression of bliss came over the faces of the others in the compartment. There was a worship of inspectors on our line.

"Call a dozen inspectors," shouted the man, still standing and threatening me. Before I knew what I was doing I gave him a push in the waistcoat, the train suddenly stopped with a jerk and he fell back into his seat. In our quarrel we had passed D.O.M.'s station where I always got out. We had arrived at the East station, the terminus.

This put me in a panic because I did not want to be seen quarrelling in the town where my home was. The passengers had risen and one, a woman, was between me and the man. He was trying to get at me. I pushed and got out on to the platform first, but my enemy was on me. He tumbled out and hit hard. The blow hit my shoulder. And he grabbed my arm,

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too. He was savage and unguarded. I saw his mouth like a flattened rose and landed my knuckles on it. This knocked him into the crowd and his spit was on my hand.

I knew I was for it now and had not a chance against this man and I was scared by what I had done. I got a burning blow on the ear that nearly knocked me senseless. I swung back at him and perhaps I hit him or one of the people who were trying to get between us and the barrier. It wasn't a fight.

"You young swine. You young hound," I heard his shouts. A passenger muddled the next swing of his arm and I caught him on the collar. The blow was not as wonderful to me as the first one; it made me feel dizzy. His spit on my hand had gone cold. I dodged away quickly, jumped on to a truck, climbed over the low fence and got down into the coal yard. A number of people were arguing with the man. His hat had fallen off and had been kicked and he was holding it crumpled in his hand and shouting at the person who had trodden on it. Someone said, "Striking a boy like that!" and this made me feel heroic now I was safe. I walked away with the feeling that I was treading through flames and one side of my face seemed to be like a football. Then I felt horror at myself; and at the whole human race. I had struck a man whose son had been killed. I suddenly knew what the war was. I went home and was sick.

After this, I did not use the East station any more. I got up earlier and used the Junction. For two years I dared not go near the East station and I did not see D.O.M. again. I found a new girl on the new line and went out arm-in-arm with her. That had an unhappy ending, too—unhappy for the girl. None of this would have happened if Isabel Hertz had not known what God is.

THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT

It was the dead hour of a November afternoon. Under the ceiling of level mud-coloured cloud, the latest office buildings of the city stood out alarmingly like new tombstones, among the mass of older buildings. And along the streets, the few cars and the few people appeared and disappeared slowly as if they were not following the roadway or the pavement, but some inner, personal route. Along the road to the main station, at intervals of two hundred yards or so, unemployed men and one or two beggars were dribbling slowly past the desert of public buildings to the next patch of shop fronts.

Presently a taxi stopped outside one of the underground stations and a man of thirty-five paid his fare and made off down one of the small streets.

"Better not arrive in a taxi," he was thinking. "The old man will wonder where I got the money."

He was going to see his father. It was his father's last day at his factory, the last day of thirty years' work and life among these streets, building a business out of nothing, and then, after a few years of prosperity, letting it go to pieces in a chafer of rumour, idleness, quarrels, accusations and, at last, bankruptcy.

Suddenly all the money quarrels of the family, which nagged in the young man's mind, had been dissolved. His dread of being involved in them vanished. He was overcome by the sadness of his father's situation. "Thirty years of your life come to an end. I must see him. I must help him." All the same, knowing his father, he had paid off the taxi and walked the last quarter of a mile.

It was a shock to see the name of the firm, newly painted too, on the sign outside the factory and on the brass of the office entrance, newly polished. He pressed the bell at the office window inside and it was a long time before he heard footsteps

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cross the empty room and saw a shadow cloud the frosted glass of the window.

"It's Harold, father," the young man said. The door was opened.

"Hullo, old chap. This is very nice of you, Harold," said the old man shyly, stepping back from the door to let his son in, and lowering his pleased, blue eyes for a second's modesty.

"Naturally I had to come," said the son, shyly also. And then the father filled out with assurance again and taking his son's arm, walked him across the floor of the empty workroom.

"Hardly recognize it, do you? When were you here last?" said the father.

This had been the machine-room, before the machines had gone. Through another door was what had been the show-room where the son remembered seeing his father, then a dark-haired man, talking in a voice he had never heard before, a quick, bland voice, to his customers. Now there were only dust-lines left by the shelves on the white brick walls, and the marks of the showroom cupboards on the floor. The place looked large and light. There was no throb of machines, no hum of voices, no sound at all, now, but the echo of their steps on the empty floors. Already, though only a month bankrupt, the firm was becoming a ghost.

The two men walked towards the glass door of the office. They were both short. The father was well-dressed in an excellent navy blue suit. He was a vigorous, broad man with a pleased impish smile. The sun-burn shone through the clipped, white hair of his head and he had the simple, trim, open-air look of a snow man. The son beside him was round-shouldered and shabby, a keen but anxious fellow in need of a hair cut and going bald.

"Come in, Professor," said the father. This was an old family joke. He despised his son, who was, in fact, not a professor but a poorly paid lecturer at a provincial university.

"Come in," said the father, repeating himself, not with the

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impatience he used to have, but with the habit of age. "Come inside, into my office. If you can call it an office now," he apologized. "This used to be my room, do you remember, it used to be my office? Take a chair. We've still got a chair. The desk's gone, yes that's gone, it was sold, fetched a good price—what was I saying?" he turned a bewildered look to his son. "The chair. I was saying they have to leave you a table and a chair. I was just going to have a cup of tea old boy, but—pardon me," he apologized again, "I've only one cup. Things have been sold for the liquidators and they've cleaned out nearly everything. I found this cup and teapot upstairs in the foreman's room. Of course he's gone, all the hands have gone, and when I looked around just now to lock up before taking the keys to the agent when I hand over to-day, I saw this cup. Well, there it is. I've made it. Have a cup?"

"No, thanks," said the son, listening patiently to his father. "I have had my tea."

"You've had your tea? Go on. Why not have another?"

"No really, thanks," said the son. "You drink it."

"Well," said the father, pouring out the tea and lifting the cup to his soft rosy face and blinking his eyes as he drank, "I feel badly about this. This is terrible. I feel really awful drinking this tea and you standing there watching me, but you say you've had yours—well, how are things with you? How are you? And how is Alice? Is she better? And the children? You know I've been thinking about you—you look worried. Haven't lost sixpence and found a shilling have you, because I wouldn't mind doing that?"

"I'm all right," the son said, smiling to hide his irritation. "I'm not worried about anything, I'm just worried about you. This—" he nodded with embarrassment to the dismantled show-room, the office from which even the calendars and wastepaper basket had gone—"this—" what was the most tactful and sympathetic word to use?"—"this is bad luck," he said.

"Bad luck?" said the old man sternly.

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"I mean," stammered his son, "I heard about the creditors' meeting. I knew it was your last day—I thought I'd come along, I . . . to see how you were."

"Very sweet of you, old boy," said the old man with zest. "Very sweet. We've cleared everything up. They got most of the machines out to-day. I'm just locking up and handing over. Locking up is quite a business. There are so many keys. It's tiring, really. How many keys do you think there are to a place like this? You wouldn't believe it, if I told you."

"It must have been worrying," the son said.

"Worrying? You keep on using that word. I'm not worrying. Things are fine," said the old man smiling aggressively. "I feel they're fine. I *know* they're fine."

"Well, you always were an optimist," smiled his son.

"Listen to me a moment. I want you to get this idea," said his father, his warm voice going dead and rancorous and his nostrils fidgeting. His eyes went hard, too. A different man was speaking, and even a different face; the son noticed for the first time that like all big-faced men his father had two faces. There was the outer face like a soft warm and careless daub of innocent sealing wax and inside it, as if thumbed there by a seal, was a much smaller one, babyish, shrewd, scared and hard. Now this little inner face had gone greenish and pale and dozens of little veins were broken on the nose and cheeks. The small, drained, purplish lips of this little face were speaking. The son leaned back instinctively to get just another inch away from this little face.

"Listen to this," the father said and leaned forward on the table as his son leaned back, holding his right fist up as if he had a hammer in his hand and was auctioning his life. "I am 65. I don't know how long I shall live, but let me make this clear: if I were not an optimist I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't stay another minute." He paused, fixing his son's half averted eyes to let the full meaning of his words bite home. "I've worked

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hard," the father went on. "For thirty years I built up this business from nothing. You wouldn't know it, you were a child, but many's the time coming down from the North, I've slept in this office to be on the job early the next morning." He looked decided and experienced like a man of forty, but now he softened to sixty again. The ring in the hard voice began to soften into a faint whine and his thick nose sniffed. "I don't say I've always done right," he said. "You can't live your life from A to Z like that. And now I haven't a penny in the world. Not a cent. It's not easy at my time of life to begin again. What do you think I've got to live for? There's nothing holding me back. My boy, if I wasn't an optimist I'd go right out. I'd finish it." Suddenly the father smiled and the little face was drowned in a warm flood of triumphant smiles from the bigger face. He rested his hands on his waistcoat and that seemed to be smiling too, his easy coat smiling, his legs smiling and even winks of light on his shining shoes. Then he frowned.

"Your hair's going thin," he said. "You oughtn't to be losing your hair at your age. I don't want you to think I'm criticizing you, you're old enough to live your own life, but your hair you know—you ought to do something about it. If you used oil every day and rubbed it in with both hands, the thumbs and forefingers is what you want to use, it would be better. I'm often thinking about you and I don't want you to think I'm lecturing you because I'm not, so don't get the idea this is a lecture, but I was thinking, what you want, what we all want, I say this for myself as well as you, what we all want is ideas—big ideas. We go worrying along but you just want bigger and better ideas. You ought to think big. Take your case. You're a lecturer. I wouldn't be satisfied with lecturing to a small batch of people in a university town. I'd lecture the world. You know, you're always doing yourself injustice. We all do. Think big."

"Well," said his son, still smiling, but sharply. He was very

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angry. "One's enough in the family. You've thought big till you bust."

"He didn't mean to say this because he hadn't really the courage, but his pride was touched.

"I mean," said the son, hurriedly covering it up in a panic, "I'm not like you . . . I . . ."

"What did you say?" said the old man. "Don't say that." It was the smaller of the two faces speaking in a panic. "Don't say that. Don't use that expression. That's not a right idea. Don't you get a wrong idea about me. We paid sixpence in the pound," said the old man proudly.

The son began again, but his father stopped him.

"Do you know," said the bigger of his two faces, getting bigger as it spoke, "some of the oldest houses in the city are in Queer Street, some of the biggest firms in the country? I came up this morning with Mr. Higgins, you remember Higgins? They're in liquidation. They are. Oh yes. And Moore, he's lost everything. He's got his chauffeur but it's his wife's money. Did you see Beltman in the trade papers? Quarter of a million deficit. And how long are Prestons going to last?"

The big face smiled and overflowed on the smaller one. The whole train, the old man said, was practically packed with bankrupts every morning. Thousands had gone. Thousands? Tens of thousands. Some of the biggest men in the City were broke.

A small man himself, he was proud to be bankrupt with the big ones; it made him feel rich.

"You've got to realize, old boy," he said gravely, "the world's changing. You've got to move with the times."

The son was silent. The November sun put a few strains of light through the frosted window and the shadow of its bars and panes was weakly placed on the wall behind his father's head. Some of the light caught the tanned scalp that showed between the white hair. So short the hair was that his father's ears protruded and, framed against that reflection of the window

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bars, the father suddenly took (to his son's fancy) the likeness of a convict in his cell and the son, startled, found himself asking "Were they telling the truth when they said the old man was a crook and that his balance sheets were cooked. What about that man they had to shut up at the meeting, the little man from Birmingham, in a mackintosh . . ."

"There's a fly in this room," said the old man suddenly, looking up in the air and getting to his feet. "I'm sorry to interrupt what you were saying, but I can hear a fly. I must get it out."

"A fly?" said his son listening.

"Yes, can't you hear it? It's peculiar how you can hear everything now the machines have stopped. It took me quite a time to get used to the silence. Can you see it, old chap? I can't stand flies, you never know where they've been. Excuse me one moment."

The old man pulled a duster out of a drawer.

"Forgive this interruption. I can't sit in a room with a fly in it," he said apologetically. They both stood up and listened. Certainly in the office was the small dying fizz of a fly, deceived beyond its strength by the autumn sun.

"Open the door, will you, old boy," said the old man with embarrassment. "I hate them."

The son opened the door and the fly flew into the light. The old man struck at it but it sailed away higher.

"There it is," he said, getting up on the chair. He struck again and the son struck too as the fly came down. The old man got on top of his table. An expression of disgust and fear was curled on his smaller face; and an expression of apology and weakness.

"Excuse me," he said again, looking up at the ceiling.

"If we leave the door open or open the window it will go," said the son.

"It may seem a fad to you," said the old man shyly. "I don't like flies. Ah, here it comes."

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They missed it. They stood helplessly gaping up at the ceiling where the fly was buzzing in small circles round the cord of the electric light.

"I don't like them," the old man said.

The table creaked under his weight. The fly went on to the ceiling and stayed there. Unavailing the old man snapped the duster at it.

"Be careful," said the son. "Don't lose your balance."

The old man looked down. Suddenly he looked tired and old, his body began to sag and a look of weakness came on to his face.

"Give me a hand, old boy," the old man said in a shaky voice. He put a heavy hand on his son's shoulder and the son felt the great helpless weight of his father's body.

"Lean on me."

Very heavily and slowly the old man got cautiously down from the table to the chair. "Just a moment, old boy," said the old man. Then, after getting his breath, he got down from the chair to the floor.

"You all right?" his son asked.

"Yes, yes," said the old man out of breath. "It was only that fly. Do you know you're actually more bald at the back than I thought. There's a patch there as big as my hand. I saw it just then. It gave me quite a shock. You really must do something about it. How are your teeth? Do you have any trouble with your teeth? That may have something to do with it. Hasn't Alice told you how bald you are?"

"You've been doing too much. You're worried," said the son soft with repentance and sympathy. "Sit down. You've had a bad time."

"No, nothing," said the old man shyly, breathing rather hard. "A bit. Everyone's been very nice. They came in and shook hands. The staff came in. They all came in just to shake hands. They said 'We wish you good luck'."

The old man turned his head away. He actually wiped a

THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT

tear from his eye. A glow of sympathy transported the younger man. He felt as though a sun had risen.

"You know—" the father said uneasily, flitting a glance at the fly on the ceiling as if he wanted the fly as well as his son to listen to what he was going to say—"you know," he said. "The world's all wrong. I've made my mistakes. I was thinking about it before you came. You know where I went wrong? You know where I made my mistake?"

The son's heart started to a panic of embarrassment. "For heaven's sake," he wanted to shout, "don't! Don't stir up the whole business. Don't humiliate yourself before me. Don't start telling the truth. Don't oblige me to say we know all about it, that we have known for years the mess you've been in, that we've seen through the plausible stories you've spread, that we've known the people you've swindled."

"Money's been my trouble," said the old man. "I thought I needed money. That's one thing it's taught me. I've done with money. Absolutely done and finished with it. I never want to see another penny as long as I live. I don't want to see or hear of it. If you came in now and offered me a thousand pounds I should laugh at you. We deceive ourselves. We don't want the stuff. All I want now is just to go to a nice little cottage by the sea," the old man said. "I feel I need air, sun, life."

The son was appalled.

"You want money even for that," the son said irritably. "You want quite a lot of money to do that."

"Don't say I want money," the old man said vehemently. "Don't say it. When I walk out of this place to-night I'm going to walk into freedom. I am not going to think of money. You never know where it will come from. You may see something. You may meet a man. You never know. Did the children of Israel worry about money? No, they just went out and collected the manna. That's what I want to do."

The son was about to speak. The father stopped him.

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"Money," the father said, "isn't necessary at all."

Now like the harvest moon on full glow the father's face shone up at his son.

"What I came round about was this," said the son awkwardly and drily. "I'm not rich. None of us is. In fact, with things as they are we're all pretty shaky and we can't do anything. I wish I could but I can't. But,"—after the assured beginning he began to stammer and to crinkle his eyes timidly—"but the idea of your being—you know, well short of some immediate necessity, I mean—well, if it is ever a question of—well to be frank, *cash*, I'd raise it somehow."

He coloured. He hated to admit his own poverty, he hated to offer charity to his father. He hated to sit there knowing the things he knew about him. He was ashamed to think how he, how they all dreaded having the gregarious, optimistic, extravagant, uncontrollable disingenuous old man on their hands. The son hated to feel he was being in some peculiar way which he could not understand mean, cowardly and dishonest.

The father's sailing eyes came down and looked at his son's nervous, frowning face and slowly the dreaming look went from the father's face. Slowly the harvest moon came down from its rosy voyage. The little face suddenly became dominant within the outer folds of skin like a fox looking out of a hole of clay. He leaned forward brusquely on the table and somehow a silver topped pencil was in his hand preparing to note something briskly on a writing pad.

"Raise it?" said the old man sharply. "Why didn't you tell me before you could raise money? How can you raise it? Where? By when?"

THE NIGHT WORKER

A MARRIAGE was in the air. In a week the boy's Cousin Gladys was going to be married. The boy sat in a corner of the room out of the way. Uncle Tom and Aunt Annie danced round the girl all day, pushing her this way, pulling her that; only a week to go and now—as the boy watched them in the little dark kitchen, out of the way of people's feet—the dance got fiercer, gayer, rougher. “Do what you like, you're free already,” they seemed to say to her. And then: “You dare! You wait! You're still our daughter. Do as you're told.” The boy watched them. He was seven. He did not know what a marriage was, and he gazed at them, expecting it to come into the room like a bird, or to be put on the table like a cake.

Aunt Annie stood at one end of the table with her back to the window, making a pie. He watched the mole move on her bony arm as she rolled the pastry.

“Hurry up with that sleeve, my girl. Haven't you taken out the tacking?”

“It's a fiddling job,” said Gladys, holding up her needle.

“Here, give it us,” said Aunt Annie, wiping the pastry off her fingers and snatching the needle. “Who's taking the Bible class on Sunday, then?”

“Not me,” said Gladys.

Aunt Annie flopped the pastry over the pie-dish and the boy saw it hang in curtains over the edge, while his Aunt stood straight looking down at the parting in Gladys's thick hair. Aunt Annie's grey hair was screwed back and in her bony face she had bold false teeth, so that she clucked when she talked and had the up and down smile of a skull. She had the good nature of a skeleton.

The boy was waiting for her to trim the pastry on the pie-dish. When she had done this she opened the oven door and

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a smell of hot cake came across the room. In came the boy's Uncle Tom, a sad, cake-eating man. How did a man so short come to marry a woman so tall? It must have been because Uncle Tom looked like a crouching animal who lived by making great jumps. He was a carpenter, whose skin was the colour of chapel harmonium keys; a yellow, Chinese-looking man with split thumb nails and a crinkled black beard and he frightened because he never quite came into the room, but stood in the doorway, neither in nor out, with a hammer or a chisel in his hand.

"I done them stair-rods, my girl," he said. It was like a threat.

"I'll take them round," Gladys said.

"She's going at twelve," said Aunt Annie.

"Jim be there?" asked her father.

"Yes," said Aunt Annie. She seemed to the boy to have the power to make her tall teeth shine on the scowl of Uncle Tom, and to put the idea of springing on us all out of his head. "Jim'll be there. She's taking the boy."

Then Gladys laughed and, leaning down the table, put her soft arm round the boy's waist and rubbed her cheek in his hair.

"I'm taking my young man round. You'll look after me, won't you?" she said. One of their inexplicable fits of laughter started. Aunt Annie's teeth clucked and clicked. Uncle Tom went, "Ha, Ha, Ha," like a saw and lit a pipe.

"Only another week, Glad. It's just because of the neighbours," said Aunt Annie.

"Ay, my girl, neighbours talk," said Uncle Tom, and blew out violet smoke as if he were smoking the neighbours out.

The girl put on a prim, concealing expression. One minute she was a girl and the next a woman, then a girl again.

"Stars above, look at the time. Quick," she cried to the boy, getting up from the table.

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They ran upstairs to her room at the back where he slept too, a room which did not smell of camphor like his Aunt's room. He did not like to see Gladys take off her kitchen dress and stand, with bare shoulders and bare arms, in her petticoat, and bare-legged too, because then she became a person he did not know. She was shorter and more powerful. But when her Sunday blue dress was over her head and after she had said "Oh these blooming things," when the hooks caught in her hair, he liked her again.

"How do I look?" she said, when she had her straw hat on, and, not waiting for an answer, she said, "Now, there's you! Brush your jersey! Quick."

Jim was waiting, she said. They went out of the room like the wind and the text "Honour Thy Father" swung sideways on the wall. Down those dark stairs, they went, two at a time and were half out of the door, when Uncle Tom made his great jump after them.

"Don't forget them stair-rods."

"Goodness," she said, grabbing them, "I'm going dippy."

And then she was going down the street so fast that the boy had to trot.

"Oh!" She breathed more easily when they had got out of her street. "That's better. You ain't seen my new house." But she was talking to the street, not to him, smiling at it. She went along, smiling at the sky and the children playing hopscotch on the pavement, and the green grocer's cart, as though she were eating the world like an orange and throwing away the skin as she went along. And her breasts and her plump chin jumped in time with her step.

"Which house is it?" the boy said.

"Not yet. Round the corner."

They turned the corner and there was another long street. "In this street?" he said.

"No. Round another corner."

He took her hand. She was walking so fast he was afraid

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of being lost. And then, down the next street, she calmed down.

Her face became stern. "Look at him, standing like a dummy! He hasn't seen us."

A man in a grey cap and a blue serge suit was standing on the pavement.

"Smoking," she said. "Bold as brass. There's men for you. He promised he'd give it up. Standing there daft and idle."

They were all workers in this family. Everything was work to them. Uncle Tom was always sawing and hammering. He had made the chests of drawers and the tables in his house. Aunt Annie scrubbed and cooked. Cousin Gladys was always sewing and even when she came in from her factory, she had, as they said, "something in her hands"—a brush, a broom, a cleaning cloth or scissors. Jim was a worker, too. He worked at the post office in the middle of the town. One day Uncle Tom took the boy on top of a tram and when they came near the post office, he said: "Eh, look out this side and you'll see Gladys's Jim working. He's got a good job. Sometimes he's on nights. He's a night worker. Now, look out for him when the tram slows down." The boy looked into the grey window of the post office as the tram passed by. Inside were dim rows of desks and people and presently he saw Jim in his shirt sleeves. He was carrying a large wastepaper basket.

"What's he doing?" said the boy.

"Sorting," said Uncle Tom. "Sorting the mail. His father put him into that job when he was fourteen."

The boy saw Jim lift the wastepaper basket and then suddenly empty it over the head of another man who was sitting at a desk. He saw Jim laughing. He saw the man jump down and chase Jim across the office, laughing too.

"Larking about," said Uncle Tom indignantly. "That's government work."

The boy stopped laughing. He was scared of Jim after this.

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Jim was a tall man with a hungry face, but there was a small grin on his lips and after seeing him empty the wastepaper basket the boy did not know what to make of him. It made him feel there was something reckless and secretive in the lives of Cousin Gladys and Jim.

Jim stood outside the gate of the house.

"You come to see the house," he said to the boy. The boy murmured.

"Lost his tongue," said Jim.

"I've been in," he said to Gladys.

Gladys took his arm.

"Have you brought the things? I've got the stair-rods."

"I put them inside," he said.

"Oh, let me see," she said eagerly. The three went to the green front door of the house and Jim let them in. It was a small house of grey brick with a bay window.

"There," Jim said, pointing to the things. "I didn't take them upstairs. I waited for you."

On the floor was a wash-basin and a jug.

"I must wash them before we go," she said. "Take them to the kitchen."

Jim stood and winked at the boy.

"Orders," said Jim.

"I can't stand dirt," she said, getting up.

"Well," said Jim, "I'm waiting, aren't I?" He put this question to the boy and winked again.

"Oh," Gladys said, "don't be soft."

"Don't look," said Jim to the boy.

And then Gladys and Jim put their arms round each other and kissed. He saw her heels come off the ground and her knees bend. Gladys blushed and stepped back.

"Oh no, you don't, does she?" Jim said to the boy. And he pulled Gladys and gave her another kiss.

"Jim!" she cried. "You'll have me over."

The boy laughed and pulled at her waist from behind and

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they were all laughing until her shoe kicked the china basin on the floor. That stopped them.

"What'll Ma say when she sees my dress," Gladys said.

"Oh," said Jim. "*He* won't tell." Winking again at the boy. "Here's a penny. Go into the garden and see if you can find some chocolate."

"No," said Gladys, kissing the boy and holding his hand. "He's my young man. He's looking after me."

They walked from room to room in the house. After Uncle Tom's house it was bare and smelled of size and new paint. The curtains were up but there was very little furniture. In the sitting-room there was only a blue carpet and a small settee. Jim and Gladys stood at the door and took deep breaths when they looked at this room. There was a vase on the mantelpiece and Gladys moved the vase from the middle to the end.

"Now I've made it lopsided," she said. "It wants two."

"It wants a picture," said Jim, looking at the bare, lilac coloured walls. "It looks bare."

"Don't complain," said Gladys pouting.

"I'm not. I was only thinking," he said, putting his arm round her waist, but she stepped away. Jim gave her a look. The boy had seen her sulk before. He loved her and when she sulked he was frightened.

Jim went out into the hall and while he was out she stroked the boy's head and pressed him against her leg.

"You like it, don't you?" she said. "You don't think it's bare?"

"No," he said.

"I'll marry you. You don't grouse."

"Here—Glad—what's this here?" called Jim sharply from the hall. "When you've done spooning . . ."

Her sulk went at once. She went out. Jim and she were looking at a small dark spot on the ceiling.

"A leak!" she cried.

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"From the bathroom," he said.

"Who left the water on last time?" she said.

"Your mother—washing things," Jim said.

"She never," Gladys said.

They both rushed upstairs. The carpet was not yet down on the stairs and their steps and voices echoed. It was a house of echoes. The boy did not follow. He went to see the painters' pails in the kitchen and to stir the oily remains of paint in them with a stick. He looked into the clean sink. He could not understand why Gladys and Jim were going to live in this house. He wanted to live there with them. He could not understand the laugh of his Aunt and Uncle, that peculiar laughter, so pleased and yet jealous, so free and yet so uneasy, when they talked about Gladys living in this house. It was a laughter marked by side glances. The boy couldn't understand why it was important for him to be there, and he felt lost. He went at last upstairs and on the landing he heard them in the bathroom. They were talking. They had forgotten him. In the evasive way of grown-up people they had gone upstairs to look at the cause of the water coming through the ceiling and, now they were there, they were not talking about that at all. They were talking about people, about some person. The boy stood still and listened.

"They don't want him. *He's* away all the time travelling and she's having another, that'll be the fifth. Terrible, isn't it? Five, imagine it," Gladys was saying.

"Can't someone put her wise," Jim said.

"I'd throw myself in the river."

The boy saw Gladys falling into the river. He thought, "I wonder why Gladys wants to get her clothes wet and what will Aunt Annie say."

"I dunno. Kids are nice. I'd like one like that," Jim said.

"Nobody's kid. That's what he is," Gladys said. When he heard the word kid, the boy seemed to himself to swell and to lean and to topple with importance towards the bathroom

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door, but some fear of a woman's hand catching him by the leg or the arm, made him seem to go thin again and lean away, till he crept quickly to the landing. There were two doors. Quietly he opened one door and went into a small room. There was nothing in it at all, no curtains to the windows, no linoleum on the floor, no firegrate either, but only a mousehole. He looked down the mousehole and watched it for a long time but nothing came out of it. There was a smell of mouse which reminded him of his home and he looked out of the window down into three back gardens but no child was there. He wondered where nobody's kid was, but no child came. So he went to another room, for this was the house he wanted to live in with one room after another, if people would come and live in it and silence the echoes. Quietly he edged out of the room and guiltily looked into the next one. It was in the front of the house and looked on to the street. Each thing in the room seemed to look at him. There was a small carpet on the floor. There was a wardrobe, a dressing table and a large bedstead with a mattress on it, but no sheets or blankets. It was like his mother's and father's room, but this one was cold and smelled of the furniture shop. It had the mystery and watchful quietness of an empty bedroom.

"Where are you?" called Gladys. "Where's the boy gone?"

"He's round about," said Jim easily. They were walking towards the room. The boy could not escape. He stood still.

"Ah, there he is," Gladys cried. And they were both in the room with him.

"Who sleeps in this bed?" said the boy. Gladys went red. Jim winked.

"Gladys, who sleeps here?" Jim said.

"I don't know," said Gladys.

"Getcha, she does. She knows," Jim said. "Ask her."

"You do," the boy said, pointing at Gladys. "She does."

"I don't," said Gladys sternly.

"Jim does," she said sharply.

THE NIGHT WORKER

"He doesn't," the boy said. He had seen the lies rolling in their glances at each other.

"I do," said Jim.

"You don't," said the boy. "You're a night worker."

"That's a good one," said Jim, who never laughed but only smiled at the corner of his lips, and now suddenly shouted with laughter. "That's it. That's where I do my work. A night worker, that's where I do my work. Eh, Glad?"

"Jim, shut up," said Gladys primly. "Don't tease."

"I'm not teasing," laughed Jim. "I'm a hell of a night-worker." And he made a grab at Gladys who moved away.

"Jim," she said, "the neighbours. They can hear everything. These walls are like paper."

"You and the neighbours," laughed Jim and he caught up the boy high in the air and sat on the side of the bed. "One, two, three," he said, and at three he brought the boy down on the bed.

"Come here, Glad," he said, "you have a go. He's ticklish." The boy called out and kicked.

"Don't," said Gladys coming to rescue him.

"Ticklish yourself," said Jim catching her arm and pulling her on the bed. The boy was free.

"Kiss her. Kiss her," cried the excited boy.

"Don't," said Gladys.

"I'll neighbour you," said Jim.

The boy watched them struggling and then he saw Jim was not kissing her but whispering in her ear.

"You are too real, Jim," she said tenderly. And then they were all lying quiet, Jim in the middle of them, with one arm round Gladys's neck and one arm round the boy and the boy wishing he could get away.

"Family already," Jim said. "You must have been on night work, Glad."

"Oh, give it a rest," said Glad. "Remember everything is taken back home. Little pigs have big ears."

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"Very nice work too," said Jim.

"Don't be so awful," she pleaded.

"What's awful about it?"

A sigh came from Gladys.

"Very nice, I was saying," said Jim. "Sunday morning. Who's getting up to light the fire?"

"You."

"Me?—No you."

"Married life," said Jim. "Hear that?"

"Who does sleep here truthfully?" said the boy.

"Nobody does," said Gladys. "But Jim and me are going to when we are married. That satisfy you?"

The boy knew it was true. It was true because it was far beyond his understanding. Jim and Gladys watched him silently, but Jim's arm tightened on her. They nodded to each other watching the boy.

"And we'll have you for our little boy," said Gladys.

He knew this was not true. He did not want to be their little boy. They cuddled and kissed and danced about too much; and then people smiled and laughed at them.

"Leave him alone," said Jim. And they all lay there silently, but he was aching to move from Jim's arm and to go. He was thinking of nobody's child and wishing he could find him, see him, watch him, talk to him.

"First question when I get back," Gladys said. "Did you put the stair-rods down. They think it's *their* house."

Yes, the boy wanted to get away from this house that wasn't a house yet, from this bed that was not a bed, and to see Aunt Annie and Uncle Tom who sat still for hours after they had worked. He was going to ask her who nobody's child was and how big he was, where he lived, to see him, to watch for a long time what he did, to throw something to him to see if he moved, to see if he talked and how his mouth looked when he talked.

"When are we going home?" he said.

